

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

A crowd had gathered around Jesus, and I suppose many a sermon could begin that way. But, once again, a crowd had gathered. Among this crowd were deriders and those who sought to sully Jesus' reputation—Pharisees and their disciples, scribes and teachers of the law, perhaps some Sadducees. Never letting a situation go without some instruction—these are his people after all, the ones created through Him, the ones He was sent to—Jesus spoke to the crowd assembled. He instructed, and some believed. To them that believed in Him He said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32)

Yet, there existed in this crowd still others who did not believe—Pharisees and their disciples, scribes and teachers of the law, perhaps some Sadducees—they've all been mentioned before. They chimed in, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" (John 8:33) Jesus explained that one who sins is a slave to sin, but if He, the Son, sets them free, they are truly free. He acknowledged that they are descendants of Abraham, yet seek to kill him; they do the work of their father, who is not Abraham. They stood firm, "Abraham is our father." Jesus responded:

If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing what your father did. (John 8:39-41)

I'll connect the dots here. Jesus just said, "You seek to kill Me...Abraham did not do this." This thing that Jesus said did not fall on deaf ears. His listeners did in fact hear Jesus compare them to Abraham and how they reacted to Jesus compared to how Abraham did. "You seek to kill Me, but Abraham never did." That's when things really go down hill. It's what prompted their retort, given in the form of an insult, with which today's lesson begins: "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" and following that,

Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, "If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death." Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?

That's why Jesus replied, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." This really threw those who sought derision for a loop. "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" You can almost hear them saying that in laughter: "Ha! You're crazy. You're not even 50, and now you're saying you were around way back when Abraham was alive. Thanks for that, Jesus; I needed a good laugh today!" Yet, as calm and matter-of-factly as ever, Jesus replied, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

Then they took up stones to kill him. But, it was not yet His time, so He passed through them unharmed.

"[B]efore Abraham was, I AM." This is not something to be taken lightly. It wasn't a grammatical mistake by John. This isn't simply a Greek idiom or a Hebrew idiom taken into Greek. Jesus plainly and truly said, "[B]efore Abraham was, I AM." He was speaking of Himself in the present tense while referring to a past event. Not only was He around to see Abraham, but *before* Abraham even walked the earth, He says of Himself, "I AM." That simple, two-word phrase carries a lot of weight.

Think back to when it was first used. Back at the beginning of Exodus, Moses was in the Midianite wilderness, having escaped there from Egypt to flee from Pharaoh's wrath for having killed

an Egyptian. He had since married and was tending to his father-in-law's flock when the Angel of the LORD—a phrase used often in the Old Testament to refer to an appearance of the Son of God before He took on human flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary, a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Second Person of the Trinity—appeared to him from the midst of a burning bush that isn't consumed. Speaking from the flames in this bush, God told Moses to return to Egypt and demand the release of the Hebrews. Moses inquired, however, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God answered, "I AM WHO I AM. Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (cf. Exodus 3:1-14)

Now, this passage from Exodus 3 in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, uses the same phrase as is found in the New Testament. When God said, "I AM," He said, "Ego eimi." That's the same phrase Jesus used in John 8. It's a little redundant, and for good reason. The word "Ego" is not necessary; it is enough to say "eimi" for that alone means "I am." Adding "Ego" makes it emphatic: "I AM," thereby meaning to draw parallels, in its New Testament use, to God's use in Exodus 3, where the phrase is used in Greek to give it the extra meaning intended by what is said in the Hebrew.

It is in the Hebrew where this interesting parallel is made. When God says "I AM" in Hebrew, He says, "e'hiyeh," a word which looks and likely sounds much like the name by which God reveals Himself in the Old Testament: "YHWH." It is a name, which at its core, means "I exist"; as if to say that God, who is called YHWH, is the real god, that there is no god besides Him—"I am, and no one else is." It is a name, interestingly enough, which the Jews refused to say, opting instead to say "Adonai" (meaning Lord) whenever they encounter God's name, a practice retained to this day.

So, what does this all mean in regard to what Jesus said?

First of all, by using the emphatic "Ego eimi," Jesus was, in fact, identifying Himself as God. This is further solidified in how He used the phrase, claiming His existence before the birth of Abraham (and, in fact, before creation).

Second, in a round-about way, Jesus had the chutzpah to speak the very name of God. Oh, certainly, there is a proper time for an ordinary man to use the Hebrew "e'hiyeh", but the context in which Jesus says "Ego eimi" and the seemingly poor grammar used when He said it—why didn't He say, "I was"?—was akin to Him saying YHWH.

In the ears of the deriders in the crowd that day, this was blasphemous. Jesus, a man in their sight, was claiming to be God. Jesus had been telling them of the God the Father, who is in heaven. Yet, a few times He also said, "I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent me," then He also claimed to be God. This is an affront to their logic which believes (rightly so) that God is one, and since God is in heaven and Jesus is not, He cannot be God. Furthermore, how could a man be God? Therefore, they pick up stones to pelt the blasphemer to death.

So, what you have before you in John 8 is the Biblical truth of the Trinity. God is one in three. God the Father is most certainly in heaven, as Jesus explained before today's lesson. The Father sent Him from above, Jesus stated. However, God the Son stands right before them. Together with the Holy Spirit, these three are one God. They are not three gods but one, "one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity," as was confessed moments ago in the Athanasian Creed.

That's about the best anyone can say to understand it, too. "We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity." God has three persons: the uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, almighty Father, the uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, almighty Son, and the uncreated incomprehensible, eternal, almighty Spirit. Yet, there are not three uncreateds, incomprehensibles, eternals, and almighties, but one. The Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, and the Spirit is Lord, yet they are not three Lords, but one Lord! The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, yet they are not three Gods, but one God.

