



*Maundy Thursday, March 28, 2013  
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Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church*

## *Will You Believe?*

SAUL (read by Pastor Mark)

Acts 9:1-4 Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground

JOHN (read by Ellis White)

Rev 9:1-17 I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet...Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and this face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

THE CROWDS (John 18:1-6)

When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was an olive grove, and he and his disciples went into it. Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.

"ejgw ejmi I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, "ejgw ejmi I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.

This is the Word of the LORD.

You've just heard 3 accounts in the Scriptures recording that God has appeared in his glory. In every instance of God appearing in glory, the human response is to fall down. Straight down. To the ground. On your face. As though dead. The first 2 encounters were understandably terrifying—John in particular seems struggling to find the words to describe the glory of the LORD. And then! Here in our passage, the glory of God **is** two words.

Two groups of people were there and saw the glory of God. Us. And Them. We do not like that language. It certainly isn't PC. I grew up in a highly racialized part of Tennessee where you skirted around us/them language but secretly whispered about race and the other side of the tracks (literally!) using us/them language. And I know you'll start squirming if I start talking us/them politics. I'm squirming! I avoid the us/them language at all costs! But when it comes to the moment when Jesus is going to go to the cross, there is a hard line drawn—not in sand—but in cement. Each individual in the scene is either us or them. And who's with who is obvious in what effect the revelation of Jesus' glory has on each camp. And when we let this text hit our head and our heart, we must take sides.

Look down at John 18. John sets up the scene for us with Jesus and his disciples, coming to the place where they always came to the garden. Jesus wasn't hiding out somewhere afraid of what might happen. He went to a habitual place where he knew he'd be found. And Judas comes in verse 3 with enemies of Jesus—servants of the high priests and Pharisees and soldiers of the temple guard. They come with weapons and lanterns, expecting to have to find Jesus and then drag him out. Not so. Jesus, knowing all that would happen, totally in control and in the know, comes out to them. He makes the first move and asks the question, "Who is it you want?" or more closely, "Who are you seeking?"

They answer, "Jesus of Nazareth." Then comes the divine declaration, "Ego eimi." This particular instance of I Am is "probably his deepest self-identification in the Gospel of John." That's what commentator and former Whitworth professor Dale Bruner writes in his commentary. We've been studying these 2 words, ejgw eijmi for weeks. When Jesus says this common phrase, he is referring to the uncommon, divine name of Yahweh, the name that was not spoken out loud in Jewish tradition. His name proclaims the all-encompassing, self-sustaining, nature of who God is. And when I Am speaks his name, I Am, the only response is to fall on your face.

There are 2 different camps of people falling down. In the accounts we heard earlier John falls down in fear, yes, but in awe! But here in John, we see very clearly that there is another kind of falling down. It's the kind of falling down Saul, too, experienced. It's the falling down of the enemies of God at encountering his glory.

THEN there's this strange parenthetical, "And Judas the traitor was standing there with them." The scene is still being set here in verse 5, and it is an us/them set up. Here's Jesus and his disciples. Then there are the soldiers and officials, the ones coming in judgment of Jesus, and Judas is with them.

In the us/them scenario, it's "them" that fall over at the name of Jesus. It's the armed enemies with all the perceivable power of position, number, and weapons who are rendered totally helpless at the sound of the voice of I Am.

We do not consider the power that's in the name of Jesus! We go on mission trips and shy away from using the name of Jesus. Our culture doesn't mind if we act like Jesus, but don't share his teaching! Don't say his name! We're in a culture, obsessed with the admonition to, "Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words." We shy away from the declaration of Jesus' name! But in the void of truth being spoken, I want to take up Dale Bruner's admonition instead. "The Church is to learn that her power, too, is present in exactly the measure that she shares and proclaims this conviction of Jesus' identity. Utter Christocentricity -- Christ-centeredness-- is the power that best meets and counters the enemy." "Preach him!' says our text."

Do you shy away from Jesus' name? Have you worked for decades with the same people and never told them you are a Jesus follower? The day is coming when the Judge will be on the throne and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord!! Everyone falls in the presence of the deity. St. Augustine, writing in the 4th century, says this, "What will [Jesus'] power be like when he comes to reign, who had this kind of power when he came to die? And now even at the present time Christ is still saying through the Gospel, "I am."

What kind of fear fills you at the thought of seeing Jesus' full glory? Confounding? Stumbling? Horrifying? Destruction kind of fear and falling? Or Awesome? Restoring? Setting back on the feet kind of falling? Some will describe what they see with incredible beauty and awe—like John did in Revelation. Others are going to be like these men and like Saul. They will fall in terror because they have been persecuting Jesus of Nazareth with their sinful, rebellious lies. They knew him not! We want to fall on our faces in awe-filled fear of the living God. Not in awful fear of the Judge.

That full revelation of God is going to come, and come quickly the Gospels tell us. God gave us appearances like this one and others with very intentional purpose in the Scriptures. Each time he appears in glory, he comes with an important message for his people. It is always a message of God's purpose. He's always telling his people what he is going to do. Jesus knew all that would come to pass, John 18:4 says, and God appears in his glory to reveal his purpose to us.

When Jesus appeared to his then enemy, Saul, he said, "Stop persecuting me." He reveals to Saul that God's purpose is that Jew and Gentile alike would hear the message that Jesus is the Son of God.

When Jesus appears to John in Revelation, the message is to tell all the churches that God's purpose is for us these churches to persevere through this age of tribulation. Jesus is coming back, and when he comes back, he wins eternally. He's appearing to John so that his followers might know even in the persecution of Rome all the way through today, that his ultimate purpose is for their victory through Christ.

