

# First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

“I AM WHO I AM”

Sunday, February 21, 2021

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell, Senior Pastor

## Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Welcome, Announcements and Opening Prayer

Good morning, friends. Welcome to this Lord's Day. My name is the Rev. Emily Riley Campbell. Today is the first Sunday in Lent. It's February 21<sup>st</sup>, and we are so glad that you have joined us for worship today.

I am glad, also, to share with you today the news that our parking lot services have resumed. And as long as it stays above 20 degrees here in warm and sunny Michigan, we will hold these services in the warmth of our vehicles. So from today going forward you can pre-register your cars each week through our church's website.

Speaking of pre-registering, let me just put out one final appeal, saying it is not too late if you are watching this on Sunday morning, to register for our church's Annual Meeting, which is taking place today, February 21<sup>st</sup>, at noon via Zoom. You can register through our church's website. The purpose of this meeting is to elect our 2021 nominating committee and also to vote on pastors' terms of call.

Friends, next weekend the deacons are offering a tremendous resource for our congregation, and family members, and friends of our congregation. They have put together a booklet entitled “Going Home — End of Life Planning” This book is a really helpful resource in providing, or at least starting, what can be difficult conversations, yet needed conversations, with family members and friends regarding the end of life. If you're interested in getting one of these free booklets, you can pick one up here at our church next Saturday, February 27<sup>th</sup>, between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. Members of the deacons will be here in the parking lot; you can get one in your car. They will also be available on Sunday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, in our parking lot service, between 10:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.

There is one final announcement today. In two weeks' time, on Sunday, March 7<sup>th</sup>, we will be celebrating our church's 186<sup>th</sup> anniversary! We have several special things planned and we hope you will tune in, either online or in our parking lot service. For one thing, you'll have members of our choir--a quartet, singing and leading us in praise. We hope you will join us for this special occasion.

Now let us prepare our hearts for worship today as we turn to God in prayer. Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, as we reflect on the life and death and resurrection of your Son, help us to discern in our own lives what we must lay down and what we must take up, what we must end and what we must begin. Give us grace to lead a disciplined life, in glad obedience and with joy, that comes from a closer walk with you. We confess, dear God, that in the busyness and stress of our lives, we often lose sight of your presence. Forgive us, we pray. Open our eyes this morning, that we may see you. Open our minds, so that we may know you. Open our hearts, that we may love you today and always. Amen.

## **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Introduction to the Lenten Sermon Series**

Friends, the season of Lent within the church is a season of preparation before Easter. The holy season begins on Ash Wednesday, which was this past Wednesday, February 17, and it carries on over the next six weeks. The purpose of this holy season is to set aside time in our busy lives to reflect on the person of Jesus Christ more fully. We consider Christ's life, his suffering and death, his burial and resurrection.

Now you may be familiar with the idea of giving up something for Lent. This is a practice that many Christian traditions follow. This can, of course, be a helpful practice as long as the focus remains on God and not on ourselves. I would encourage you to do whatever it is that will help you feel closer to God in this holy season. Perhaps this means taking walks outside and spending more time with God in prayer. Perhaps this means refraining from social media for a period of time during Lent and using that time, instead, to dig more deeply into God's word. There certainly are lots of great apps and studies that we could point you to in that endeavor.

Here in church, throughout Lent we are returning to the basics. We're going to ask the question, "Who is the person of Jesus Christ? What does he say about Himself and how does Jesus' teaching relate to our lives today?" Our sermon series throughout this holy season will be based on the sayings of Jesus found in John's gospel that are all characterized by the words "I am."

Each of the statements Jesus says about himself begin with those words, "I am." Perhaps you've heard some of these before. They are statements such as, "I am the bread of life," and "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Each week going forward we will study one of these great claims that Jesus made about Himself in the hopes of growing closer to God.

Today we're going to start at the very beginning. We're going back to the Old Testament to look at the origin of those words, "I am," for "I AM WHO I AM" is the name by which God first refers to Himself when he speaks to Moses through the burning bush. I know that God's name here can completely sound confusing and almost sounds like something taken out of a Doctor Seuss book, but it is also extremely meaningful to our lives today.

So friends, I invite you on this journey of discovery throughout Lent. We hope you will join us as we seek to know God more.