The Athanasian Creed attempts to put words to the fact that Scripture plainly teaches that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God with the fact that Scripture also plainly declares that God is one. Gladly, this third creed also states that God is incomprehensible. You cannot begin to comprehend the Trinity, and that's alright. On this side of eternity, it's not given to you to understand that God is one in three, but that you confess with your mouths and believe in your hearts that you worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. "He, therefore, that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity." The Scriptures declare this to be true, and so you believe it, you take God at His Word, whether you understand it or not: God says it, so it is true!

Furthermore, it could be a good thing not to understand it. There is a danger in trying to make sense of the Trinity. Trying to apply faulty logic and fallen reason to something incomprehensible inevitably leads to errors.

One such error is a teaching known as modalism. Modalism teaches that God is one—there is only one God—but that He works as Father, Son, or Holy Spirit at different times; sometimes one, sometimes another. At one point, He'll put on His Father hat, so to speak, and operate in Father mode, and at another, His Son hat, and operate in Son mode, and at another, His Spirit hat, and operate in Spirit mode. But, since God is one, He cannot wear more than one hat at a time, to use the same illustration. You can likely point out from certain passages of Scripture that this is false; for instance, the Father was present at His Son's Baptism to speak as the Spirit descended upon the Son in the form of a dove—Modalism teaches that there can't be separate "modes" present at the same time.

Another error is a teaching spoken clearly against by the Athanasian Creed: Tritheism. This one acknowledges the three persons, but claims that they are all individual gods, independent from each other. This would be the polar opposite of Modalism. It is refuted, not only by the Athanasian Creed, but also by the beautiful passage that begins St. John's Gospel as well as Jesus saying, "I and the Father are one," in John 10:30, among many other places in Scripture.

It could also be a good thing for to struggle with understanding it. There is a danger in refusing to grasp what you cannot understand. Now, I don't want to encourage applying faulty logic and fallen reason, but I speak of a refusal to acknowledge that there is a great mystery in the Trinity to the point of ignoring it altogether. Far too often, if there is something one finds difficult to understand or simply cannot comprehend it outright, they'll ignore it altogether.

The Trinity is one such mystery. Feeble, fallen minds can have a terrible time wrapping themselves around the mystery of the Trinity such that you can be easily tempted to ignore it altogether, outside of simple lip-service maybe once a year. It is as if to say of the Trinity that it is not an important doctrine of the faith. It's an easy cop-out for a wayward people that do not like to struggle, either physically, emotionally, or in thought. It's an attitude of indifference that is extremely dangerous to one's salvation.

However, God's Word declares the doctrine of the Trinity to be true. Therefore, for one who believes what the Word of God says, the mystery of the Trinity is an important doctrine. There is no room for indifference with regard to the Trinity for one who keeps God's Word—who guards, watches, cherishes, and clings to it, as you may recall hearing last week (and which Jesus also said in today's lesson)—or abides or remains in it, as Jesus said of His true disciples earlier in John 8. God's Word declares this to be true—the doctrine of the Trinity is true—and so one who keeps God's Word believes it and cherishes it. God declares who He is in His Holy Word—He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...one God—therefore one who keeps God's Word believes it and cherishes it. "He therefore, that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity."

Otherwise, if one dismisses the Trinity as so incomprehensible it is unworthy of thought or care, they they dismiss what God says of Himself. To them, God's identity is unimportant. This leaves the door open to myriad interpretations about who God is (and none of them can be true) and myriad

creations of who they want God to be (and none of them will be true). These believe in a false god who cannot save. To paraphrase: He, therefore, that will be saved must not thus think of the Trinity.

You cannot and do not go wrong in acknowledging that you cannot understand the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity. It is enough to take God at His Word, and believe and confess it to be true, as He has given you the faith to confess! In fact, this is the essence of faith. The letter to the Hebrews describes faith as the assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen. (cf. Hebrews 11:1) If you understood something, you would see it, even if only with your mind's eye. The Holy Trinity, being incomprehensible, cannot be grasped or seen with the mind's eye, so your knowledge of the truth of the Trinity is taken on conviction of faith. God's Word declares it to be true, so you believe it and confess it.

This belief in the Triune God—in one God in three Persons—expresses itself in the confession of the Creeds—the Apostles' and Nicene in addition to the Athanasian. For it is those creeds that you confess that God is One, yet works in each of His three Persons for your good, not as in modes, but in actual Persons who are all One God. I fear if I try to say too much more than that about the Trinity, it'll end up being too confusing, at best, and erroneous and heretical, at worst.

In any event, when you confess the three Person of the Trinity as one God, you confess that God the Father created you and has given and continues to give you all that you need to support this body and life; God the Son has redeemed you as He took on flesh, was born of the Virgin Mary, and died on the cross to forgive your sins; God the Spirit sanctifies you and daily brings you to the Word wherein you find repentance and the forgiveness of sins and brings you into the presence of God and His means by which He gives you repentance and forgiveness of sins. Again, these He did not as in modes, but in each of His persons. It is God—one God—who is at work to give you all that you have and need for your care and salvation in each of His three Persons.

There is no need to reduce God to something understandable and weak or completely do away with what cannot be comprehended. On the contrary, it is well and good to rejoice in a God who is greater than you are and greater than you can understand, who is strong enough to save, and who has given you faith in Him and His Word to believe "one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity." He who thus believes in and confesses the Trinity will be saved—as you do and have today—for it is done and has been done with a faith which receives these words: You are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.