

GOOD NEWS ABOUT DEATH: The Last Word

Ephesians 1:15-23

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I.

I love words. That is probably a good thing for a preacher to love. Y'all can keep those pointless sudoku books with all the numbers. Give me crossword puzzles and Wordle any day. For me, a beautifully penned sentence is like a work of art or a delicious meal you savor long after it has ended. Words are, in a word, marvelous.

And yet, there can be too much of a good thing, something long-winded preachers tend to forget. It is better to leave people wishing for more than to have them praying for less.

While everyone is not as enchanted with words as I am, there are two words that nearly every person treasures forever – the first word and the last.

When a baby first speaks around the age of one, parents obsess and compete over the first syllables from their child's lips: what will it be – Dada? Mama? Maybe the first word is "no," and thus begins the fun. The first word and other cherished milestones are often recorded on video or in baby books. First words matter.

But so do the last words. It is interesting to read what people choose for their last words, the words they leave us with, whether in conversation or on headstones. Some are funny. Like Bob Hope, the comedian who, after his wife asked him where he wanted to be buried, responded with these last words, "Surprise me!" Some are ironic, like Sir Winston Churchill. Before slipping into a coma and dying nine days later, Churchill, the statesman who is famous for his commencement address of "Never give up!" died on January 24, 1965, with these last words. "I'm bored with it all." Sounds like he may have given up after all.

And, of course, there are some hopeful final words, too. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spent his dying breath saying, "Best of all, God is with us." The great evangelist Henry Ward Beecher used his last breath to say, "Now comes the mystery."ⁱ

We have a lifetime of words we don't always pay attention to, but our first and last are some of the most remembered.

II.

Today is kind of the last word of the Christian calendar, a calendar shared by Christian churches worldwide consisting of a cycle of seasons, celebrations, and Scriptures. Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the church year. Next Sunday is Advent, which always begins a new year in the church.

I love that our faith tradition has a calendar of seasons and celebrations to help keep us on track of the larger story. Each year, we anticipate the coming of Christ in Advent and celebrate his arrival during the days of Christmas. In January, we recognize how Christ's light shines into the world on Epiphany and beyond. With the end of winter comes the journey to the cross during Lent, culminating in a joyous Easter celebration and fifty days of Eastertide as we welcome spring. Summer welcomes Pentecost and all the Sundays through summer and fall. In this season, we talk about what it means to be disciples of Jesus, to listen to his teachings, to see his miracles, to understand the alternative kingdom of service, compassion, and love he announced against the kings and kingdoms of his day. The season of Pentecost culminates today when we declare Christ's place on the royal throne.

Christ the King Sunday was started by Pope Pius XI in 1925 and was first celebrated when the world was reeling from World War I. The world had just endured the horrific consequences of power, greed, and hatred in the hands and hearts of men. Nationalism and authoritarianism was rising after the war, so the church sent a bold statement on the last Sunday of the Christian year by declaring it Christ the King Sunday. This day is to remind Christians that their allegiance was to their spiritual ruler in heaven as opposed to earthly nations, dictators, and rulers. Earthly powers, nations, and leaders come and go, but, for Christians, Christ has the last word.

While you can love God and nation, it can be tempting to confuse and conflate the two, forgetting Who has the last word. Ready for a pop quiz today? Let me give you three quotes from well-known American leaders, and I want you to tell me what word goes in the blank of each quote – America or Jesus. ⁱⁱ

“ _____ is the world's best last hope.” Presidents Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln (AMERICA)

“ _____ is the savior of the world.” President Woodrow Wilson (AMERICA)

“We must keep _____ first in our hearts.” “ _____ is the light and glory among the nations.” President Donald Trump (AMERICA)

We could play this game for a long time. There's no shortage of quotes like these from leaders in both major political parties. Various countries are represented in this room and among those who watch our services. No matter where you call home, you can love your country, serve, be proud of, and pray for your country, but my country nor yours is our hope, savior, or first in our hearts. For Christians, those roles are already taken by Christ. As Baptists, our long-standing commitment to the separation of church and state is to help protect against this conflation of the two for people of all religious traditions and people with no religious traditions. The kingdom metaphor is not perfect and carries a lot of baggage and pain. It has been used to justify setting up our earthly empires in the name of Christ, but this was not the type of kingdom Jesus announced. The kingdom of God is God reigning. It is present wherever what

God wants done is done. It is all around us, among us, and is from everlasting to everlasting. It is not about us having power, but acknowledging Christ's power.

III.

If I'm honest, there is no shortage of things that seem hard, overwhelming, and scary in life. Politics is definitely one of them. Death is another. And there are about a thousand things in between the two. We could all name things in our lives that are creating fear, anxiety, and worry. Whether politics, personal stuff, or the ever-present reality of death, it's important to remember we are part of an old, old story. One that starts in the beginning of time, sits with us in the present and reaches into the promised future and the promise that God is not done.

