

Before Abraham Was, I Am

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 February 2022

Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

[0 : 00] We hope that you enjoy this teaching from Christ Church. This material is copyrighted and no unauthorized duplication, redistribution, or any other use of any part is permitted without prior consent from Christ Church.

Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

I'm Maddie Duhan. I'm a recent addition to the Berkeley Tuesday Community Group and the Women Reading Women Group. Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel According to John, chapter 8, verses 42 to 59, as printed in the liturgy.

Jesus said to them, if God were your father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own.

God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires.

[1 : 09] He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?

Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God. The Jews answered him, aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?

I am not possessed by a demon, said Jesus, but I honor my father, and you dishonor me. I am not seeking glory for myself, but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge.

Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death. At this they exclaimed, now we know that you are demon-possessed. Abraham died, and so did the prophets.

[2 : 15] Yet you say that whoever obeys your word will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?

Jesus replied, if I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. 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. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day.

He saw it and was glad. You are not yet fifty years old, they said to him, and you have seen Abraham. Very truly I tell you, Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I am.

At this they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

[3 : 21] Good morning, Christ Church. It's good to see you all, and it's good to see a few faces this morning.

I know it's going to take us a while to kind of get adjusted, but the idea of more faces in 2022 is, I think, a very hopeful thing. One of our kids has a birthday tomorrow, and I'll never forget the moment each of our children were born, and the first time we looked in each other's faces, just look eyeball to eyeball.

And you're probably aware newborns' visual systems are not yet fully developed, and infants often have trouble distinguishing between basic shapes. But babies, even newborns that are less than an hour old, are able to see something as complex as a human face.

And they can stare at that image, the facial image, much longer than any other object. And I just think it's amazing that our Creator God has built us with this capacity to connect and to attach at that level.

And so I'm hoping in the next months, you know, that we'll begin to just emerge and enjoy each other's faces and all the emotion recognition, all the trust building, all the communication that God gave us faces for, and that we really need to have human connection and attachment.

[4 : 52] Amen? Well, you may have heard this text read and felt a little nervous, like, okay, are we really going to talk about the devil today? And the answer is yes.

In our late modern secular age, we're people of the post-Christian West, and in our enlightened materialistic vision of reality, it's a struggle.

It's a struggle to believe in malevolent spiritual beings, isn't it? After all, we're educated and cultured people with computers in our pockets, so it feels a little primitive and a little backwards.

But, you know, people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, for them, it's obvious. You know, the things that are tearing us apart, that are destroying us as human beings are spiritual forces.

And they kind of look at our, you know, Western secularity and all of our smug condescension and are kind of like, what's up with you guys? So I'd like to just start with a quote from a professor at Columbia University.

[5 : 54] He wrote a book in the 90s. This is Andrew Delbanco. And the title of his book is called *The Death of Satan, How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*. He says, A gulf has opened in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources to cope with it.

We have jettisoned in the West the idea of cosmic evil or transcendent evil or supernatural evil. We don't believe in it. In fact, we don't even like to use the word evil because it implies moral absolutes and value judgments.

So we use medical terms. We talk about dysfunction. We talk about pathology. We don't use moral terminology. But as the 20th century has gone on, it has gotten harder and harder to say that holocausts and ethnic cleansings and serial killings are just bad psychological and sociological adjustments.

What we said 150 years ago, that all evil has natural causes, has scientific causes, that theory is wearing thin. Well, we want to avoid the twin errors of an unhealthy interest in the devil on the one hand and ignoring him altogether on the other hand because it's been said many times the devil's most clever deception is to convince us that he's not there.

And I think that's true. Jesus taught us that that's true. In the Our Father prayer that he taught us to pray, that most famous prayer in the whole world, there are six petitions divided in two halves.

[7 : 29] God's concerns come first about his name, his kingdom, and his will. And then our concerns come next. Our biggest daily concerns. Our daily need for bread.

