

Sermon: The Promise of God

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, June 1, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I've been thinking about last words, words people speak as they shuffle off the stage of life. Allow me to share with you a few examples of famous last words from a few famous or infamous people.

Nostradamus, the French physician, astrologer, and seer predicted, "Tomorrow, at sunrise, I shall no longer be here." He was right, finally, for once.

Jean-Philippe Rameau, one of the most influential composer and music theorists of the 18th century, objected to a song sung at his bedside. He said, "What the devil do you mean to sing to me, priest? You are out of tune."

Marie Antoinette, the infamous last Queen of France in 1793, stepped on her executioner's foot on her way to the guillotine. Her last words: "Pardonnez-moi, monsieur." Still polite to the end.

Staying on the theme of those executed, murderer James W. Rodgers was put in front of a firing squad in Utah in 1960. When asked if he had a last request. His reply was, "Bring me a bullet-proof vest." I guess that request was not granted.

John Arthur Spink also executed, in Florida in 1979. He spent his final days writing these last words on various pieces of correspondence: "Capital punishment means those without the capital get the punishment." There is some truth to that!

Johnny Ace, an R&B singer, died in 1954 while playing with a pistol during a break on his concert set. His last words were, "I'll show you that it won't shoot."

Leonardo da Vinci, a genius in his own right who epitomized the Renaissance humanist ideal, was nevertheless modest to a fault, saying, “I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have.” I guess the Mona Lisa isn’t good enough?

Sir Winston Churchill’s famous last words were, “I’m bored with it all.”

Charles Gussman, the writer and TV announcer. As he became ill, he said he wanted his last words to be memorable. When his daughter reminded him of this, he gently removed his oxygen mask and whispered: “And now for a final word from our sponsor....” A real dedication to his craft, or just a dry sense of humour? You be the judge.

These last words may not have defined a person, but they certainly shed light on important aspects of who they were. What about our Lord Jesus Christ? What were his famous last words? I am not talking about those he uttered on the cross before his death, because we know that death was not the end. I am referring to the last words, or the ending of the gospel account of the good news of Jesus.

Now there are four accounts, as there are four gospels written from different perspectives. Matthew ends in chapter 28, with Jesus laying the so-called ‘Great Commission’, as in verse 18-20, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*” Isn’t this simply wonderful.

I don’t know if you have ever been involved in a committee tasked with formulating a mission statement for a particular organization. It is not my cup of tea for it usually is a long and drawn out process—drawing out personal experiences of all participants, trying to word-smith something coherent and relevant. The end result is often a bit of compromise, a bit of people trying to accept what they could live with, a bit of people being simply fed up and just wanting to get it over with. The resulting statement often reads as something produced in a committee—long, cumbersome, somewhat unfocused, and usually not memorable.

Well, the 'Great Commission' is the exact opposite. It lays out simply what we as disciples of Jesus are called to do—that is to make other disciples, to baptize them and to teach them to obey what the Lord has commanded us. And adding to this commissioning, Jesus promises, *“and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* Good ending, blessed last words.

The Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four gospels account, on the other hand, has somewhat of controversial endings. I am using plural here for there are actually two endings. The original one is in chapter 16:1-8, where Jesus is nowhere to be found. That scene describes the three women, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, going to the tomb where Jesus was buried. Upon seeing an empty tomb, a young man dressed in white informed them that Jesus had been raised, and had gone on ahead to Galilee. The women were told to go and tell the disciples and Peter of this great news, but instead, here is how the original gospel account ends, as in verse 8, *“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”*

One can see how that ending is not particularly satisfying, enough that some scribes might've decided to add and elongate the ending of Mark, from verse 9-20. Now that is an ending that one suspects is the product of a committee, with long elaborate and somewhat puzzling words, supposedly from Jesus, commanding his disciples to a number of actions, including baptizing others, as well as casting out demons, speaking new tongues, picking up snakes, and drinking deadly poison. I am not going to get into details here today, but it does make a interesting read.

The Gospel of John also has two endings, both authentically written by the same author. The first one, chapter 20;30-31, focuses on the purpose why this book is written, *“as that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”* The other ending is in chapter 21, verse 25, after yet another post resurrection appearance of Jesus, particularly that BBQ at a beach where Jesus absolved Peter by inviting him three times to feed the Lord's sheep, and to follow Jesus. Then the author of John concludes, in verse 25, by saying, *“But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”* The focus here is clearly not what Jesus had said, but what the author of the gospel wishes to convey.

Of all the endings in the gospel account, Luke is my favourite, in our Scripture passage today, of chapter 24:44-53. Jesus reminded the disciples again why he had to suffer, that is to fulfill everything written about the Lord. The idea that God's Messiah, the Anointed, had to suffer and die really doesn't 'market' well. But it does lead to the subsequent death and resurrection, so that 'repentance and forgiveness of sins' can be and is proclaimed in the name of Jesus, to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.

The life of Jesus is not an accident in history. His life and ministry of is a continuation of God's presence with humanity from the beginning. Jesus is the Word of God. He embodies God's longing and love for humanity, for all the creation. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's covenant with us, and God's Word does not return empty.

The disciples were then given a promise from the Father, told to wait in the city until they are 'clothed' with power from on high. This promise from the Father undoubtedly points to the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit. We could trace this promise the text in Jeremiah 31 where God is writing a new covenant, not in stone, but in our hearts. But as Ezekiel 36 explains, when people's heart become stubborn and harden like a rock, God will have no choice but to perform a radical heart surgery— removing from us heart of stone and giving us a heart of flesh and of spirit. It is in that same line of thinking that John the baptizer explains in Luke 3:16, *"I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come...he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."*

It is interesting to note that the Spirit comes only after Jesus has ascended to God. It is only when Jesus ascends to God that Spirit empowers the church, and sends it out to bear witness. And with that Jesus blesses them, and withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And the disciples rightfully worshipped him, for the ascension brings a fitting end to the incarnation—the Word became flesh and dwell among us. Now the Word has returned to God, not void, but accomplished what God pleases. And with that, we look forward to the pentecostal fire that shaped and continues to shape the Church, as we say alleluia, praise be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**