In the opening verses of Ephesians, a letter written to a group of churches, Paul states loud and clear that Christ has the final word. Amid chaos, fear, war, elections, rulers, and yes, even death itself, Christians are to hold fast to the image of Christ enthroned above all. When we forget this, we are tempted to put our hope and trust in things, people, and earthly powers. We look to politicians, our 401K, or a new relationship, outfit, TikTok trend, or diet plan to calm the chaos within and around us. There is a time when we all face powerlessness in life, and it isn't fun. It is actually pretty terrifying. The world says if we have enough prosperity, power, or positive thoughts, we can manifest any life we want. But those are just words, words, and more empty words.

Want we want, what we need is the last and final word. And Paul says that belongs to Christ. We may be powerless at times, but Christ is not. And I trust him way more than I do myself or others. All power is his, Paul says, not only in this age but in the age to come.

Paul writes in verses 20 and 21, "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come."

In the gospels, we see the picture of Jesus, a man we can relate to because he, like us, walks, talks, eats, is angry at oppressors and injustice, and gets frustrated with friends and foes alike. We see a servant and a Messiah who leads with compassion, humility, mercy, justice, and love. These are the ways of his kingdom and reign. But with the resurrection and ascension of Christ, we come to know the cosmic Christ who is "seated at the right hand in the heavenly places."

The power of Christ fills all time, space, and reality. This includes our present and our future. We can be Christ's people in the here and now because we believe the risen Christ gets the last word. Everything is under his feet – every single thing we fear and worry about, Christ has power and authority over it. If Christ has power over death, I'm pretty sure Christ has power over anything else you or I might be worried about.

IV.

Tony Cartledge, professor, author, and former pastor, told the story about a summer long ago

when he was a pastor and accompanied a youth/adult mission team working in Williamsburg, Kentucky. While there, they visited Cumberland Falls, a beautiful and majestic sight. The Cumberland River runs quietly through the mountain valleys until it gets to just that spot, where it turns to thunder as it pours in a horseshoe-shaped cataract that drops for almost 70 feet. A heavy mist waters the plants clinging to life on bare rock across both sides of the valley. Rainbows dance in the mist. It is an impressive, heart-pounding sight.

As Tony stood and looked out at the roaring falls, he thought of his seven-year-old daughter, who had recently lost her life to a drunken driver, and Tony said to himself, "I wish I could show this to Bethany." Then it occurred to him, "If only a fraction of what we believe about heaven is true, then Bethany has far more wonderful things than this to show me!"

In an article, Tony said, "I can't claim that I was one of these people who sat back and was totally untroubled. There are times when it's hard to believe, as you always have. But I had this hope that Bethany still lived in some way and that we would see her in another world, hope that God was still with us and would work through us."ⁱⁱⁱ

I had this hope that she still lived in some way, that we would see her again. And I had hope that God was still with us and working through us in the here and now. Hope for tomorrow and hope for today. Paul assures us that God not only loves us enough to forgive us and adopt us as children but has also set aside an incredible inheritance. In this life, we cannot know exactly what lies beyond this life, but in Christ, we have this hope of an eternal inheritance, which can give us daily cause for praise and joy in the here and now.^{iv}

V.

God has a plan, and Christ is the cornerstone of that plan. The work of faith is to live in the confidence of God's final word in Christ. In reflecting on this Ephesians passage, Tony wrote, "In Jesus Christ, we have redemption from our sins. We have an inheritance in eternity. We have a present comforter and guide. We have, in short, all that we need for a life that is filled with meaning and laced with praise."^v Even after the loss of his seven-year-old daughter to a tragic death, their only child at that time, Tony still proclaims his hope for today and tomorrow is in Christ.

Jesus' authority transforms every allegiance, every relationship, and even our understanding of life and death. It changes our future and our present. Jesus is our hope as we sit in waiting rooms and doctor's offices. Jesus is our hope as we weep at gravesides and over empty chairs at our tables. Jesus is our hope as we watch wars escalate, and death tolls rise. Jesus is our hope as we await elections and see earthly powers come and go. Jesus is our hope when hope seems lost, promises appear broken, and dreams remain only dreams. Jesus is our hope when relationships end, anxiety seems to run the house, and we struggle to see any good over the horizon.

Whether politics, personal stuff, or the ever-present reality of death, remember we are part of an old, old story. One that starts in the beginning of time, sits with us in the present and reaches into the promised future and the promise that God is not done. On this Christ the King Sunday,

we complete another year of telling the story of an upside down kingdom not of this world. Next Sunday, we will begin telling it all over again as we prepare our hearts to welcome the Christ child, Emmanuel, God with us. And we will continue to tell it and live it year after year until Christ comes again for the last time.

Like Tony, despite the heartache and pain of this world, we have hope for today and all our tomorrows. As we conclude this series, we're reminded that the good news about death is that Christ has defeated death forever. God has put all things under his feet, so we need not be afraid of any earthly power or situation, for Christ the King has the last and final word, which is the best last word we will ever need to hear.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ Jessica Miller Kelley, "A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series" (Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 79.

ⁱⁱ <https://podcast.choosetruthovertribe.com/episodes/christian-nationalism-andrew-whitehead?hsLang=en>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.baptiststandard.com/archives/2005-archives/journey-through-grief-offers-hard-earned-life-lessons72505/>

^{iv} Tony Cartledge, "Nurturing Faith Commentary: Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Year A, Volume 4." (Nurturing Faith, Macon, 2023), 335.

^v Cartledge, 326.