What purpose did Jesus intend with this profound declaration, this divine revelation that put people on their faces, with these powerful words of authority, *ejgw ejmi*? God has revealed himself again in these 2 words. For what purpose? Let's pick up again in John 18:7.

Again he asked them, "Who is it you want?"  
And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth."

"I told you that I am he," Jesus answered. "If you are looking for me, then let these men go."

This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me." Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.)

Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"

The passage starts off with a repetition of what we have already heard. Who is it you want? Or, Who are you seeking? John sets this up as the most important question! Note that it's nearly identical to the first question Jesus asks, his very first words actually, found in John in 1:38, "What are you seeking?" Now, it's, "Who are you seeking?" AND the first question the risen Jesus will ask Mary will also be, "Who are you seeking?" It's the critical question! The first question of God incarnate, the question that sparks the rest of the crucifixion narrative, and the first question of the risen Christ: "Who are you seeking?" On the lips of Jesus, let this question pierce your hearts tonight, "Who are you seeking?"

In what tone do you think Jesus asked this question a second time? In defiance? A voice like thunder? Or is he just reorienting them? Remember, they've just fallen down. I doubt they expected to do that, and so he asks again, "Who are you seeking?" This repetition inspires us to be repetitive in asking the very most important question of our friends, our family, our LifeGroup, our children, "Who are you seeking?" "What are you seeking?"

Do you think the enemies of God found who they were looking for? They were looking for Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus has confirmed, "I am he." They came

with lanterns, though, expecting him to be hiding. They expected a fight, but he has come out voluntarily. They certainly didn't expect to be cast down by the power of 2 words, I suspect. They certainly were not looking to encounter, I AM! Is this who we seek? Powerful Jesus with the authority to cast down his enemies? Or do we look for complacent Jesus, nice Jesus, moral Jesus? Do we seek the Creator of the Universe? This is an us/them scenario. Which search party do you find yourself in?

"Who are you seeking?" Jesus asks in verse 7. Once again, it is Jesus of Nazareth. He confirms, again, ego eimi. Then they who have come to cast judgment, to bind the one accused, who have come to issue the command to come to Jerusalem, find the tables have been turned by I Am! Jesus bosses them, "Let these men go."

Hear the words of I Am. Do you remember where we first heard the divine name, I Am Who I Am? What book of the Bible was that in? (Exodus.) And what was the message that Moses was to give Pharaoh? (Let my people go.) Once again, I Am, commands those that seek to bind his people, "Let my people go." I Am has handed himself over in your stead. He has spoken the Jubilee words of freedom over your life. Be unbound by all that would seek to accuse you and tie you down. He is the Truth, and the truth has set you free. He will keep you. He assures us that he has not lost even one that has been given to him.

Continuing in this scene... Peter, our favorite Peter, takes matters into his own hands. He thinks that violence is the answer. But Jesus says no. The resolution to the problem of the enemies of God, the enemy of sin, the enemy of death, of Satan, the answer is not slaying with the sword, but being slain by it. It will be in suffering, not in fighting, that God's purpose will prevail. But we're a nation of fighters! Let me help you, Jesus! I can do it. I'll fight injustice on my own, thanks for the inspiration! I'll fight poverty and the sad state of our ecology on my own, thanks. I've got a little knife of self-improvement in my pocket, and I know how to use it!

But God's purpose is greater. He reveals to his disciples that his purpose is for Jesus to drink the cup. What is this cup? The Old Testament refers often to the cup of God's wrath that will be poured out upon the nations, upon the rebellious, upon the sinful. God's wrath is the just response, the fair response, to the problem of sin and evil in the world. It's total destruction and separation from God. It is ugly and bloody and painful, and we really don't like reading about the glimpses of God's wrath we see in the Old Testament. God's message in this revelation of his glory in the person of Jesus Christ, in the words, I Am, is that I AM will be drinking the cup of wrath. Put away your sword, Jesus says. I will be the one slain. I will take upon the wrath of God instead of you. I will fight off your enemies by suffering death on a cross. You, you're set free. I'm going to die.

He has the power to make his enemies fall! We just saw that, literally! And yet the way of eternal conquering is in Jesus' sacrifice. From Isaiah 51:22 we read, "See,

I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger; from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again." The cup of God's wrath had to be drunk by Israel and all the world! Until God himself took the cup from their hand and took it upon himself.

This ugly, bloody, violent symbol of God's wrath that Jesus suffered on Good Friday then becomes painted beautiful because of what it means for us. God's wrath has been satisfied! The glimpses of wrath in the Old Testament were poured out fully upon Jesus on the cross. We paint and bejewel the cross and hang it on our walls and in our sanctuaries because it is the image of our freedom! It proclaims Jubilee for us! Sins have been crucified for us in Christ. This is the finale. The sword will be no more. Instead, God will drink the cup of his wrath upon himself. He is the substitute for our sin and suffering of wrath. He suffered it instead. Instead of whom? Instead of me, and instead of us!

God revealed his glory in the person of Jesus Christ. I Am lived and showed us his glory with the deliberate purpose that he would die for us on that cross, that we might live.

Hear these words of the LORD as you prepare your hearts to receive Christ's sacrifice on your behalf.

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven... and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is this—my flesh." (John 6:51)

"This is why the Father loves me—because I lay down my life, so that I may take it back again. No one takes it away from me, but I lay it down of my own free will. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it back again. This commandment I received from my Father." (John 10:17-18)

"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 1:4)

"I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins." (John 8:24)

God has revealed himself in Jesus. You have heard tonight that he is I Am. He has died for you. Like it or not, we live in an us-them world. Every knee will fall in the final day at the sight of the full glory of God. Will you believe?