

I Am
John 8:58

In 2012, 83 year old amateur artist Cecilia Gimenez wanted to do a good work of service for her church. Mercy church was a small parish in the village of Borja, Spain. The wall of the sanctuary featured a painted fresco of Jesus, a traditional portrait entitled Ecce Homo which is Latin meaning “behold the man” which comes from the gospel of John. The fresco was painted by Spanish artist Elias Garcia Martinez in 1895. He was not among the great masters, and the painting was not considered a classic work of art, but the portrait was special to the church and held sentimental value in the local community. In recent years, however, the painting had deteriorated and began flaking away. So, Cecelia Gimenez, with Parish approval, offered her services free of charge to restore the painting.

It began with a minor brushstroke here and a small touchup there. Eventually, she decided to get it all done, and so she set herself to painting. After working herself to the point of exhaustion, she decided to take a break and get away for a few days. It was during this break that the incomplete, yet disastrous results of her efforts went viral, and Cecilia Gimenez became the laughingstock of the entire world. Ecce Homo, behold the man, became Ecce Mono, behold the monkey.

Gimenez was heartbroken. She was despondent. She cried for days. She faced potential criminal charges. The original artist’s heirs threatened to sue. Her best intentions had turned out in the worst way possible.

Thankfully, that’s not the end of the story. The small town has become a tourist attraction, and people come by the thousands to see her epically botched restoration. Monkey Jesus has found his way onto tee shirts, wine bottles and mousepads and has become a financial boon to the little church and community. Even better, all the notoriety led to the discovery of Martinez’s original oil on canvas of Ecce Homo in a private collection. Apparently, the church fresco was based on this original portrait and it is the same in every detail.¹

The lesson here is clear. When we forget what Jesus is like, or we try to change him, or our recognition of him is so messed up, we don’t know who Jesus is anymore, we must go back to the original. Over these next 8 weeks we are going back to the original portraits of Jesus.

The gospel of John includes seven self-portraits of Jesus. Today, we take selfies and post them on Facebook and Instagram. Well, Jesus didn’t have a smartphone and social media, but in John He gives us seven “I Am” statements in which he reveals himself to us. Unlike our selfies, though, Jesus’

selfies haven't been selected for the perfect angle in the perfect light and run through a bunch of filters to make him appear as something other or something more than he really is. You ever noticed that? How do we end up with selfies that look nothing like how we actually look in real life? I'm just not as good as some of you all out there. When I take a picture of myself, my grandfather's old adage holds true— "You take a picture of a horse; you get a picture of a horse."

But these "I Am" statements of Jesus are his true identity. This is Jesus as he really is. His self-portraits are painted on many different canvases. He uses the kitchen as his canvas when he says, "I am the bread of life." He uses the pasture when he says, "I am the good shepherd." It is against the canvas of a grave when he says, "I am the resurrection and the life." He uses the garden when he reveals himself as the true vine.

But the grand poohbah of "I Am" statements is found at the end of John 8. Here Jesus doesn't say, "I am this," or "I am that." He simply reveals himself as "I am." There is no object following the verb. Jesus simply is. He is life in and of himself in an ever-present, eternal self-sustaining existence. Jesus can say "I am the bread of life", or "I am the light of the world," or "I am the good shepherd," all because he can truthfully say, "I Am."

John 8:58 comes at the end of a tumultuous series of conflicts and disputes between Jesus and the unbelieving Jewish people led by the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. It is the Feast of Tabernacles or the Feast of Booths. This was an annual religious festival established by God himself in Leviticus 23. It lasted for a week and began and ended with Sabbath worship on consecutive Saturdays in the fall. During that week the people lived in temporary tabernacles, or tents, or booths to remember their time of wandering in the wilderness. As a fall festival it sought to give thanks to God for that year's harvest and express their trust in Him as their provider.

During the feast, the temple courts are overflowing with worshipping Jews. It is the perfect opportunity for Jesus to teach. It is also the perfect time for his opponents to strike, to undermine this Galilean interloper before the masses.

Chapter 8 opens with Jesus teaching in the temple courts, the religious leaders bring in a woman caught in adultery, their kangaroo court perfectly timed for maximum impact. Curiously, they only have the woman in custody. There is no sign of the adulterous man. Perhaps he was an accomplice, a hired co-conspirator. No mention is made of just how they managed to catch this woman

in the act. How would Jesus treat this obviously guilty woman when the letter of the law required the death penalty? If he spared her, then he was violating the Old Testament commandment. If he condemned her, he was violating Roman law, and would bring down the wrath of the empire on his head. It was a brazen attempt to trap Jesus before the watching eyes of the crowd, but Jesus cuts through their Gordian knot with wit, wisdom and love. He invites anyone without sin to cast the first stone. No a single rock was thrown.

