

Rev. Dr. Thomas Nelson Green  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
4/2/2017, The Fifth Sunday in Lent

**SERMON 040217 + LENT V + IMMANUEL LUTHERAN CHURCH,**  
**NYC + ST. JOHN 11:25 + IN NOMINE DOM. JESU CHRISTI!**

**JESUS SAID TO [MARTHA], “I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE, WHOEVER BELIEVES IN ME, THOUGH HE DIE, YET SHALL HE LIVE, AND WHOEVER LIVES AND BELIEVES IN ME SHALL NEVER DIE.”**

Scattered through the Gospel of St. John, like pearls of great price, are the regal “I Am” declarations of our Divine Lord. The text for this sermon is among the best known of them. Individually the declarations are of infinite value and comfort, but taken together they are Christ’s personal assurance that His followers need not be infected by the plague of fear and doubt and worry that today trouble both individuals and nations.

We need not fear and fret as others do because Christ’s divine, protecting presence is promised in each of His “I Am” proclamations. Listen again to some of them! The first is, “Before Abraham was, I Am!” Here He relates Himself to the Covenant God, “The Great I Am,” whom He calls Father. In those two words, “I Am,” He assures us that He is all powerful, all-merciful and all gracious. As long as we remain faithful to our baptismal covenant, He will be our God; He will neither forsake us nor abandon us to worry, doubt and fear.

Again He declares, “I Am the Bread of Life.” Those who come to Him will neither hunger nor thirst. They will always receive from Him the spiritual nourishment that will sustain their faith through all the days of their lives. He fulfills this promise for us each Sunday and Holy Day! We receive the food of immortality when we come together to celebrate the Holy Eucharist and hear His Word. Strengthened by this spiritual sustenance we are able to avoid the spiritual starvation that disturbs the lives of so many people today.

Again He declares “I Am the Light of the World.” In our world there is a pervading moral and spiritual darkness. What once appeared to be evil and forbidden has become more and more acceptable. The Judea-Christian moral standard contained in the Ten Commandments that once influenced the mores of society is the moral standard no longer. Into this darkness comes Christ, the Light of the World. In His light we can recognize the path of righteousness. In His light we can find our way to God. In His light we can rise above fear of the power of evil. With Christ at our side fear of spiritual

darkness gives way to the light of righteousness.

Again He declares, "I am the Good Shepherd." Because I love you and know you and call you by name I will lead you in the way of safety. There may be in the world a variety of satanic wolves that would destroy you. And these wolves may be powerful enough to cause human beings to fear. But fret not yourself because of them! I will protect you even if it means laying down my life for you. Indeed, He did this on the cross of Golgotha. As long as our hearts are fixed on the crucified and risen Christ, the world and Satan cannot lead us astray and disturb our tranquility with their cunning temptations.

Again He declares, "I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" Being human and subject to foolish actions, we may wander off by ourselves and become lost along the dangerous, twisting paths of life in this world. Yet Christ is always beside us, ready for us to reach out by faith and take His hand. When in faith we cling to the hand of Christ we have nothing to fear. He who is the Way, the Truth and the Life will safely lead us to the waiting arms of the heavenly Father. With our hands in His we have no reason to doubt our familial relationship with God.

Through all the days of our lives, whether they be many or few, Jesus Christ, "The Great I Am" is with us to banish all fear and weakness and doubt. Now we come to the climax of Christ's "I Am" statements. This was addressed to Martha of Bethany, His friend who had been saddened by the death of her brother, Lazarus. To her He spoke these comforting words, "I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." For very many human beings death is the chief cause of worry and fear. Death leads to the unknown and unknowable, and it seems final and irreversible. From death there appears to be no return. But Christ, our "Great I Am," is the Resurrection and the Life. As long as we cling to Him by faith death holds no great threat, for He overcame death and the grave on Easter Sunday when he arose victoriously. In this triumphant act He brought life and immortality to light! In this act He assures us that we too shall rise on the latter day to be with Him and dwell with Him in joy through all eternity. In His promise we can rest assured because He is truth incarnate, We can cry out with St. Paul: **Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.** Even in the face of death we have nothing to fear! For Christians death is but a peaceful sleep in Jesus.

Today, here in this Holy House, inspired by the familiar words of the Liturgy

and sacred music and the power of those majestic “I Am” declarations, we may feel that we have nothing to fear, nothing about which to worry and fret ourselves. After all, when our eyes and hearts are fixed on Christ our covenant God, who is with us to satisfy our wants and needs and to protect us from evil, worry seems far away.

Ah, but all too soon we shall leave this place of spiritual refuge and reenter an atmosphere that is radically different. The world is truly a place of insecurity that gives birth to worry and doubt. Christ was well aware of this and He knew the minds of those who lived in a world of uncertainty and worry. Listen to His words recorded in Matthew’s Gospel: **“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ... And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ... Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you.”**

In the world Gentile concerns and worries are all about us, and we are tempted to share them. Our Divine Lord, however, takes note of the folly of Gentile worry and concern. Why share them when the worries are beyond our ability to change? Why share them when God knows our needs and while God, who cares for us, will take care of us. Fretting and worrying accomplishes nothing at all; both are wastes of energy; both contribute to making life miserable, both weaken our faith in God. Anticipated evils are often more serious than experienced evils. Why then should we anticipate our date of grief and run to meet what we would most avoid?

The season of Lent is traditionally dedicated to the contemplation of all that our Divine Lord has done for us and for our salvation. Salvation includes more than forgiveness of sins and the promise of a future life of blessedness! Salvation creates a relationship with God here and now that assures us of a life in which God’s love is always with us. We may well experience the vicissitudes common to mankind, but they do not reduce us to days of fretting and worry. God who is with us and who has promised to be our Protector and Guide will not fail us. In His good time He will deliver us from every ill that may trouble our lives. Therefore we have nothing to cause us worry and fear. What is true of our daily life will be true also when the hour comes for us to take leave of this world. Christ who is our daily Guide and Protector is also our Resurrection and Life, and we shall be able to close our eyes without fear

or doubt, speaking the prayer of a glorious choral:

Lord, at last let Thine angels come,  
To Abr'ham's bosom bear me home,  
That I may die unfearing;  
And in its narrow chamber keep  
My body safe in peaceful sleep  
Until Thy reappearing.  
And then from death awaken me,  
That these mine eyes with joy may see,  
O Son of God, Thy glorious face,  
My Savior and my throne of grace.  
Lord Jesus Christ, my prayer attend, my prayer attend,  
And I will praise Thee without end. Amen!