

Knowing the Only I Am

8th Sun. after Pent. – 07/23/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Isaiah 44:6-8 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 8, [Yahweh says to His people of old, and to us today,] **“Fear not, nor be afraid... Is there a God besides Me? There is no Rock; I know not any.”**

Introduction

✘ As Americans, living in a country that was settled by people fleeing from rulers in Europe who were persecuting them; not allowing them to worship and practice their religious beliefs according to the convictions of their own conscience, you and I are thankful that the First Amendment of our Constitution grants us the freedom to exercise our beliefs as we see fit.

→ And that means that, for us to have that freedom, we must then allow others the freedom to believe differently than we believe; to practice those beliefs in a manner that at times is actually in direct opposition to our own convictions and beliefs.

→ This is why some 20 years ago, Judge Alfred T. Goodwin of the Ninth Circuit Court concluded in a his judgement on a case about whether or not the Pledge of Allegiance was unconstitutional that “the United States is not a nation under God. We are a nation under God, as well as Vishnu and Zeus and no god at all. We are a nation of many religions and none at all” (*Broomfield Enterprise*, 7/20/02).

✘ But as we see in our Old Testament Reading today, this kind of thing is nothing new. Ever since sin came about, soon after God created the universe, people have created and worshipped their own gods. Sometimes they were idols that they created out of wood or metal or stone and often they were gods that they created in their own minds from a cafeteria of various beliefs and philosophies, in order to fit their own fancy for that day.

→ This is the context into which we enter with the prophet Isaiah and the people of Israel today. As God alludes to in verse seven of our text, He appointed the people of Israel, and led them as His “chosen people” centuries earlier, ever since He brought them out of slavery in Egypt when He parted the Red Sea some 700 years before. But even then, God’s people fell to the temptations of the nations around them and they created and worshiped idols and false gods of all kinds.

→ Over and again they became discontented with only one God; with God as their King; with Him as their Commander of armies. They questioned God and His ways. They wanted to be like the nations around them, having earthly kings and human commanders. In short, they wanted, like so many of us and the people around us in this world, to be their own gods; to have complete control of their own lives and their own destinies, even though having all of that actually guaranteed each person’s and the entire nation’s eventual destruction.

✘ So the question this text poses to you and me right now is this: “Who is God for you today?” Notice I didn’t ask, “Who is God?” but “Who is God for you today?”

→ J. I. Packer, an Anglican theologian in the late 20th century, pointed out that there is a big difference between knowing about God and knowing God. Knowing about God is merely a matter of the head. It’s like someone reading a textbook about love and then saying they know everything there is to know about being in love. Knowing about God is being able to say the right things about God; the facts and events and details from the Bible, for example.

→ But actually knowing God is a matter of the heart. It is confessing Him not only with the head but also with your body and life and entire soul. It is as Martin Luther teaches us in his meaning to the First Commandment, fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things.

- ⊗ This morning, in our Old Testament Reading, we hear how God Himself has had enough of Israel only knowing about Him with their heads so that He calls them back, away from their idols and false dreams, to a true heart-knowledge of Him as the one and only true God.
 - ➔ And in this word to Israel, God calls you and me, too; away from the idols we have given our hearts to, so that we can worship and truly know the one who is our King; our Redeemer; and the only Commander of Armies not only according to our head-knowledge but in the deepest recesses of our hearts!

I. I am (v. 6).

- ⊗ You see, ours is not some impersonal god in a textbook, is He? No, we see that He speaks to us here today very directly saying, “I” and “you”; inviting us really to know Him – to know His power; to know how very different He is from all of our idols, but also to know Him intimately and personally, and eternally.
- ⊗ And He starts out using His own personal name; the name that He revealed to Moses some 700 years earlier than the time of this text when He spoke from the burning bush and said, “I AM WHO I AM. ... Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex. 3:14).
 - ➔ From that time forward God’s covenant name was the Hebrew word that means “He is”, which is “Yahweh”; the name that assures us that there is never a time when He “is not”. He always “is” God. So, just using the name Yahweh highlights the stark contrast between Him and every other idol and so-called god, because every one of them, in reality, is not; is not real; nothing; non-existent!
- ⊗ So, in the English translations, we are reminded of Yahweh and His ever-present character when we hear Him referred to as “I Am”. It even speaks to the original question I asked, “Who is God for you today?” because, for many people their god changes from day to day. Today it might be money, tomorrow it might be a famous actor or singer; the next day it might be their dream-girl or guy or their job or a political agenda or a bottle of booze.
- ⊗ But Yahweh is eternally God in the present tense. He always is God. And in verse six, the great “I Am”, begins by identifying Himself with three powerful titles.
 - ➔ First, He says that He is “the King of Israel”. Even though they rejected the idea of Yahweh being their king (1 Sam. 8:6-9) and appointed a long line of bad and sometimes not-so-bad earthly kings, Yahweh here calls His people back into understanding that only He is the true king of His people. He’s reclaiming His rightful place not only as ruler of the nation of Israel, but as the ruling King of the entire universe.
 - ➔ Second, Yahweh identifies Himself as Israel’s “Redeemer”. Isaiah prophesied in advance that, because of Israel’s sins and their worship of so many false gods, the king of Babylon would come with his army and conquer and destroy Israel; taking their leaders and most of their people away as slaves. And all of that did take place.
 - Frankly, folks we in our sins, and our worship and creation of so many idols today; we deserve no better. In fact the Bible is very clear that we deserve eternal separation from God, not just a temporary exile of 70 years like the Israelites had to endure.
 - But Yahweh says here that He is the “Redeemer”. The Hebrew word is “גֹּאֵל (gō’ēl)” which means that because of His love and commitment to His people He is the only one who will stand up for His people and vindicate them. You see, with this name, Yahweh is both making a claim and giving a promise. Though their/our sins bring necessary consequences here on earth, He is still committed to redeeming and saving His people from their sins in the end. So only Yahweh,

