***LAST WORDS***

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Texts: 2 Samuel 23:1-7 and Revelation 22:16-17 and 20-21

When I was practicing law we lived outside Carlisle, PA, across the road from Joe and Rita Dickey. They had horses and stables and Rottweilers to guard them. At one time they had a particularly high-spirited colt who they decided needed to move on to a new home. I was working in the yard one day when I saw Joe come flying up over the hill on the back of that young colt. The colt raced toward the fence along the road and then cut at the last moment, tossing Joe through the fence to the ground. I went running over and found Joe on his back gasping for breath. As it turned out he had fractured ribs, a punctured lung, and broken facial bones. At about that time two women came running from the top of the hill with mouths agape as they saw Joe, battered and gasping for breath on the ground. Joe looked up at them and between gritted teeth spit out the words, “I guess you don’t want to buy the horse.”

There are such memorable moments in our lives when something is said that sticks with us. Joe recovered from his fall, but often such memorable moments occur as last words are spoken. Across the years there have been a host of folks whose last words have been recorded because they were so memorable or so faithful or so fitting to the person who said them. Some of those words seem to affirm that what the speaker did in life really was his or her calling:

* Surgeon Joseph Henry Green was checking his own pulse as he lay dying when he uttered his last word: “Stopped.”
* Composer Gustav Mahler died in bed, conducting an imaginary orchestra when he uttered his last word, “Mozart!”
* The final words of Dominique Bouhours, a 17th century French grammarian, were “I am about to -- or I am going to -- die: either expression is correct.”

Other folks’ last lines are directed at those gathered at their bedsides:

* Composer Jean-Philippe Rameau objected to a song being sung at his bedside, saying, “What the devil do you mean to sing to me, priest? You are out of tune.”
* When playwright Wilson Mizner was on his deathbed, a priest said, “I’m sure you want to talk to me.” Mizner replied, “Why should I talk to you? I’ve just been talking to your boss.”

Other last words are far more profound:

* “Now comes the mystery,” murmured evangelist Henry Ward Beecher in 1887.
* “I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have,” said no less a genius than Leonardo da Vinci, as if his contributions were somehow not enough.[[1]](#endnote-1)

What would your last words be if you could choose the last words you would utter on earth before heading to your heavenly reward? Perhaps, “Lord have mercy upon me?”

The last words of Jesus vary from Gospel to Gospel as each writer recalls those precious moments. Matthew and Mark record his despairing cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” followed by another loud cry as he breathed his last. Luke recalls him saying, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” while John records his words simply as, “It is finished.” Memories fade, recollections vary, perspectives change as different words are recalled as Jesus’ last words. Fortunately, the power of Jesus’ death lay not in the exact last words he spoke, but in the Word made flesh that was his body – crucified and risen for us.

The writer in 2 Samuel leaves no question as to the legacy of last words King David would leave behind, for he begins that passage we read this morning with: “Now these are the last words of David…” Were they really his last words? Probably not since David is quoted again as speaking in the very next chapter of 2 Samuel, but regardless of what other words may have escaped his lips with his dying breath, the writer records these words as the last words which the people of Israel might remember from King David at the end of his life. After a lifetime of words spoken as shepherd, warrior, king and psalmist – David’s last words are recalled as words from the Lord spoken through David, an oracle spoken by a favorite son of God. What does he say that we should remember as his last words?

He says that one who rules over people by doing justice and fearing the Lord is like the sun rising on a bright cloudless morning with the dew glistening on the grass. It is a great image – bright and fresh – and it is rooted in justice and fear of the Lord. The 112th Psalm describes those who fear the Lord as being gracious, merciful, and righteous,

conducting affairs with justice and giving to the poor,

having steady hearts that are unafraid.

