

Sermon, May 24, 2020

Good morning! Welcome again to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and this morning Mary McEwen will join Laura on piano and me for Special Music. Still no word from officials on when our worship life can return to normal. Or what normal will look like. Council discussed a reopening plan at length Thursday evening. While technically churches in Garrett County are allowed open, attendance is limited. No congregational singing will be allowed, since the safe distancing for singing is about 24 feet. No communion, no collection plates, and those over 65 years old and/or medically-compromised people and their family members should not attend.

Masks are required and social distancing required by the health department is seven feet, not six. That means only every third pew could be open. No hymnals, bulletins or worship booklets would be allowed. With those things in mind, Council has opted not to reopen at this time. Meanwhile please continue to support your church, and also consider sharing our recorded online service with others. Hit "share" if you reached it through Facebook. Our virtual Sunday School continues to be both fun and educational. Thank you Nicole, Ashley and Taylor for that. If you have children or grandchildren who may be interested, please call the church office and we will send you the link. If you have friends or family members without internet service and you have a laptop computer and a smartphone, you can easily take the service to them. Call the church office if you want to learn how.

The Lord be with you.

Let us pray. Almighty and eternal God, your Son our Savior is with you in eternal glory. Give us faith to see that, true to his promise, he is among us still, and will be with us to the end of time.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

A reading from Acts of the Apostles, the first chapter.

When [the Apostles] had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away.

When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John the seventeenth chapter.

After Jesus had spoken these words [to his disciples], he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.

And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.

So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Today is the seventh and last Sunday of Easter. And every year on this Sunday we read a portion of the seventeenth chapter of John. That chapter is a long prayer prayed by Jesus. John's prayers of Jesus are unique in the gospels, in that Jesus prays out loud, in order that his disciples can hear what he is saying.

Thankfully, so can we. John Chapter 17 is often referred to as the "High Priestly Prayer."

It is called that because it is a prayer of intercession for the future church. It is the longest prayer prayed by Jesus in the New Testament.

In John, the High Priestly Prayer concludes the final talk Jesus had with his disciples just prior to his arrest and execution. These were the last words he spoke to the gathering of those closest to him. Not coincidentally, the assigned first reading from Acts of the Apostles today includes the last words Jesus spoke to his disciples before ascending to heaven.

Final testaments or last words have been highly regarded throughout human history, and not just in the realm of religion. Even today in criminal and civil law cases, deathbed confessions (I did it) and dying declarations (He did it) are admissible evidence in court. People have always paid special attention to, and highly regarded, one's last words.

Who can forget Nathan Hale's immortal, "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Mother Theresa's last words were, "Jesus, I love you." Pope John Paul the First's last word was a fitting, "Amen." Martin Luther's last words were written, rather than spoken. Luther wrote that in the end, before God, "We are all beggars. This is true."

Other than the Declaration of Independence, historians say John Adams and Thomas Jefferson never agreed on much of anything. Rivals to the end, Adams vowed he would prevail over Jefferson by outliving him, even though he was seven years older. Turns out both died on the same day, July 4th, 1826—the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of that declaration. Jefferson’s last words were, “Is today the fourth?” Adams last uttered an obviously disappointed, “Thomas Jefferson lives.” Turns out no he didn’t. Unbeknownst to Adams, Jefferson had actually died a couple of hours earlier.

Of course last words CAN be more embarrassing than prophetic. Union Civil War General John Sedgewick spoke his last words on the battlefield. When warned that there were enemy snipers in the trees, he said, “Don’t worry, they couldn’t hit an elephant from this distance.” (Turns out, yes they could!) Mexican Revolutionary War hero Pancho Villa, supposedly also spoke his last words on the battlefield, saying to those gathered around his mortally wounded body, “Don’t let it end like this. Tell them I said something.”

Final Testaments, or last words, are certainly big in the Bible. Genesis Chapter 49 is Jacob’s farewell speech. Moses’ farewell speech is called the Book of Deuteronomy. Joshua’s last words make-up the last two chapters of his book. Samuel’s farewell is found in First Samuel chapter twelve. David’s appears in First Kings.

Ancient last words were viewed much differently from modern ones. We tend to think of the deathbed as a place for reflection—you know--to look back in time. Remembering our lives, and counting life’s blessings while confessing past mistakes. In fact many modern westerners believe your entire life passes before your eyes as you near death, and some who have experienced narrow escapes or miraculous recoveries insist that’s true.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, however, people saw death as a time for looking forward, not backward. They believed the closer one came to death, the closer one came to God. People thought the dying could see into the future, for the benefit of those left behind.

Jacob foretold the future of his twelve sons. It was good news for some of them. For others, not so much. But indeed, what he foretold came true. Samuel warned that King Saul would fail miserably and eventually be killed for behaving badly. And he was.

And it wasn't just in the Bible where they dying foretold the future. It was true in other ancient Mediterranean writings as well.

In Homer's Iliad, a dying Patroclus predicted the death of Hector at the hands of Achilles; and turnabout being fair play, the dying Hector then accurately foretold the imminent death of Achilles.

According to Cicero, as Calanus of India took his own life rather than suffer further with Pneumonia, he told friend Alexander the Great, "I'll see you in Babylon." A few days later Alexander died. In Babylon.

Today Jesus said his final farewells. Before his death in John; and then in Acts before ascending to heaven. In Acts he told his followers, "Don't worry so much about the coming end times. They will happen when God decides so. In the meantime, empowered by the Holy Spirit, you will be my witnesses, even to the ends of the earth. And today Christianity is INDEED the faith of two billion people on seven continents. It was Jesus' farewell speech. Of course it would ring true.

Don't know about you, but in these times of fear and uncertainty, I find the prayer of John seventeen quite comforting. He promised that God's love and protection from evil, previously reserved for Jesus, would now be extended to first his disciples, but then also to us; so that not ONE of them or us would be lost. That we TOO will be one with God, just as Jesus himself is.

A few verses later, he will go on to warn us followers of Jesus that life will sometimes be difficult for us too, but that he is with us even in life's toughest times. We should remember that in these frightening days of uncertainty.

“I ask not ONLY on behalf of these,” he said, “but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through THEIR word.” That would be us. Jesus today gave us the same promise he had given them. That through him we are ALSO one with God when we are one with each other.

For my last words, I hope I'll say something funny rather than profound. I certainly won't be the first to do so. A priest was summoned to the deathbed of Voltaire back in 1778. The Priest demanded the famous French author and satirist renounce Satan. Voltaire replied, “Now now, my good man, this is NO time to make new enemies.”

And then there was Oscar Wilde. Whose last words were, “That's it, either this wallpaper goes, or I do!” And he did.

Buddy Rich died of heart failure following surgery for a malignant brain tumor back in 1987. His last words were spoken to a prep nurse just before the procedure. She was checking for possible drug allergies and asked the great drummer, “Is there anything you can't take?” And he said, “Yeah. Country Music.”

I'm not worried that I haven't worked out MY last words yet. Because I'm pretty content with the dying promise of Jesus that the end of this life really isn't the end of anything. That God's love and our oneness with him will indeed last forever.

Plus I know that Thomas Edison wouldn't lie. From his deathbed in 1931 the greatest inventor of all time smiled and calmly announced, “You know, it's very beautiful over there.” Amen.