

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2018
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In the Gospel of John there are seven times that Jesus uses the name of God, YHWH, the great I AM WHO AM, to refer to himself. This name was considered so holy that it was forbidden to be used outside of the Tabernacle, the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. Each one of these I AM moments brought Jesus closer to the cross and us to our salvation. Each brought an accusation of blasphemy. Our readings today, as Christmas looms ever closer, provide the origins in scripture, almost a chant or litany of these seven I AM statements. The prophet Micah supplies the beginning. You Bethlehem-Ephrathah, literally translated (Bethlehem) House of bread – (Ephrathah) Fruitful, from out of you will come a ruler whose origin is from of old, from ancient times. This ruler is YHWH, I AM WHO AM, the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush. The one true God who in Genesis in the Garden of Eden at the fall of man foretold a redeemer coming through a woman whose name we now know is Mary. Jesus says of himself in John's Gospel, "I AM WHO AM the bread of life." In becoming the Incarnation, in becoming flesh Jesus fulfills God's will and feeds us with his own body and blood. Micah says of him, "He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock

by the strength of the Lord, in the majestic name of the Lord, his God.” Jesus says of himself in John’s Gospel, “I AM WHO AM the gate keeper.”; “I AM WHO AM the Good Shepherd.” He who will stand firm at the gates of heaven in defense of his people and tend those who recognize his voice with the loving care of the shepherd. Micah continues, “His greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth.” John’s Gospel echoes, “I AM WHO AM, the Alpha and the Omega, the sunrise and sunset, “the light of the world.” The light in the darkness who will lead us down right pathways. Micah closes by saying of this I AM WHO AM, “He shall be peace.”

But only four of the statements have been revealed. Psalm 80 takes up the chant, “O shepherd of Israel from your throne upon the Cherubim, shine forth. Rouse your power and come save us.” Jesus says of himself in John’s Gospel, “I AM WHO AM the way, the truth, the life. He who sits at the right hand of God and rules as eternal judge and king over heaven and earth. “Look down from heaven, and see,” says the Psalmist; take care of this vine, protect what your right hand has planted.” Jesus says of himself in John’s Gospel, “I AM WHO AM the vine and you are the branches, remain in me.” Psalm 80 finishes the chant, completes the seven, “Then we will no more withdraw from you; give us new life, and we will call upon your name.” Jesus says of himself in John’s Gospel, “I AM WHO AM the resurrection and the life.” We respond with

psalmist; come Lord Jesus save us, take care of us, protect us, make us strong, teach us, judge us, give us new life.

These two readings set the stage for Luke who guides us in the footsteps of the Virgin of Nazareth, the woman of Genesis, towards "a city of Judah." According to scholars this city would be the modern Ain Karim appropriately translated "The Spring of the Vineyard", situated in the mountains, not far from Jerusalem. Mary arrived there "in haste," to visit Elizabeth her kinswoman. The reason for her visit is to be found in the Annunciation, Gabriel made special mention of Elizabeth, who through the power of God in her old age had conceived a son by her husband the High Priest Zechariah, "and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." The divine messenger spoke of what had been accomplished in Elizabeth in order to answer Mary's question. "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" It is to come to pass precisely through the "power of the Most High," the great I AM WHO AM. Mary will conceive and bear a son who will be called holy, the Son of God.

Moved by charity, therefore, Mary goes to the house of her kinswoman. When Mary enters, Elizabeth replies to her greeting and feels the child leap in her womb, being "filled with the Holy Spirit" she greets Mary with a loud cry: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Elizabeth's exclamation becomes her part of

the Hail Mary, a continuation of the angel's greeting, thus becoming one of the Church's most frequently used prayers. But still more significant are the words of Elizabeth in the question which follows: "And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Elizabeth bears witness to Mary: she recognizes and proclaims that before her stands the Mother of the Lord, the Mother of the Messiah, the fulfillment of Genesis, the mother of I AM WHO AM. The son whom Elizabeth is carrying in her womb also shares in this witness: "The babe in my womb leaped for joy" John the Baptist, who at the Jordan, at the institution of the sacrament of Baptism and the inauguration of the womb of the church from which each of us was drawn at our Baptism will point out Jesus as the Messiah, the "Lamb of God." This is why the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy, genuflects in the water of his mother's womb at the presence of the great I AM WHO AM. The waters that gave birth to a nation when Noah was saved from the flood, Moses' passed through at the Red Sea and Joshua entered the promised land through the halted waters of the Jordan has now brought about redemption from the sin of Adam. The water into which Jesus steps becomes the womb of the church, the font of life through which we are saved.

While every word of Elizabeth's greeting is filled with meaning, her final words carry fundamental importance: "And blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

These words are linked with the title "full of grace" in the angel's greeting at the Annunciation. The fullness of grace announced by the angel means the gift of God himself. Mary's faith, proclaimed by Elizabeth at the Visitation, indicates how the Virgin of Nazareth responded to this gift. The Letter to the Hebrews is now justified in proclaiming, All the sacrifices and offerings, holocaust and sin offerings have been forever replaced we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all, the son of God, the great I AM WHO AM.