Our daily need for cleansing from sin. And then our daily need for protection from what? The evil one. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us not from evil, but Jesus taught us to pray from the evil one.

The Gospels don't ignore Jesus' encounters with this dark power and the way that Jesus came to release people from their bondage and from their tyranny to this dark power.

And so John chapter 8, Jesus is in the temple courts in Jerusalem. He's there at the festival of Tabernacles. It's about October of 29 AD.

And Jesus is trying to teach us about this dehumanizing power and also about a power that can rehumanize us and a power that can give us life.

[8 : 31] And so my golden thread today is this, that Jesus challenges our views on the devil, divinity, and death. That's my outline.

Jesus challenges our views on the devil, divinity, and death. Just a few small topics this morning. You guys ready to dive in? Jesus challenges our views on the devil. Look at verse 44.

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

You can file this one under the hard sayings of Jesus. This sharp exchange between Jesus and his opponents is a source of potential embarrassment for us on two levels.

First of all, it sounds anti-Semitic. It sounds like he's saying that all Jews in general have the devil as their father. Secondly, it sounds like hocus pocus, like Jesus really believes that there's this personal, supernatural, evil being that's alive and active in the world.

[9 : 44] And these are two huge stumbling blocks I'd like to deal with for a moment. First of all, your father, the devil, sounds like Jesus is saying that Jews in general are children of the devil, meaning

that they are, like him, inveterate liars and murderers.

And we instinctively recoil at that thought. And we wonder, is this the Jesus that we know and love from the rest of the New Testament? And sadly, if you know anything about history, it's hard to imagine all the hurt that's been done by people who've distorted these words of Jesus into the ultimate lie that Jews are inferior people.

As we know, Jesus and his first followers were Jews. And so, this cannot be an ethnic slur.

And the question is, what does it mean? Well, in order to understand that, we have to unpack Jesus' teaching about the devil and seek to understand it. Jesus says in verse 44, you belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires.

And what are his desires? Jesus says he's a murderer. What does a murderer desire? A murderer desires death, not life. And we could think about going back to the past, we could think about the Garden of Eden and that killing where the human race's perfect relationship with God was slain in the beginning.

[11:13] Or we could go forward from this text and we could think about Golgotha. We could think about the crucifixion and how this murderer wants to destroy the person and the work of God's Son.

Jesus is teaching us that the devil desires death, not life. And he also desires lies, not truth. He says in verse 44, he was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.

When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. This fallen angel, Lucifer, Satan, his native tongue, the language in which he is fluent, proficient, and articulate is the language of deception.

And how does he use his language of lies, his language of half-truths, to kill our relationship with God? Well, if you go back to the opening pages of the Bible, the first three pages, Genesis 1, 2, and 3, you read there that Adam and Eve received this special revelation.

The inspired word of God was given to them, telling them who God is and all of his power and holiness and his wisdom and his love.

[12:35] This revelation was telling them who they are and their identity and to whom they belong in their relationship and what they're here for and their meaning and their purpose and how they're to live in their morality and what they're to do and not do in their ethics.

And God gives them this great gift, and then what happens next? The devil makes his first appearance in Scripture in the form of a serpent, and what does he do? The voice of this dark power asks a simple question, and if you want to turn in your pew Bibles, you can to his first words in Genesis 3, 1.

And what's his question? Did God really say? Did God really say? He's shrewd.

He's crafty. He uses speech to introduce confusion and distort God's words. This adversary comes and he speaks like a winsome, angelic theologian, right?

Smoothly maneuvering us into what appears to be a sincere theological discussion. And in that discussion, he distorts our perspective and he subverts our obedience by the by doing what?

[13:54] By emphasizing God's one no and minimizing God's 1,000 yeses, right? He emphasizes God's prohibition, this one thing they can't do, and he totally ignores the many, many things that God has provided.

And he's reducing God's commands down to a single question. Doubting God's sincerity. Defaming God's motives. Denying the truthfulness of God's consequences.