**Geff Phillips plays and sings "*Blessed Be Your Name*"**

## **Darlene Maginley, Director of Children's Ministry – Children's Message**

Good morning, kids. There is this great story in the Old Testament where God tells Moses that he wants him to do something really hard. Now it's in the book of Exodus, chapter 3. God talks to Moses through a burning bush. So after the service, I would recommend that you open up your Bible to Exodus, chapter 3, and read all about it, because it doesn't happen very often that somebody talks to us in a burning bush! But God wanted Moses to do something really hard and Moses basically tells God, "No way! I'm not doing that!"

What God wanted Moses to do was lead all the Israelites out of Egypt to the land that he was going to show him. Moses said, "But why on earth would the Israelites listen to me?" So Moses says, "Who am I going to tell them has sent me? They're not going to

listen to me.” And God says, “I AM WHO I AM, and you tell the Israelites that ‘I AM’ sent you.”

Moses did that, and the people followed him.

Centuries later, Jesus comes to earth to live with us and during his preaching, he starts saying, “I am the bread of life, I am the way, the truth, and the life.” He starts using all of these sentences that start with ‘I am’ and the people of that day knew the story about Moses and about God saying, “I AM.” And they figured out, “Hey, you know what? He's using the same words that God was using.” That's how they figured out that Jesus was the Son of God.

Now a lot of times in our lives we say, “I am.” Sadly, when I say, “I am,” a lot of the time, it's not a good thing. I say, “I am so mad” or “I am so tired of snow and cold weather and winter,” but every time Jesus said it, it was a *good* thing. So I have a challenge for myself and I hope that you will do it too. This week, every time I open my mouth to say “I am...” if it's one of those ornery “I am's,” I'm going to stop and I'm going to think about what Jesus did for us. I am going to change “I am frustrated” or “I am angry” to “I am so grateful,” because Jesus came to earth and gave his life for us and we're in this season of Lent now.

Lent is that time before Easter when we think about all of the things that Jesus came to earth and suffered and took on because of us. We're going to learn a little more during the season of Lent about how Jesus was “I am.” But this week, just remember that it's always a good thing.

Let's pray together. Dear God, thank you for being the great “I Am”. Thank you for being there at the beginning and for Moses and for Jesus and for us and forever. We thank you for all of the ways that Jesus came to earth and the great ways that he was the “I am”-- the bread of life, the resurrection of life. Help us to remember that “I am's” should be positive and grateful, also. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor – First Scripture Reading**

#### **Exodus 3:1-12**

<sup>1</sup> Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.” <sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>5</sup> Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” <sup>6</sup> He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup> and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the

Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup>The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup>So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” <sup>11</sup>But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” <sup>12</sup>He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

## **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Second Scripture Reading**

### **Exodus 3:13-15**

<sup>13</sup>But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” <sup>14</sup>God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”<sup>[a]</sup> He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” <sup>15</sup>God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD,<sup>[b]</sup> the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

This is my name forever,  
and this my title for all generations.

Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Amen

## **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Sermon, “I AM WHO I AM”**

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Friends, I have a confession to make. The very first time I heard God referred to himself as “I AM WHO I AM,” my mind immediately jumped to Doctor Seuss's 1960s children's book, “Green Eggs and Ham.” That book begins with the words, “I am Sam, I am Sam. Sam I am, Sam I am.” However, it was a very helpful friend in seminary, slightly older than myself, who shared with me, well, actually, God isn't like Doctor Seuss in his wording. God is like Popeye, the sailor man, the cartoon created in 1929. Popeye famously declares, “I am who I am and that's all I am.” Now, trust me, I understand that there is something very wrong about comparing the God whom we worship, the God who is holy, loving and just, to a famous cartoon character or even to a character in a beloved children's book! But friends how else can we make sense of this very strange name? We have no other frame of reference.

In Exodus, chapter 3, at verse 13, Moses receives a call from God to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt. Moses says to God in response to this call, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and I say to them the God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, what is His name? What shall I tell them?” God says to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” That is what you are to say to the Israelites. “I AM” sent me to you.”

God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob has sent me to you.” And God said, “This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.”

Clearly, this name is important, but how are we to make sense of it today? Well, friends, by digging a little bit deeper into the meaning of this name, we unearth new understandings about who God is and what God's name and presence means in the context of our lives. Today, first and foremost, what we learn about God's name, is that God is eternal. Although the phrase "I AM WHO I AM" does not make a lot of sense to us today, it did make a lot more sense to its original recipients.

