



The Gospel of John

Week 5: I Am

Brian Mattson - 06/29/2025

Let's play a guessing game, shall we? I'm going to give you some details about one of my favorite movies—that's the first hint, the category is films—and we'll see if you can figure it out.

- The main character grows up in small town America.
- After a childhood accident, he lives the rest of his life with a small disability.
- He wants to see the world, but takes over the family business instead.
- Due to financial distress, he and his new wife live in a fixer upper.
- Under the weight of financial instability and family stress, he doubts his worth.
- With the help of a supernatural guide, he returns home content.

Any guesses? If you don't have one yet, that's probably because I've done a terrible job of describing the movie. The answer is *It's A Wonderful Life*, and the reason you probably had a tough time figuring it out is because the movie is much more than a list of events. The details of George Bailey's life are masterfully woven together through the art of storytelling. When people tell stories, they aren't just providing facts and figures. They use many different techniques to not just fill our brains, but to tug on our hearts.

It's A Wonderful Life does this beautifully, and by the end of the movie we are all hoping for a miracle. We are praying that George Bailey makes the right decision. We want George to see himself for what we've seen with the help of Clarence, his guardian angel. All George can see through his fear and frustration is a list of failures and not-enoughs. He never traveled the world or built great buildings. He never explored the unknown or even left his hometown. George can't see what we've all seen; that his life is so much more than a checklist of things he didn't succeed at.

And we are able to see that through storytelling. We get to see the full story of his life and the light that he brings into the lives of so many people around him. We get wrapped up in the drama, the relationships, humor, and the suspense. We understand the implications of the familiar cultural markers, like the Great Depression, runs on banks, and World War II. And all these things work together to tell us more than a short list of events and details. We develop a relationship with George and along the way our hearts break for him, with him. And as the movie ends, we walk away with our eyes a little misty and our lives changed by this story of a cold heart being warmed—his and ours.

I think that's what the author of the fourth Gospel is doing. The Gospel of John is a masterclass in storytelling. It's not a biography of a man named Jesus, listing and describing the facts, figures, and events of his life. We see more of that in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Those other three gospels speak to the audience focusing more on logos and ethos—the logic, structure, and credibility of the writers. The author of John is taking us on a journey, less concerned with the exact details and timelines. These 21 chapters are more nuanced and filled with pathos to evoke our heartfelt response to who Jesus is and what he means for the audience at the time and even us today. Like George Bailey's story, the Gospel of John tells the story of Jesus' life—his words, his actions, and even his humanity—to warm the hearts of the audience.

We left our story last week after Jesus performed a miracle, the feeding of 5,000. God in the midst of God's people, providing for them in their need, but the people want more, more, more. They told him that Moses fed the people in the desert. Moses gave them bread from heaven!

Jesus responded, "The real significance of that Scripture is not that Moses gave you bread from heaven but that my Father is right now offering you bread from heaven, the real bread. The Bread of God came down out of heaven and is giving life to the world."

They jumped at that: "Master, give us this bread, now and forever!"

Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life. The person who aligns with me hungers no more and thirsts no more, ever."

- John 6:32-35

This "I am" statement is different from the first time we heard Jesus say "Ego eimi" to the Samaritan woman at the well. There, he was letting her in on the secret of his identity as the Messiah. Now, he uses that same phrase, "Ego eimi," equating himself with God, but also revealing that Jesus provides something. Jesus sustains humanity with the bread of life.

The first hearers of this story would have easily understood this rhetorical identification with God, using the exact same words God used with Moses at the burning bush. But this new "I am" statement reveals something else. The truth that Jesus is not only divine, but what he offers is a metaphor for our spiritual hunger. Jesus satisfies our hearts.

The next "I am" statement comes twice at a Jewish festival. Most modern readers miss the significance of the statement at this celebration, but those first hearers would've understood. Again, the storyteller is using cultural awareness to shed deeper meaning on the black and white text we read today. Jesus declares "I am the light of the world," the first time around the

Festival of Sukkot. During this time, people ignited large oil lamps to recall the days when God guided the Israelites in the wilderness. The second time he says it in a much more literal metaphor. He heals a blind man around the time of the same festival.

With this miracle, the sixth so far in the gospel, Jesus truly becomes the light of the world, the giver of sight to the blind. Of course this stirs up controversy. Some in the crowd don't think it's the same blind man. Others contend that he is the man. They need to kick this debate up the chain of command.

They marched the man to the Pharisees. This day when Jesus made the paste and healed his blindness was the Sabbath. The Pharisees grilled him again on how he had come to see. He said, "He put a clay paste on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "Obviously, this man can't be from God. He doesn't keep the Sabbath." Others countered, "How can a bad man do miraculous, God-revealing things like this?" There was a split in their ranks.

- John 9:13-16

The storyteller is building up the tension. Jesus, the ever-present rabble-rouser, is becoming an even thornier problem. Here he is healing on the Sabbath again, linking himself to God, and speaking metaphorically about who he is and what he provides. The Pharisees are busy investigating this whole situation, interrogating the man and his family, trying to get the story straight.

