

## I AM – It is I

**John 6:16-21**  
**March 6, 2022**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Pastor Dave Carlson**

Some time ago, a New York man named Jose Luis Espinal legally changed his name to Jesus Christ. Espinal said he was moved to seek the name change a year earlier when it dawned on him that (quote) “I am the person that is that name. This was not done,” said Espinal, “for any reason other than I am that person.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, we start a Lenten sermon series titled “I Am,” looking at five of the “I Am” statements of Jesus, beginning next week with, “I am the bread of life.”

This week, in today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus comes to the disciples and says, “It is I; do not be afraid.” By looking at how and when and where Jesus comes to the disciples in today’s scripture, we come to see how, when and where Jesus comes to us most fully. John tells us the disciples “got into a boat and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was dark,” says John, “and Jesus had not yet come to them.”

The Apostle John is known for using dark and light in reference to Jesus, as in chapter 1 where he says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” So when John says, “It was dark and Jesus had not yet come to them,” we know the disciples are in a vulnerable place, exposed to outside forces beyond their control.

We’ve all been in dark places in life, at the mercy of outside forces. What’s that like for you, when you can’t see your way forward? Pretty scary, right? But remember, the disciples are fishermen. They’re used to being on the Sea of Galilee, even at night. For a fisherman, being out on the lake before dawn or after dusk is the best time to catch fish. It’s when they’re near the surface feeding.

Interestingly, the disciples had just left Jesus after the Feeding of the 5,000. They had just relied on Jesus to help feed all those people crowded around them, and then they got in their boat alone, and set off without Jesus.

Don’t we do that? We turn to God when things get rough, and then when things smooth out, we go off on our own. Like the disciples heading out in the boat, we return to our routines with little thought of God, until things get rough again. As John tells us, “The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing.”

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<sup>1</sup> The Denver Post (December 25, 2005, 4a)

There's nothing the disciples can do about a strong wind on rough seas, except pray, turn to God. As Jews, they believed in the God of Creation, when Genesis tells us "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."

Did they look to God as the wind swept over their rough seas, threatening to capsize them? Amid the darkness and the churning waters, did they look to God to pierce that darkness and separate those waters, to bring forth dry land once again as he did at creation?

We don't know. But we do know that their situation was dire, threatening their future as fishermen, and as followers of Jesus. John tells us that by this time "they had rowed about three or four miles" across the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is eight miles across, so they were at the halfway point. They were really stuck. They faced the storm either way they went. No matter what they did, their journey was going to be rough.

That's when it's good to have a friend like Jesus. Jesus doesn't guarantee us smooth sailing through life, but he does promise to be with us. And that's especially true when things get rough. A robber breaks into a house while the residents are away one dark night. As he's searching for valuables in all the cupboards and dressers, he hears a voice out of nowhere saying, "Jesus is watching you." The criminal jumps, afraid the residents are back, and freezes. After a few minutes of silence, he assumes it was his imagination, and goes back to robbing the house. A couple minutes pass and he hears the voice again – "Jesus is watching you." This time he hears where it's coming from and goes into that room. And there he finds a parrot – "Jesus is watching you," squawks the parrot. Thinking it might be valuable if it can really talk, he says, "What is your name?" "Ismael," says the parrot. "Ismael? What type of idiot names a parrot Ismael?" The parrot speaks again, saying, "The same type of idiot who picks the name Jesus for his Rottweiler. "Jesus is watching you."

Yes, Jesus is with us always, and especially when things get rough. And yet, it can be hard to see Jesus in the midst of life's storms raging all around us. Where's Jesus when the kids are tearing through the house, when our chores and work overwhelm us, when the car breaks down in traffic, when we're hit with one medical issue after another and we're just drowning in red tape? It can be hard to see Jesus at those times, even if he is drawing near to us. John says the disciples "saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified." That's understandable. They never expected Jesus to come to them in that way.

And that's a good lesson for us. Sometimes Jesus comes to us in surprising ways, in scary ways, in ways we don't understand, in ways that challenge our assumptions about what's possible. That's when faith comes in.

The promises of Jesus – the promises of this sermon series titled “I Am” – they’re often hard for us to understand and apply to our lives. The help that Jesus sends our way doesn’t always look like help at first. Sometimes we push Jesus away. We get in so deep that we become hopeless, and nobody is going to convince us otherwise. I often see this helping someone who’s in a rough spot. They’re so upset and anxious about the crisis they’re in they just can’t imagine there’s any way to get past it.

And yet, when things look darkest, that’s when we need Jesus the most. We need to set aside our fear and cling to our faith. We need to take a breath, listen to someone we trust, step back and look at things from another angle. For those who trust in the Lord, there is always a way to get through it even if it is one of the darkest, roughest patches you’ve ever faced.

The disciples are in the middle of the Sea of Galilee in a storm that could drown them at any moment. They see Jesus coming toward them walking on the water, and this actually scares them even more – they don’t understand that it’s Jesus coming to help them. But they do know Jesus, and they are open to his help, his reassurance. He says to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” When they hear this, John tells us “they wanted to take him into the boat...”

That’s all Jesus asks of us – that we be open to taking him into our hearts, open to his help, that we trust in his assurance. “... And immediately,” says John, “the boat reached the land towards which they were going.” Immediately, when they wanted to have him be near to them.

Now for us, getting to the other side of whatever is troubling you seldom happens that quickly. There are always bumps along the way, wrong turns and times we get stuck and have to wait things out for awhile.

And yet, we can be assured that we will make it, that Jesus is here for you, - for me-for us -and that he will give you strength for the journey as the Bread of Life, light for your path as the Light of the World, protection along the way as the Gate for the sheepfold, and the assurance that you will make it through life’s struggles and difficulties as long as you stay near to Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

When the storms of life rage all around us, dear Lord, may your great Spirit steady us. We know the power of the wind; and even here, we feel the winds of war in Ukraine.

Be with the Ukrainian people, and help them to stay steady in the storm.

And remind us that there are many battling evil all around us, and dealing with forces beyond their control. Show us ways to respond to those in need.

Remind us, too, that those who suffer the most are always the poor and oppressed. Keep us steady, Lord, and fill us anew with the power and promise of your Holy Spirit.

We ask your spirit of comfort and healing upon those dealing with illness and disease. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace and Lord of lords, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**