So, their plan backfired, and Jesus publically embarrassed the religious leaders before the people, and so in verse 13 they challenge him. They question his credentials. They said resume was lacking to be speaking to the people as he was. They question his identity. No matter what Jesus says or does, they refuse to see who he really is.

In verses 31-47, Jesus and the unbelieving Jews debate their Jewish heritage. The Jews carry Abraham's blood, but they do not carry his faith. The fact they won't listen to his words, proves they don't hear the words of God. Jesus says they only listen to the lies of their true father, the devil.

At this point, the fangs come out and they are dripping with venom. We will pick up the text here at this point. We'll treat this like a sporting event, and I'll give you a play by play:

48 The Jews answered him, "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?"

The Jews are attacking Jesus' origins and heritage. They employ racism. They call him a Samaritan. To a Jew, this was the worst of insults. Think of the worst, most racist invective you can think of. These words are dripping with that sort of hatred. Finally, they accuse Jesus of being demon-possessed. It's easy to ignore the words of God if you can claim they come from demons. And so Jesus replies:

49 "I am not possessed by a demon," said Jesus, "but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. 50 I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death."

"By dishonoring me," Jesus says, "You dishonor God." His glory comes only from the Father, and the Father will be their judge. Jesus makes an incredible promise in verse 51 saying that whoever obeys my word will never see death. The Jews are incredulous:

52 At this they exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that whoever obeys your word will never taste death. 53 Are

you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"

How could Jesus say that his disciples will never see death? Is he claiming to be greater than Abraham, because they are all children of Abraham and even Abraham died? They simply could not grasp what Jesus was saying. Jesus continues in verse 54:

54 Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. 55 Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and obey his word. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

Again Jesus accuses them of not really knowing God, and even their physical ancestor Abraham looked forward in faith to Jesus' day and rejoiced at the thought. You can almost see them pulling their hair out at the thought. How could Abraham ever see Jesus? He lived 2,000 years before, and Jesus hasn't even reached middle age.

57 "You are not yet fifty years old," they said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!"

Jesus then responds with one of the boldest proclamations of his identity and his divinity that he ever made. Pay close attention to the grammar Jesus uses here, how he switches verb tenses from past to present.

58 "Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"

"Before Abraham was, I am!" Jesus isn't just talking about his age here. If that is all he meant, he would have said, "Before Abraham was born, I was." But Jesus said, "I am" He is claiming to be eternally present. There are a lot of things that I can claim I WAS there. I was at the inauguration of George W. Bush. I was at Talladega Super Speedway when Dale Earnhardt won his final race. I was there when I married the most beautiful woman in the world, but I can't say I AM there. I am only ever present in the now. I can only say I am here. I am now. For anything else, I can at best say. I was there. I will be there. I hope. I wish I had been there. Only Jesus can say at any time and at any place in history— I Am. This is nothing less than an unambiguous claim to divinity. Jesus is claiming to be equal with God. And that's exactly how the Jews took it, because look how they respond:

59 At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

To the Jews, blasphemy was a capital offense. They go from trying to trick Jesus into stoning the woman caught in adultery to picking up stones themselves and wanting to brutally execute the ever-

present, eternal Son of God. If Jesus was anything other than the divine Son of God, he would have been guilty of the most heinous crime. It was all a question of who is Jesus, really? It all boils down to a conflict between who they thought Jesus was versus who Jesus really is.

We experience some of those same conflicts, don't we? There is the Jesus we want him to be, and there is the Jesus we fear He may be. There is the Jesus we think He is. The Jesus we misunderstand. The Jesus we don't fully grasp. The Jesus we pretend He is, but then there is Jesus as he really is.

Jesus knew this was a bold and foundational truth. He starts off by saying, "Very truly I tell you." The old King James renders this, "Verily, Verily." Others render it "Truly, truly," or "I assure you." The original is simply one word repeated. "Amen, amen." Amen means, "It is true." When you say "Amen" at the end of a prayer you are declaring the truth of the prayer. When someone shouts "Amen" in a sermon, they're saying, "That's the truth! Preach it! Hear it!" But Jesus says it twice. That how they emphasized things in ancient near eastern culture. It's like typing something in bold face or italics. It's like a speaker shouting something or using an exaggerated gesture to emphasize a point. If something was really important, you repeated it, and so the creatures in heaven in Revelation worship saying "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." Paul writes in Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice." So whenever Jesus says, "Amen, amen," whenever you read in English the translation of those words, "I tell you the truth," or "Truly, truly," or "Very truly I tell you," that means this is an important truth, pay attention.

