

Sunday November 25th, 2018
Kirk of St James
Sermon "Closing Out the Year"
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Movies, books and speeches often all contain memorable last words. Some are short and pithy and others longer and more meaningful. For example, we can likely all easily recall Arnold Schwarzenegger's in Terminator 2 "Hasta la vista baby." Or, for something longer and more meaningful there is Al Pacino in "Any Given Sunday" where in the speech *Inch by Inch* he talks about football and life and fighting hard for each inch and victory that we gain. In famous speeches in history Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech is well remembered for its final words which state "When we allow freedom to ring-when we let it ring from every city and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, Free at last, Great God a-mighty, we are free at last." In fact, that final line from the spiritual was craved on his headstone as his final words. When we come to the Bible it is no different. The Bible is full of important last words by some of its greatest leaders.

Moses takes a while to say all he wants to say. He talks openly about coming to the end of his journey with the Israelites and imparts a patriarchal blessing on each of the twelve tribes. In fact, as one writer points out "He names each one and indicates by his wish for them that he is aware of their strengths and weaknesses. He tenderly prays for each and hopes that their way ahead will be healthy, strong, faithful and blessed." His words are realistic, loving, and lasting. I am certain they were recalled with deep love by each of the tribes through countless generations. The prophet Elijah uses his last words to encourage Elisha who was to follow in his footsteps. And who can forget Stephen who when faced with an angry mob preparing to

stone him to death prays for their forgiveness. Saul who later became Paul stood by and watched the martyrdom of Stephen and the courage and grace that was displayed must have had a lasting impact on him--even if it was not right away. But, perhaps the most famous words of all are those of Jesus Christ who while dying on a cross prayed for all humankind. As one biblical scholar said "He commends his spirit into the hands of God. Bruises and blessings, achievements and failures, his whole ministry and life, together or unraveling, are offered back to the one who called him."

So why all this talk about last words on Christ the King Sunday? It is because this Sunday are the last words we speak before the new church year is upon us. While the New Year may indeed be a few months away, for us in the church advent begins a new church year. For the four weeks of advent we wait and pray with anticipation as we move closer to celebrating the birth of Christ. The words today close out what has been and look to the future to what may yet be. I always consider it a pause in the church year, where we catch our breath for a moment before jumping into the joy of advent. In the lectionary the text chosen to close out the year is the last words of King David found in 2 Samuel which is appropriate all things considered.

David was a complicated king. His reign included heights few (if any other) king reached but, it also had incredible lows. When David reaches the end of his life his household is in chaos. It includes adultery, murder, and a divided house. We typically don't think of King David in these terms. In fact, the advent season centers around a descendant of David--Jesus Christ. David's reign embodies the human struggle between the divine and the earthly, between faith and power. While David struggles throughout his life he understands the one thing of fundamental importance: his reign has been at its best when he has remembered his relationship with God. That is what his final words impart to us today. This legendary King when

reflecting on his life affirms that his relationship with God has been the single most important factor. How many major world leaders today do you think would have the same reflection? Likely less than we would hope.

For David there is another important aspect found in his last words. David affirms that it is God who has blessed him throughout his life, and that God will also continue to bless his people. We know that much like David his people learn the hard way what it is to forget about or, neglect God. Once again, they are at their best when they remember the One who calls them. One of the authors I read this week while preparing for the sermon today spoke about how the tragic subtext of this passage is how hard it has been for humanity to handle the sacred responsibilities given to us by God. Through the bible and its teachings, we know the expectations for love, justice, mercy and compassion that have been placed on us. We are stewards of God's creation. However, we often struggle with the execution of this responsibility. It is not a wonder why. Sometimes this life and world seems extraordinarily complicated or, we feel powerless to do anything in the face of the large problems that plague us. Sometimes at our worst we are complicit in injustice or wrongdoing like David, and at best simply do nothing. David's last words remind us that no matter what God never gives up on us. That even if it feels like we are barely crawling along an inch at a time at the very least we are moving and when we get it wrong, we are always given another chance.

David reflecting on his own shortcomings and failures reminds us that "the hopeful tone of this song is that there is a source of justice and love that allows those in power to scrutinize their uses and abuses of power and do better. It may sound trite, but this critical edge is what saves us from ourselves. Were it not for a vision of God's justice and mercy, the corrupting capacity of power would have its way with even more devastation than it has had throughout

human history. The sound of any voice that can name injustice is a testament to the faithfulness of God's presence in the world." God has been and will forever be faithful to his creation.

That is good news we can close out the current church year on. The realization that no matter what has happened in the last twelve months there is always hope. If we have had moments of victory, we can celebrate them, if we have had moments where we have not been our best, we can ask forgiveness, and more than anything remains the love of God that never lets us go. King David understood that more than any other truth in his life. In the end what held value for David was not the Kingdom he had built, the kingship he had had, or anything else found in this world, it was the recognition of the importance of his faith that held more meaning than any other thing he possessed.

Next week we begin a season that celebrates a "manger child, a Nazareth nobody, a washer of feet, of a flesh and blood life susceptible to lashes, thorns, and nails of this world." A baby who lived, died and rose again. As we prepare to anticipate and celebrate this season, I would encourage each of us to consider our own lives of faith. Where are we, and where do we hope to be? What are our positive moments and where do we struggle? Sometimes it is helpful to have advent resources so this year in our Christmas letter we have several different ideas on ways to celebrate the season. If you decide to try one let us know we would love to hear more about it! Blessings on you, your family and your loved ones as we prepare to celebrate this special season!