Those are the ones fit to rule the people. How do those qualifications stack up against the qualities trumpeted by the plethora of presidential candidates vying for their party’s nomination today? Are they falling over themselves to show who is the most gracious, most merciful and most righteous – or is it just toughness they are all claiming? Are they laying out policies to help the poor and marginalized? Are they encouraging justice for all people – or for some more than others? Our candidates would do well to heed David’s last words, but we too need to heed those words and demand of all those who govern accountability on all those counts.

This past week in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris there was a lot more talk of fear than of justice and mercy. Some even suggested that justice needed to be sacrificed for some in order to allay the fears of others as we so sinfully did with the internment of over 120,000 Japanese-American citizens after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The acts of ISIS, an organization that CIA Director John Brennan accurately described as “murderous sociopaths with a nihilistic and criminally depraved agenda to simply kill others under religious pretense”[[2]](#endnote-2), have been claimed as a basis for refusing welcome to Syrian refugees , fifty percent of whom are children, driven from their homes by that same ISIS organization. We cannot govern justly out of fear of ISIS or anyone else, but only out of fear of the Lord that compels us to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream for all people, including those refugees driven from their homes, including those enemies who Jesus calls us to love. That is what David had to say to his people and to us – justice and fear of the Lord are marks of good governance. But that is not all that he had to say.

David also reminds the people of the everlasting covenant God made with him as king. It was not just a promise to David, but a promise to the people about the one who would reign in Israel after David. David was dying, but the covenant remained intact. A dying David did not want them to forget that covenant. Centuries later the gospel writers remembered that covenant in tracing the Davidic line from King David to the one born in the City of David as a Son of David and Son of God. It is that same covenant Jesus recalls in that vision of John in Revelation when he says, “I am the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

Today we remember those last words of David as we celebrate the reign of Christ and look ahead to Advent and our preparations for Jesus’ coming. For, it is not just his birth in Bethlehem which we prepare to celebrate; it is also his return in glory. John anticipates that return as he chooses last words for the account of his apocalyptic vision in Revelation:

*The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

Come, Lord Jesus. Those are among the last words in Scripture as well as the last words in Revelation. Come, Lord Jesus! Come not just to Bethlehem, but to Staunton and to Paris and to Mali and to Syria. Come not just to a first century world, but to a 21st century world that cries out for your touch. Come to us, Lord Jesus – here, now! For the world needs you, and we long for your return.

Come, Lord Jesus! Who knows how many times that prayer has been uttered across the ages? Ann Weems, the poet laureate of the Presbyterian Church has described God’s coming in these wonderful words:

*Our God is the One who comes to us*

*In a burning bush,*

*In an angel’s song*

*In a newborn child.*

*Our God is the One who cannot be found*

*locked in the church,*

*not even in the sanctuary.*

*Our God will be where God will be*

*with no constraints,*

*no predictability.*

*Our God lives where our God lives,*

*And destruction has no power*

*And even death cannot stop*

*The living.*

*Our God will be born where God will be born,*

*But there is no place to look for the One who comes to us.*

*When God is ready*

*God will come*

*Even to a godforsaken place*

*Like a stable in Bethlehem.*

*Watch…*

*For you know not when God comes.*

*Watch, that you might be found*

*Whenever*

*Wherever*

*God comes.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

Whenever, wherever, to whomever you choose – come, Lord Jesus. That is our prayer in these turbulent times! But while we are praying those words, perhaps we should be doing what William Henry Seward, architect of the Alaska Purchase, bid us do in his last words. When asked if he had any last words to offer, Seward replied: “Nothing. Only love one another.” That sounds a lot like Jesus. “Love one another, for surely I am coming soon,” says Jesus. Surely! Amen

1. Quotes gleaned from [www.Mentalfloss.com](http://www.Mentalfloss.com) and [www.corsinet.com/braincandy](http://www.corsinet.com/braincandy) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Brennan: CIA ‘Working Feverishly’”, Bart Jansen, USA Today, November 17, 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ann Weems, “The Coming of God” in *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, p.23 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)