

Before Abraham Was, I AM

John 7-8

What We Found

The Feast of Tabernacles set the stage. The rites come down to us in the Mishnah's tractate Sukkah, a Jewish description written after the Temple fell but preserving what was done there: every morning, water drawn from the Pool of Siloam was poured out at the altar, a rite Jewish tradition joins to Isaiah's promise of drawing water with joy from the wells of salvation, Isaiah 12:3; every evening, four golden candelabras blazed in the Temple court and lit up Jerusalem, a light the same tradition reads against the pillar of fire. On the last and greatest day, Jesus stood up in the crowd and claimed the first ceremony: if any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. John told us plainly what the living water is, the Holy Spirit, and hung the gift on a strange hinge: not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. Then, in the very courtyard of the candelabras, he claimed the second: I am the light of the world.

Twice this feast the authorities moved to seize him, and twice the same sentence stopped them: no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come. The restraint on the plot has a name, and it means the cross, when it comes, will be an appointment kept, not an ambush suffered. Between the arrests (in a passage the Church receives as canonical Scripture, whatever its winding manuscript road), a woman caught in adultery was set before him as a trap, and mercy walked out of it holding both clauses that must never be separated: neither do I condemn you, and, go, and do not sin again. And then the summit: your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day... before Abraham came to be, I AM. We opened Exodus 3 at last and heard the bush: I AM WHO I AM; say to Israel, I AM has sent me. We opened Isaiah 43:10 and heard God's courtroom refrain. Your English will read, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He; the Greek Bible Israel read carries that last clause with the same two words John puts on Jesus' lips, egō eimi. The English alone will not show you the seam. The Greek does, and the Church has long read the two together. His hearers knew their Scriptures and professional theology, and they reached for stones, the response Leviticus prescribes for blasphemy, as the scene has always been read, and John never says they misunderstood.

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine of Hippo, Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 33

On the woman caught in adultery, Augustine compresses the final tableau into four words the Church has never forgotten: two were left, the wretched woman and Mercy. And he will not let mercy be softened into permission: the Lord condemned the sin, not the sinner, for he did not say, go and sin, but go, and sin no more. Mercy meets us where we are and refuses to leave us there.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: St. Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, Book 1

Hilary's own conversion turned on the divine name. Searching the philosophers for what God is, he opened Moses and was stopped cold by the words from the bush: I AM WHO I AM. No definition could be more worthy of God than being itself. Then he opened John and found the same eternity speaking in time: in the beginning was the Word. What the bush declared, Jesus speaks in the first

person.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homily 55

Chrysostom fastens on the verbs: Jesus did not say, before Abraham was, I was, which would merely outrank the patriarch. He said I AM, as the Father uses the name I AM, for it signifies continuous being, exempt from all time. That is why they took up stones: they heard not a claim of age but a claim of the Name.

Live It This Week

- **Pray the Name.** Once a day this week, pray the ancient Jesus Prayer slowly, five times: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner. You now know what weight the Name in that sentence carries; pray it like you know.
- **Light one flame.** Light a candle once this week, at church or at home, and pray John 8:12 over one dark situation you carry: I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness. Leave the candle burning a while.
- **Drop one stone.** Name, privately, one person you have been condemning in your heart. Every day this week, pray for them by name, and end with the Lord's sentence about yourself: neither do I condemn you. Stones get heavy; set yours down.

Memory Verse

John 8:12 (RSV2CE)

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

Before Next Session

Read John 9 and 10. Session 9: The Light and the Shepherd. Keep every tally going, and keep your guess sealed.

Catechism References

CCC 206-207, 211, 590, 748, 1846-1848.