

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
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"A Different Slant on the 'I'"

"Jesus said to them, 'I am ...'" [John 6:35 NRSV]

Have you ever stopped to think how many times a day each of us uses the common personal pronoun "I"? The opportunities are legion! Just consider it for a moment. When you first get up in the morning, you probably think to yourself, "Today, I..." Next someone probably greets you with a question about your well-being, to which nine times out of ten you will answer, "yes", or "no", followed by "I". Then perhaps a friend will call you on the telephone and invite you somewhere, to which, once again, you will respond with an "I". Or maybe you have a doctor's appointment and she asks you how you feel. It would be pretty hard to describe yourself without using "I".

I discovered just that one Sunday years ago when a parishioner came up to me after the Service and said, "Do you realize, Barry, that you used the word 'I' thirty-six times in your sermon?" Either he was truly bored or just being "nit-picky", but in either case he had a point. Even though I was describing my own personal experiences, the first person singular had been used an unusual amount of times. Obviously he had gotten very little out of the sermon!

The personal pronoun that describes the self in the first person is used by almost every culture on earth. It of course has many different forms. In German it is "ich"; in French "je"; in Greek it is "ego"; in sign language it is the "I" sign drawn inwardly to the body. There is an equivalent for each language, but the most fascinating is the root pronoun for "I" as it is pronounced in the Semitic languages. We would spell it *yodh*. It sounds like heavy breathing: *yodh*.

This particular form of the "first" pronoun is interesting because it is this breathing sound that God may have used when life was first created. No matter whether you interpret the Genesis stories symbolically, or accept them literally, the sound of creation was probably like a breath, a divine *woosh* that gave the first human "self" motion.

It was this same divine "woosh" that God used with Moses when he asked God for a name to give to the Israelites. You remember the story. Moses flees Egypt having killed a soldier who was beating a Jew. Out in the wilderness, he meets a good-looking woman and falls in love with her. He marries the gal and falls into a fortune 500 family and is instantly elevated to executive shepherd. It's all very romantic until one day he goes over to investigate a bush that is on fire without being burned. Lo and behold it is God who tells Moses a) take off your shoes, this is a holy place, b) you are a Jew, therefore c) I am sending you back to Egypt to rescue my people. Whoa, says Moses; and after losing every argument he can think of for not doing this mission, he finally comes up with what he hopes is the clincher. "Who shall I say sent me? I mean, these people are not going to just up and follow me, even if I use my personal pronoun 36 times!"

It is at this point that God puts a different slant on the "I". "My name," says God, "is *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* (I am who I am). Tell them *Yahweh!* Tell them 'I am' has sent you!" It was the same divine "woosh", only this time it was slanted forward. Oh yes, the name was deliberately vague, because no name, no word, no sound can completely communicate God to another. But still, it had a definite impact, a power behind it. It had a command attached to it. It was God's breath telling someone to do something. It was the divine "I" in action! It had a definite "slant" to it!

We know the rest of the story - the proof of God's name was in the action that it performed. The Israelites were rescued, given a new code of laws and eventually entered a promised land where they were fruitful and multiplied. But a strange thing happened. The Israelites lost God's name! Or perhaps one should say, they put it away where no one could use it! Over the centuries they made the name so special that the average person was no longer permitted to pronounce it. Instead they substituted *Adonai*, the word for "Lord." Under penalty of death, no one was allowed to say the sacred *Yahweh*. No one could invoke the great pronoun. The powerful slant of the divine "I" was blocked out. No one any longer used God's name.

It was like that for a long time, so fast forward a few thousand years to about 31-33 A.D. [By the way, to be politically correct now days, we should use C.E. instead of A.D. A.D., of course, is short for *anno domini*, which means "in the year of the Lord." But there are so many non-Christians in the world that scholars (and/or politicians) decided it was more proper to say "common era", or C.E. after the year "0". Never mind that it still recognizes the birth of Christ as being pivotal in the history of the world. It's supposed to be more ecumenical!] So! In those days C.E. a man named Jesus (a name, by the way, that also uses the divine "woosh") appeared on the scene and began saying things like "I am the Good Shepherd; I am the Door; I am the Way; I am the Truth; I am Life;" and in today's lesson he says, "I am the Bread of Life." Perhaps a new slant has been given to the "I"!

Note first the identification of the personal pronoun with objects or concepts that describe the nature of the Divine. In each case the object or concept used is symbolic but it also is something that we know in real life. We know what a shepherd is and what a shepherd does. We know the purpose of a door. We know how to find our way somewhere, even if we might need a map or directions. We seem to have an internal understanding of what truth is, at least vs. something false. We are ever searching for the meaning of life.

Note second that the "slant" of this divine nature is always directed toward the other. Through Jesus, the divine "I" connects us to all of these descriptions. God is always "leaning over" towards us.

Note third that there are many scholars who believe and much evidence to support the idea that Jesus was using this form of speech on purpose. He was saying "Yahweh. He was using the divine "woosh", "I am." He was slanting the "I" of God back toward God's people. There is at least one indication that he carried it even further.

In their book The Hidden Value of a Man, Gary Smalley and John Trent describe the power of this divine "I". They refer specifically to the time when Jesus was in the garden praying on the night before his death. Judas led a detachment of soldiers to the place to arrest him. Knowing that they were coming for him, Jesus went out to meet them, and said, "For whom are you looking?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. Jesus replied, "I am he." When Jesus said to them, "I am," they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, "For whom are you looking?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he." [John 18:4-8 NRSV]

In the Greek the phrase is εγω ειμι, or, literally "I am." If translated directly from the Hebrew, or Aramaic, it is the same form used by God when the divine name was given to Moses, *Yahweh!* A literal translation might read that they were pinned to the ground! A mere detachment of soldiers was no match for the power of the divine "woosh!"

The point of all this is, *nothing* can match the power of the "I" of Jesus; *nothing* can overcome the divine "woosh!" Just as the armed soldiers were no match for the power of the Lord, neither are all the painful events of life that threaten to beat our hope into submission.

I don't know about you-all as laypeople, but as a priest, being on the side of that power is a thrill beyond words. It means I can enter any suffering situation and know that as an emissary of Jesus, I can offer hope, even when all else appears lost. The slant of the "I" is in our favor, and I suspect anyone can use it!

So maybe our task here in Sparta is to apply the "I". Maybe we should all be out there looking for more situations where we can apply the power of the divine "woosh." Maybe we ought to be giving away our "selves" and replacing them with the great "I am."

I'm not sure how to do that any better than we have been, but I'll bet that together we can figure it out. Through prayer and openness to the sound of the divine breath, I'll bet that Jesus is just waiting for us to ask, so that he can say, "I already told you that I am; now here's how we can do it!"

"I am," Jesus said. Are you?