If you look there at Genesis 3, 5, it says, When you eat the fruit, your eyes will be open and you will be like God. That's the first lie.

At least in human history, it's the first lie. And what this tells us is that the devil desires to sow doubt about God's revelation and about God's word.

He wants to make us word ignorers. He wants to make us people who are word adverse. Or if we do read God's word, he wants us to deconstruct it with that question, did God really say?

[15:03] He wants God's word to appear harsh. Like God is restricting us from our full humanity. He wants it to seem like if we build a life based on our own autonomy and our own independence, that that will not bring shame and pain.

That will actually bring enlightenment and progress. This is what Jesus is building on, right? This is why he says in verse 42, If God were your father, you would love me.

If God were your father, you would love me. What is the lie that the devil most wants people to believe? The lie that Jesus is not who he says he is.

The lie that Jesus is not sent from the Father. He's not the one who speaks the truth of God. He's not the one who brings the life of God. When Jesus says here that you either belong to God as your father or the devil as your father, strong words, he's basically restating Genesis 3.15 where God declares this, I will put enmity between you, the serpent, and the woman, and between your offspring and hers.

He will crush your head and you will strike his heel. That mother promise at the beginning of the Bible, that first announcement of God's grace declares that there are actually only two humanities, two families.

[16 : 35] One humanity bears the identity deriving from that lesser and limited power which denies the truth and destroys life. The other humanity bears an identity that derives from that transcendent and infinite power of the living God who will send the seed of the woman to save us.

You see, even here in paradise, this conflict between these two humanities, these two families is announced.

And all of us belong to that former family until by the new birth, by the Holy Spirit coming into our lives from God, we're transferred into the family of God, having God as our father.

Does this make sense? Jesus says in verse 42, If God were your father, you would love me. And you know you have God as your father if you love Jesus.

For love of Jesus is the mark of someone who belongs to God in the family of God. Unfortunately, some people think that they are a child of God, but they don't love Jesus.

[17 : 54] They don't love Jesus with all their heart as of paramount importance for their lives. But when the Holy Spirit comes into your heart, he gives you this love for Jesus. And that's why Jesus is begging the question, Who's your father?

Who's your daddy? Whose child are you? To whom do you belong? Do you belong to this one who from the beginning has brought lies and death?

Or do you belong to the one who sent his son to bring truth and life? That's the question. So Jesus is challenging our views of the devil.

But it gets more interesting than that. He challenges not only our views of the devil, he challenges our views of divinity itself. When he says in verse 58, Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am.

And you're like, okay, Jesus, that's bad grammar. It should be I was. Before Abraham was born, I was. And even if that's good grammar, that's logically impossible.

[19 : 00] Is it not? Abraham's the father of Israel, the people of God. And again, we get to that story in Genesis chapter 12 to 22, where God made promises to save the world through the family of Abraham.

And through his descendants, through one particular descendant of Abraham, all the nations of the world would be blessed. Now Abraham lived roughly as long before Jesus as Jesus lived before us, about 2,000 years.

So what is Jesus getting at with this statement? Well, we'll look at the context in verse 54. He says, And then Jesus says this.

He says, Jesus is suggesting that Israel's God, the one whom these Judeans claim to worship and know and serve, is operating now in and through Jesus in a decisive and unique way to summon Israel and to summon the whole world back to a genuine knowledge and allegiance to God.

And that Abraham, entrusting God's promises, that through his family, all the peoples of the earth would be blessed, Abraham was actually looking ahead to that day when Jesus would bring God's promises to reality.

[20 : 38] And so Jesus is claiming that he is at last embodying what the one living God, Abraham's God, had envisaged and promised all those years ago.

They've already mocked Jesus as a Samaritan half-breed and as demon-possessed. So how do they respond to this claim that Abraham was actually rejoicing in Jesus?

Well, verse 57, They laugh at him. You knew Abraham. Have you been traveling in a time machine? Did you get like three wishes and a lamp or something? Like, you're not even 50 years old, much less 500 years old, much less 2,000 years old. Jesus, you're talking nonsense.