and no other, is able to both make the claim, and bring it to fulfillment in and through His Son, Jesus on the cross and through the empty tomb.

→ The third identifier that Yahweh takes is that He is “Yahweh of Hosts”. The Hebrew word translated as “hosts” is “צְבָאוֹת (šēbā’ôt)”. It means “armies”. So “Yahweh of armies” really means He alone is the “Commander of armies”. Though Israel had been overrun by the mighty army of Babylon, with Yahweh as their Commander there is then no army; no force or power on earth or in the spiritual realm, which includes Satan and all of his evil demons; no one anywhere that is able to hold God’s people captive or harm those who believe in and confess Him to be their God and Savior – in Isaiah’s time or today or ever!

- Yes, only Yahweh can conquer and utterly destroy any and all powers and enemies that seek to stand in the way of His people living with Him in His kingdom here and in the courts of heaven.

II. I am the one (vv. 6–7).

⊗ Not only are these Yahweh’s characteristics and claims and promises, but He ups the ante so that there is no room for any doubt or question or debate when He says, “I am the first and I am the last; besides Me there is no god.” Not only is there no god as good or as great as Yahweh, He’s saying there is no other god that even exists!

→ Yahweh is the Creator of all things; nothing was before Him, and nothing Israel had, or you and I have today, became ours except through Him. Only Yahweh is the final authority, as well as Israel’s and our future. Everything is completely in His hands.

⊗ And because Jesus is the second person in the One Holy Triune God, guess what? Jesus is “I Am” as well. In Revelation 22:13, Jesus even said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” We’ll expand on Jesus’ connection to this more in just a bit.

⊗ But first, in verse seven, Yahweh calls out both the idols and the idol worshippers directly when He says, “Who is like Me? Let him proclaim it.”

→ The Israelites were trying to cover all of their bases in the spiritual realm, much like people do today. They “worshiped” Yahweh, but they also worshiped the Baals; the Canaanite gods, and even the gods of their defeated enemies like Syria (2 Ki 16:7–16). They sacrificed and prayed to these false gods for rain, fertility, crops, and other blessings. But now Yahweh challenges those people and their gods, telling them to “put up or shut up”!

→ And He challenges us and all of the idols of our time too; the idols that remain in our own hearts. You see, this is a very real, very serious war that’s going on here, people; a battle for your body and life, my body and life; a battle for our souls, today, tomorrow and for eternity! Who is our King, our Redeemer, our Commander and Chief? Is it some temporary, flawed, made-up god, or is it the only God who IS “the first...and the last”?

III. I am the one to know (v 8).

⊗ Now in verse eight, Yahweh gets personal and intimate with each and every person ever to live and breathe on this planet. So, let’s be honest, all that He has said so far is intimidating, and it should be!

→ We can’t know this God in His absolute majesty and freedom – at least not as we are in our sin. It would utterly destroy us.

⊗ Martin Luther knew this when he was still a monk in the Roman Catholic Church. It was only this intimidating, judging, perfect God that he knew at the time. And it drove Luther to despair

because he saw that there was no way he could make himself good enough to earn his way into God's presence.

→ Yet Yahweh – the great I Am – speaks to the Israelites, Martin Luther and you and me today in verse eight because He loves us and wants an exclusive relationship with us. He wants us to know Him in our hearts! And so He says, “Fear not, nor be afraid.”

→ He tells us that only He is the Rock; the strong, unassailable, fortress and refuge against the forces of sin, Satan and our corrupt and evil world. In Psalm 89:26 Yahweh says that His believers will cry out in faith, “You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.”

⊗ This, my fellow Christians, you and I know – not only about God, but we know and we have Him in our hearts! How? because He revealed Himself to us in Jesus.

→ As we saw earlier, Jesus is the great I Am in human flesh. In fact, His name – “Yeshua” in Hebrew means “Yahweh saves”.

→ In Jesus we see Yahweh's reign as King, His love as He redeems us with His own sacrifice and blood and His overwhelming power as He conquers Satan and death and every other evil power as our Commander and Chief so that our sinful souls are now washed “white as snow” (Is. 1:18) and our place in His loving hand is safe and secure today, tomorrow and forever!

⊗ This is Yahweh, the great I Am! This is the God we know by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone; not by our works or efforts or intrinsic worth, but only by His love for us; only by His power to bring us into His eternal embrace!

Conclusion

⊗ So, do not be afraid! As a Christian, Yahweh has delivered you from your past. Your future is secure because He is always with you and you know He is your Rock. Amen.