Jesus says this is a big deal— I Am! Let me explain why it was a big deal. It goes all the way back to Exodus 3:13-17. God is sending Moses to go before the Egyptian Pharaoh and say, "Let me people go." Moses wants to know if Pharaoh should ask, whom he should say sent him. God says tell him "I am" sent you. The ever-present, eternal one. In Hebrew, the word for I am is Yahweh. Yahweh means I am and it is the personal, sacred name of God. This is the name the Jews would not write. This is the name the Jews would not speak for it was holy, and they didn't even want to accidentally use it in vain. When Jesus says, "Before Abraham was born, I am." He was using the personal, sacred, divine name for God and applying to Himself.

This is a specific claim of divinity. Atheists spout this mantra that Jesus never claimed to be divine in any of the gospel accounts. That is categorically false. This is a brazen claim of Godhood by Jesus and that's why the Jews wanted to stone him.

It was a bold and revolutionary declaration when Jesus said it. It rocked the 1st world, and it ultimately changed the course of history. Jesus still announces "I am" into our lives today, and it is just as revolutionary and disruptive now as it was then.

In the middle of your fears, doubts and uncertainty, Jesus, "I am." In the rubble of your mistakes and failures and broken dreams, Jesus declares, "I am there." He is the "I Am" at the peak of your greatest victories.. In the face of your biggest obstacles and most overwhelming challenges, he says, "I am there too." In the midst of your divorce, or after you get home from your honeymoon; in the middle of your depression or the midst of your rejoicing, after your greatest victory or fallen in your most humiliating defeat; getting your big promotion or getting fired from your dream job, Jesus says, "I am." "I am there. Whether you're at the top of the ladder or the bottom of the barrel Jesus can truly say, "I am." I am present. I am there with you. You are not alone. You are not forgotten. You are not abandoned, you are not above or beneath, ahead or behind, because Jesus is I am. He is the one who declares I am what you need. I am the one who understands. I am the one who can use this for God's glory. I am the one who can snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. I am the one who can make your accomplishments count for something eternal. I am the one who makes all things new.

Let me quickly share with you some of the repercussions of Jesus' I am statement, some of the practical implications. First, he is eternal. He never had a beginning. He will never have an end. I don't think we fully grasp the implications of this. I don't want to wallow too deep in the philosophy this morning, but to say that Jesus is eternal means more than he lives a really long time, or even that he lives forever. You see time is a concept that doesn't apply to him. He is beyond time, outside of it. He's not limited by it in any direction. He never has to wait in nervous anticipation for something to come. He never questions his memory over something that has passed, because He is eternally present. He is no more limited by our timeline than an author is limited by the timeline of his book. The author can enter the story at any point of his choosing. He knows the end even as he writes the beginning. He can change the middle even as he writes the final chapter.

Jesus is the Creator. He is the author of time. He is never too late or too early, or at the wrong place at the wrong time. Jesus can promise, "I will be with you," because He can truthfully claim, "I am."

Second, since the I Am is ever-present and eternal, he is independent. He is a reality unto himself. Life and love and goodness and holiness are intrinsic to him. He doesn't get them from anywhere. He doesn't learn them or grow in them. He simply is. He doesn't need anything. Rather, we depend on him.

This also means he is the Unchanging One. He doesn't develop, mature or evolve. Our Savior is not capricious or unpredictable. He doesn't act on a whim or do something stupid on the quirk of an impulse. He is the anchor that not move. The rock that does not blow in the wind. Hebrews 13:8 declares, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." You follow the same Savior as your great, great grandma as she read her Bible by the light of an oil lamp, the same Savior as Martin Luther when he nailed the 95 thesis to the Wittenberg chapel door, and the same Savior Paul followed across the sea to take the Gospel to Macedonia.

There is an echo of this divine name though each one of Jesus' I Am statements. When he says, "I am the bread of life, I am the good shepherd," or "I am the way, the truth, and the life," we hear ripples of his divinity as who He is comes into contact with who we are.

The misunderstood cry out, "See me for who I am." The imperfect long, "Love me as I am." The depressed lament, "I am a nobody." The self-confident proclaim, "I am somebody." The feminist declares, "I am woman. Hear me roar." Popeye says, "I yam what I yam." Rene Descarte reasoned, "I think, therefore I am." But we will only know our true identity as we know our savior. Who we are is wrapped up in who he is.

¹ <http://www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/45260>