And of course, Jesus, as usual, is talking on another level altogether. And that's why he says in verse 58, Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am.

[21 : 43] To understand this, you have to go back not just to the first book of the Bible in Genesis, but to the second book of Exodus at the burning bush, where God reveals himself to Moses, and he gives him this call to deal with the problem of getting Israel out of Egypt.

And Moses says, Well, God, how am I going to tell the king of Egypt what kind of God has sent me? And what does God say? I am who I am.

Go tell them that I am who I am has sent me to you. The God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come has sent you. The self-existing, self-sufficient, eternal, ever-present living God who is outside of time and existed before Abraham and exists today and will exist ever afterwards.

Go tell them that he is the one who's sent you. When you read on in Exodus, you get to the center of the Torah, the center of God's great revelation to his people in Exodus 34.

[22 : 49] And God reveals himself to Moses again out of the fire on Mount Sinai. And what does he say? He says, God is revealing all of who he is.

And Jesus takes this most holy name of Yahweh, of I am, and he says, That's me.

Not before Abraham was, I was. Before Abraham was, I am. The greatest and highest expression of divine self-reference, Jesus applies to himself.

He says, I am uncaused. I am self-sufficient, self-determined. I depend on nothing and no one. All that exists depends on me, in fact.

I have no beginning. In fact, in me, all things have their beginning. That sounds a lot like the first line of this gospel, doesn't it? In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

[24 : 03] If you were to go to city arts and lectures in San Francisco, and the presenter gets up on the stage and steps to the microphone and says, I am ultimate reality.

I have always existed. I created the world. I'm, in fact, in this moment holding every single one of you together. And at the end of time, your relationship with me will determine where you spend all of eternity.

What is the conversation going to be like after that talk? Like, man, she was a really great speaker. She had some strong beliefs and really some interesting insights, you know, on life.

No, everybody would conclude this woman, this guy, is deluded. This guy's deluded. And how do we know that Jesus' opponents understood what he was saying? In verse 59, they picked up stones to stone him.

They didn't pick up a rope to hang him or a sword to behead him. And why did they pick up stones? Because in the third book of the Torah, Leviticus tells us that death by stoning is the capital punishment for anyone who blasphemes God's name and claims to be God.

[25 : 21] And so these folks attempt no further investigation to do what God's Word tells them to do in this situation. Jesus is not difficult to understand.

They knew perfectly well what he was saying, that he was claiming divinity, and that is absolutely intolerable if you're just a human being.

I think I've got a streak now going in all these sermons in the Gospel of John of quoting C.S. Lewis, so I'm just going to keep it up. But if you've never read this book, Mere Christianity, it's great.

He's an Oxford professor, and he says this. He says, I'm trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him. Quote, I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.

That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on a level with the man who says he's a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell.

[26 : 32] You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool. You can spit at him and kill him as a demon.

Or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher.

He's not let that open to us. He did not intend to. Professor Lewis goes on. He says, we are faced then with a frightening alternative. This man we're talking about either was and is just what he said,

or else a lunatic or something worse.

Now it seems to me obvious that he was neither a lunatic nor a fiend, and consequently, however strange, however terrifying, however unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that he was and is God, that God has landed on this enemy-occupied world in human form.

I think this is maybe the most challenging statement in John's gospel, at least so far. And I think Jesus is challenging us to get off the fence.

[27 : 47] He's saying, you can't stay neutral about me. You either need to crown me or kill me. You know, say that I'm Lord or say that I'm a demon. Center the whole of your life around me as if everything else pales in comparison.

Or stamp out the memory of me forever. Those are kind of the things that Jesus wants us to wrestle with. Before Abraham was born, I am.

Jesus challenges our views of the devil and of divinity. And I want to say a last word about death. Because you may have noticed this other provocative statement in verse 51.

Very truly, I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death. What? Death is this wide and this deep word.

