

“BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS BORN, I AM”: HOW LIMITED PEOPLE ENCOUNTER ETERNITY

Each of Jesus' 'I am' claims brought a reaction. None more so than the final one we'll consider this term:

Before Abraham was born, I am.

John tells us that, following this 'I am' claim, uttered by Jesus in the context of hot dispute, the religious leaders pick up rocks to stone Jesus. They judge him worthy of death.

Why? Because Jesus is linking his identity with an important incident in which the living God made himself known, recorded in the Old Testament.

Fifteen hundred years earlier, a man called Moses is in the desert of the Sinai Peninsula. He's caring for his father-in-law's sheep. Other than the animals, Moses has only bramble bushes for company.

Then Moses notices that one of these bushes is *alight*.

Normally if a bush catches fire, it's soon consumed. All that's left is a pile of ash.

Not *this bush*.

The bush is burning, yet keeping its shape. If there's smoke, it is coming not from the branches but from the flame itself. For the flame is somehow *independent* of the bush.

Normally, flames get their energy from fuel—from whatever is being burnt. Once the fuel's exhausted, the flame dies. It goes to show that, in a sense, the flame was *needy* all along.

But not this flame. This flame isn't needy. It has life in itself.

Moses is startled and draws near to investigate. Here's what happens next:

God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

The reason the burning bush isn't being consumed is because of who is present in it. The flame, that doesn't need anyone to sustain it, mirrors the one speaking from the bush, who doesn't need anyone to sustain him.

It's tempting to think that God is just a bigger, better, improved version of us. Yet, according to the Bible, God is different from us in important ways.

Perhaps the most important difference is that, whilst we are creatures, God alone is the Creator.

The Bible opens:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

So here's the claim: before the beginning, God was. He has existed eternally. He's alive, not on borrowed breath, but sustained by the life he has within himself.

Everything else derives its life from his life.

This is why the Bible can say that God is the source of all things. God originates and sustains everything else that exists. He isn't dependent on anything he made to do anything at all.

God lacks nothing. He is entirely whole. Before the beginning, he was. At the end, he will be. Like the flame in the bush, he's not needy. He has everything he needs in himself.

This reality is the basis of God's self-disclosure to Moses. Moses asks for the name of the one speaking from the bush. Here's the reply:

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."

God is the eternally, self-existent One who always was, always is and always will be. Everything else comes and goes. God simply is.

And now, standing before the religious leaders, Jesus echoes the claim of the voice from the bush:

Before Abraham was born, *I am*.

Abraham lived two thousand years before Jesus was born, in Bethlehem, away in a manger. But in employing this awkward grammatical form, and in emphasising the phrase 'I am', Jesus is not just claiming that he existed before Abraham—but that he's existed eternally.

The flame required no fuel. The Creator isn't dependent on his creation. It's the same with Jesus. Indeed, as the religious leaders understand, Jesus is claiming *to be* the Creator, the life source for everything and everyone.

If it's untrue, it's blasphemous.

If it's true, it changes everything.

The one that the religious leaders are planning to hurl stones at is the one upon whom they depend.

Can limited humans encounter eternity? John's claim is that, if you'd been in Jerusalem that day, you could have seen the living God.

Here's how he puts it at the beginning of his Gospel, a part of the Bible often read at Christmastime:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

Perhaps John had the religious leaders' opposition in mind when he then writes:

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

Yet a wonderful promise follows:

To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

It's what we've seen this term.

Jesus is the all-sustaining bread of life, the light of the world, the truly good shepherd and gate, the resurrection and life, the way, truth and life, and the true vine from which all fruitfulness flows.

He is the source of life, the great I AM himself, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, in whom is life.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas: the God who doesn't need us nonetheless wants us. He took on human form, he was despised by those he made and died a cruel death, so deep was his love for us.

And that means that the awesome God, who stands outside of time... can nonetheless be known, at Christmastime and forever—if you will believe in his name.