During this makeshift legal proceeding, Jesus launches into his next "I am" statements. They come in this lengthy section of John 10 known as the Good Shepherd discourse. The language is beautiful. Take a moment to read The Message translation this week to get a better sense of how the original words would've been understood by the ancient audience.

In the words, Jesus paints a picture using familiar metaphors to the people of his time. He talks about herding sheep and in these simple words and descriptions point again to the deeper meaning of who Jesus is and what he offers to the people who choose to follow him. He tells the Pharisees, and the gathered audience, "I am the gate for the sheep," and "I am the Good Shepherd."

The Message translation says:

The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it. I am the Gate for the sheep.

- John 10:2-5

Jesus is the point of access to God for the flock offering up good pasture and free access, access to an abundant life. An eternal life. He tells the Pharisees, metaphorically, that the religious leaders and others who came before Jesus were more like gatekeepers, bandits, thieves. They used the law to restrict access. To separate people from God. They weren't life giving, they were life draining.

Jesus continues:

I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary... I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me. In the same way, the Father knows me and I know the Father. I put the sheep before myself, sacrificing myself if necessary. You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen. I need to gather and bring them, too. They'll also recognize my voice. Then it will be one flock, one Shepherd. This is why the Father loves me: because I

freely lay down my life. And so I am free to take it up again.”

- John 10:11,14-18

By the end of this scene, the Jewish leaders are ready to throw Jesus in jail. Their blood is beginning to boil. The author is offering greater contrast between the religious establishment and Jesus. The Gospel of John is careful here to not place Jesus too far above humanity though, out of reach and unattainable. It seems his divinity has become clear so now the story turns to the emotional catharsis of the story.

In John 11, Jesus makes his way back towards Jerusalem where the authorities are looking to lock him up. He is going to Bethany after he learns his dear friend, Lazarus, has fallen ill and eventually dies.

This scene marks a turning point in the story, the tender precipice where Jesus' divinity matches his humanity. It begins as the disciples are walking towards Bethany where Lazarus and his family lived. Martha meets him on the way and in her grief cries out to Jesus, "If you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died."

Dr. Garcia Bashaw says it's "an accusation as much as it is an acknowledgement of Jesus's power." Our emotions are on full display in our grief, aren't they?

Jesus says Lazarus will be raised and Martha concedes, "I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time." Jesus, though, means something different. He responds, **"You don't have to wait for the End. I am the Resurrection and Life, right now. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all."**

Dr. Garcia Bashaw again:

This "I am" statement is a watershed moment of self-revelation in John, another climax in the story. The concepts in the statement

point backward and forward in the narrative: there is a reflection on the earlier theme of life and a foreshadowing of Jesus's own resurrection on the horizon.

Martha recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. Then in walks Mary. And through her sobs, she lobs the same accusation and plea to Jesus: if only you had been here!

Imagine this scene. There are two sisters mourning their brother, a community gathering around them fresh in grief, and now Jesus, the dear friend, finally breaks down. The weight of humanity has come fully for Jesus. And he weeps. Life is hard. Jesus knows this. And now Jesus feels this in all his humanity.

Dr. Garcia Bashaw says:

Jesus—the Word, provider of bread and truth, light of the world, vigilant shepherd, the very source of light itself—sheds creaturely tears for his friends and for the plight of all humanity. The streaks of compassion and pain on Jesus's face demonstrate why incarnation is not just an idea—it is a revolution.

We know what happens next. Lazarus wakes up from the sleep of death. Jesus' "I am" statement—I am the resurrection and the life—are made real. The seventh miracle Jesus performs, the number of perfection, is a foreshadowing of Jesus' own resurrection in the garden on Easter. There is a stone rolled away, the disciples are gathered at the tomb, and Mary weeps.

And here at the tomb, Jesus shouts, "Lazarus, come out!" The first hearers of this gospel would not only be moved by this emotional, heartrending scene, but would hear the call in their own lives. Wake up! Come out to new life. Lazarus' story is also a metaphor for our own lives. We once were dead, yet we have the chance to be made new. To follow the Good Shepherd and live an eternal life. A Godly life.

This entire Gospel the author is pleading with the listeners and the readers to respond to Jesus, using all the tools at the storyteller's disposal. There are metaphors, innuendo, and allusions encouraging our cold hearts to get warm. Can we believe again, even in this crazy world? Can we come back to life, back to our divine purpose?

The author of John is our very own Clarence. Our personal guide to point out that Jesus's life isn't just a list of facts and figures, events and dates. It's a beautiful story that warms our hearts. It helps us recognize that the hunger in our souls can be satisfied by the bread of life. In Jesus, we see a light for our dark paths. There's a gate that opens up to give us access to eternal life, and a shepherd who can guide our way.

The Gospel of John tells the story of Jesus differently than the synoptic gospels. And John, often more than the others, warms our hearts through storytelling. And when our hearts are changed, that's when the world changes too. And the hope is that we, like George Bailey, learn to see the world in new ways, willing to do the work of God for the people of God.