

Famous Last Words

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

May 13, 2018

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I picked the title for this sermon weeks before Wayne Lollis' funeral, but it seems like God's sense of humor was at work again. At Wayne's funeral last week, his son Stephen shared that Wayne's last words before he died were, "Oh, shoot!" Except Wayne didn't say "Shoot," and neither did Stephen. I don't often condone profanity from the pulpit, but on that occasion, knowing the kind of character Wayne was, it seemed quite appropriate.

I bet you know some other famous last words. "Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." Do you know what movie that line ends? Of course, it's "Casablanca." How about, "Oh no, it wasn't airplanes. It was beauty that killed the beast." That's from "King Kong". How about "Silence of the Lambs," in which Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lecter, following a former nemesis of his, says, "I do wish I could chat longer, but I'm having an old friend for dinner."

How about this: "We have to chase him. Because he's the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now, so we'll hunt him. Because he can take it, because he's not a hero. He's a silent guardian, a watchful protector, a Dark Knight." That's from "Spiderman"...just kidding! It's from a Batman movie. I'm a big fan of the ending of "The Usual Suspects." After the big twist is revealed, Keyser Soze says, "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he did not exist. And like that...he is gone."

But my favorite movie ending is probably "The Shawshank Redemption." The movie, which is based on a Stephen King book, tells the story of Andy DuFresne and his imprisonment for murder. While in prison he meets Red, played by Morgan Freeman. Andy and Red strike up a friendship, and Red helps Andy with his escape attempt. At the very end of the movie, Red gets released from prison, and goes in search of Andy. His last line is, "I find I am so excited I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it's the excitement only a free man can feel, a free man at the start of a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain. I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope."

Hope also plays a role in the ending of another favorite work of mine. If I were to ask you the very first words of the Bible, I bet a majority of you would know, "In the beginning." But if I were to ask you how the Bible ends, would be able to come up with it? How *do* you end a book like the Bible?

The predominant theme of the ending of the Bible is stated right before the benediction in the last line. That theme is "Come, Lord Jesus!" The Bible ends with a request, a plea, for Jesus to come again and make the world right, to end all pain and suffering and usher in the kingdom of God that is described in Revelation 21 and 22. These verses we read today bring to a close the book of Revelation, which uses very symbolic and disturbing imagery to paint a picture of what the end times will be like. I once did a verse-by-verse study of Revelation that took nine months, and when I finished I didn't really understand it much better than when I started. But I do know that it ends

with the earnest desire for Christ to come again, a concept that has been problematic for believers down through history.

I think part of the struggle with the idea of the Second Coming is how much focus has been put on predicting when it will happen. Even though Jesus says no one knows when this will happen, people have spent so much time talking about the date of the second coming. Well, I've read Revelation, and it doesn't lay out a blueprint for what's going to happen. I wish it did. I wish I could give you a day and a time of the Rapture, and then a checklist of what you needed to do before it happened. "Walk old lady across street." Check. "Put on clean underwear." Check. "Make sure pledge is paid up." Check. OK, I'm ready!

I have to think that the amount of energy expended figuring out how things are going to end is out of whack compared to the amount of time scripture spends on it. If the Christian life is merely about getting to Heaven, why is the Bible so thick? If all that matters is how things end, why do we have 66 books about loving our neighbors and carrying our crosses and keeping commandments? Is that just busy work until the Jesus arrives? The Bible doesn't end with "Come Lord Jesus" in order to give a time and date for Christ's return. Instead, I believe it's making a statement about preparation.

Because we believe Christ is coming again but don't know when that will happen, we are charged to live in a constant state of preparedness. That's a challenge for us today, because the thought of Christ coming again has lost its urgency. It really meant something to the original readers of this book, when Jesus had only been gone a few decades and there were still eyewitnesses telling stories about him. It's like the difference for us between the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. People still have vivid memories of one, but no one remembers the other. Many of us can tell you exactly where we were when the Challenger exploded or planes flew into the World Trade Center. But no one remembers Jesus telling us he's coming again, so that concept has faded back into history.

So then, what do we do with the idea that Jesus is coming again? First, we have to acknowledge that it can absolutely happen at any time. After all, that's the promise of scripture. But are there other ways to think about the second coming? You know, next week we celebrate Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit of God descending to earth and ignited the disciples to go out and spread the Good News. Here's a crazy idea. Could it be possible that Pentecost WAS the second coming of Jesus Christ?

Hear me out on this. The promise of Christ's return to earth in Revelation is that he will enact a thousand-year reign of peace. Doesn't that sound great? Why don't we just sit back in our recliners, pop open an ice cold Coca-Cola, and look up to the clouds for a bright light and some harp music? "Hey Jesus, we've really made a mess down here, would you mind coming on down and cleaning it up for us?" Is that what we mean when we say, "Come, Lord Jesus?"

Not hardly. In fact, I would argue that instead of us waiting on Jesus, Jesus is waiting on us. In the story of the feeding of the 5,000, when the disciples come to Jesus to miraculously provide food for a hungry crowd, remember what Jesus says? "You give them something to eat." And remember when the resurrected Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" and Peter says, "Yes"? Jesus says, "Then feed my sheep." I can think of plenty of other occasions where Jesus doesn't jump in and save the day, but instead empowers his followers to do it. As he says in John's gospel, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who

believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”

What if the Second Coming has already happened in the form of Pentecost? What if, when the Holy Spirit was poured out and spread around, God was saying, “Ok, kids. Here’s all you need to make my kingdom real here on earth. Now, get to work.” What if Jesus is waiting on us to enact peace in this world? We have to laugh, right? My knee-jerk reaction is to say, “Huh! Then he’ll be waiting until Jesus comes!” What if fixing this world isn’t up to Jesus, but up to us, or better yet, up to the Jesus in us? Sounds insane, right? But think about it. Isn’t that what the gifts of the Spirit are all about? Isn’t that what it means to be made in God’s image? We have the gifts, we have the tools, we have the motivation, and God knows, we’ve created the mess. It’s time to get to work.

We do that by taking what has been given to us – the living water of Jesus Christ – and offering it to those around us who are dying of thirst, literally and spiritually. There are people in our midst who are thirsty for acceptance, thirsty for justice, thirsty to know that their lives matter. There are people parched from addiction and oppression, people who live in deserts of poverty and hunger, people whose throats are like sandpaper because their voices have been silenced. This is a thirsty, thirsty world.

And we have water. Don’t we? “Let everyone who is thirsty come,” Jesus says. That is an invitation to each of us, to come to this table and drink the living, life-saving water of Jesus Christ. But this water wasn’t just poured out so we might be quenched. This water is for the world, and we hold the hose. We control the spigot. We hold the wrench to the fire hydrant. I’m running out of metaphors, but you get the picture. They are thirsty and we have the water! We can offer them cups of cold water by looking in their eyes, by speaking words of encouragement and hope, but serving them lunch, by sharing our abundance, or by literally taking them jugs of fresh, clean water.

Is Jesus coming again? I honestly don’t know. I hope so, because we could sure use him right now. But the Bible says no one knows when that’s going to happen. So instead of waiting for Jesus to come and set things right, how about we do it. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Empowered by the Holy Spirit, enlivened by the resurrected Christ, and gifted with life by our gracious God, find someone who is thirsty and offer them something to drink. “Come, Lord Jesus!” He’s here. He’s here.