These words were originally written in Hebrew and in Hebrew the "I Am" verb is not tied to any specific grammatical tense as it is in English, which means this verb can be translated in a couple different ways. It can actually be translated into the past tense, into the present and future tenses. All of this is to say that "I Am Who I Am" can also be translated as I am who I was, and it can also correctly be translated as I will be who I was. Now all these translations suggest the same thing. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God is eternal. God was, God is, and God is to come.

His presence is as real now as it was to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when they walked the earth. God's presence will be as real in the future as it is with us today. Now from this one name we learn that God is not only eternal, but we also learn that God is powerful. Warren Wiersbe is a contemporary biblical commentator. He has said, of our scripture passage, that when God called Moses to go to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses repeatedly responded to God, both in Exodus, chapter 3 and we see more in Exodus, chapter 4. Moses says, in essence, to God, "I am not equipped." But, through his name, God clearly responds to Moses, saying "I AM."

Moses, of course, was not the only biblical character that believed himself not worthy to carry out the call of God. Gideon, Isaiah, Jeremiah—they all expressed this same reluctance, fear, and doubt. But in each of these stories, God's great power is on display as he equips his chosen people to serve not out of their own strength and ability, but in the strength and power of God. For Moses this meant that God equipped and provided Moses with signs to convince Pharaoh to release the Israelites. God also provided help in the form of Aaron, Moses' brother, who would serve as a mouthpiece for Moses. God provided strength for Moses in his old age, in all that was necessary to lead his people through the wilderness.

Now, although the 1956 movie, *The Ten Commandments* shows a 33-year-old Charlton Heston playing Moses, the reality from scripture is that Moses was most likely a weather-beaten 80 year-old, who spent the bulk of his life tending sheep. Although, in so many ways, Moses is an unlikely hero to the Israelites, God made use of his background, his experience in Egypt, his experience with Pharaoh's family, his knowledge of the land of Egypt, his knowledge of the language of the people of Egypt. His own desert experience would help him lead God's people to freedom.

There truly are no wasted experiences in God's economy. If we are willing, God will use every experience in our lives for His glory. We may feel like Moses and think I'm not good enough to be a witness for God, I'm not good enough to serve as a disciple today, but God responds confidently 'I AM!' God's power is magnificently on display even through our weaknesses.

In Exodus, chapter 3, God says of his name, "This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation, I AM WHO I AM." In other words, God is saying to us today, "I am eternal. I have existed from the very beginning of time and will be here to the close of time, I am powerful, I am capable of working through you, I am

with you, and I am *for* you forever.” God is saying to us through his name, “I am turning your every experience and even your weaknesses into a means of grace.”

Friends, we may never fully understand all that God's name means, but we can understand that this name was and is and always will be a tremendous blessing to us. And our God continues to bless us through further teaching about his name that's given to us through the person of Jesus Christ. For more than once, as you've heard repeatedly in John's gospel, Jesus says, “I am, I am, I am, I am.” With each “I am” saying, we learn more about what God's name means. We learn more, too, about the person of God Himself, and how God relates to our lives today.

Friends, I hope you will stay with us throughout this Lenten journey, as we seek to discover more and more about how God's name and who He claims to be shapes our lives today. May God help us as we seek to grow closer to Him. Amen.

### **Geff Phillips plays and sings “I Am”**

#### **Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Closing Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we praise you for mercy shown, grace given, living water, and the Spirit's power. We ask you for daily strength, hope for tomorrow, your Word to guide us, and strong feet to follow at the burning bush. You say that you have seen the misery of your people, you have heard them cry out and you are concerned about their sufferings.

Today we bring before you the broken ones, forgotten ones, and abused ones. Bring freedom and release, love and compassion to damaged hearts and souls.

We bring before you the grieving ones, addicted ones, suffering and wounded ones. Bring wholeness and healing, comfort and relief to broken bodies and minds.

We bring before you the lonely ones, the homeless ones, thirsty, tired, and penniless ones. Bring hope and sustenance, physical and spiritual food to hungry bodies and souls.

Our God is good and mighty, the great I Am, the one who was, is and will always be, and from generation to generation, the one who sees our pain, cares for our needs, and then sends us out to go and do likewise.

May we draw closer to our God and to one another as we recite together the words our Lord has 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.

**Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Benediction and Blessing**

Friends, as we go from here today, may we go in the strength of the Father, and the grace of the Son and in the wisdom of the Spirit.

May the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.