And I think Jesus is speaking on two levels, as he often does. If we think that this is a denial of the literal death of the body, it probably does confirm our suspicions that Jesus is mad.

[28 : 54] But he can't mean physical death, like if you keep my word, you're not going to die. Because all of his disciples died. In fact, only John, the apostle, didn't die a violent death as a martyr.

So what does Jesus mean? Well, the first level of meaning of this word death, I think, is a reference to that ultimate disaster. When you die and you go out into eternity and you're unprepared to meet God.

And you die without the forgiveness of Jesus. And you meet God as your judge. And you enter the other side and you realize there's no more hope. And that God is going to dismiss you from his presence.

And that you will then live forever in a state of eternal spiritual death without God who is life itself. That is a chilling thought.

And that, I think, is the teaching of Jesus. But look at what Jesus does. Listen to his gracious offer. To these people who are dishonoring him, blaspheming him, calling him a Samaritan half-breed, calling him demon-possessed.

[29 : 58] People who are in danger of themselves of the judgment of God. He holds out this gracious gift in verse 51. Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death.

If you obey my word. If you believe what I have to say about myself and my Father and the Holy Spirit and the great salvation that we've come to accomplish.

You will never see death. If you obey the word of him who's going to taste death on your behalf on the cross. If you obey the word of the one who's going to lay down his life as your substitute.

To triumph over sin and win a victory over death and the resurrection. If you embrace and cherish and abide in or are transformed by the reality of my word. You will not have to come to that ultimate disaster.

Of eternal spiritual death. That's pretty good news. But Jesus I think also has a second level of meaning. Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death.

[31 : 14] I think what he means is that death can go through you. And you can go through death without it making any difference.

Of course it will make a massive heartbreaking difference to all those people you're going to leave behind in a wake of pain and grief.

But what about your personal experience of death? I had a pastor pal, long time church planter in Boulder, Colorado. Just passed away last night. What about his experience of death last night?

Jesus says you will not see death. You will not notice death. You will not pay attention to death. Though physical death will happen to you. Because of what I'm doing inside of you.

It will not matter to you. It will be irrelevant to you. And you're looking at me like you're crazy. And that's how they were looking at Jesus. I read these words last year during lockdown.

[32 : 16] J.B. Phillips was a friend of C.S. Lewis. And he wrote a great modern English translation of the New Testament. And he also wrote a little book called *Your God is Too Small*. And a section of that book is called *The Abolition of Death*.

And I know I've had very long quotes in the sermon. But here's one more. He says, We find Christ teaching an astonishing thing about physical death. Not merely that it is an experience robbed of its terror. But that as an experience it does not exist at all. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the meaning that Christ intended to convey. Was that death was a completely negligible experience to the man who had already begun to live life of the eternal quality. Once it dawns upon us that God, incredible as it may well sound, has actually identified himself with man. That he has taken the initiative in effecting the necessary reconciliation of man with himself. And has shown the way by which little human personalities can begin to embark on that immense adventure of capital L living.

[33 : 27] Of which God is the center. Death. The discarding of a temporary machine adapted only for a temporary stage may begin to seem negligible.

It is only in Christ, in the representative man who is also God, that death can be safely ignored. And heaven confidently welcomed for those who have a grip on the timeless life of God. When you guys come together for my funeral, I don't know, it's going to be soon or it's going to be a long time from now.

I don't know if you believe this, but I do. So make sure you say, Jonathan St. Clair is not dead. He became, he became a partaker of the life of God himself. A life which death has no power to destroy. Make sure they say that. You say that. Okay.

[34 : 41] Friends, you don't have to die. And if we think out the implications of our deathlessness, it's astonishing. What the world needs is not cautious Christians who are afraid of death like everybody else is in the world.

What the world most needs is the Christ of free and fearless Christians who know and live like we're never going to die. Why? Because that is the truth. If you obey my word, you will never see death. Who wants to be that kind of Christian? I do. May God give us the grace and the mercy to live like that. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.