

Today Is the Day

Luke 4:16-21

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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When a person dies (particularly if it is a famous person), there always seems to be special interest in that person's last words. Books have been written with collections of "Famous Last Words." Some of them are inspiring; some funny; some downright sad. There is a huge plaque at the front of the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte memorializing one of the early pastors of that church, and on the plaque are recorded his last words: "I have fought the good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith." Don't you wish that those might be your last words?

Some famous last words aren't quite so inspiring. When Ethan Allen, leader of Vermont's Green Mountain Boys during the Revolutionary War, was dying, his family called in his pastor who said to him, "The angels are waiting for you, General Allen." And Ethan Allen responded, "Waiting for me are they? Well, let 'em wait." And with that he died.

There is a sadness to the last words of the unpopular President Grover Cleveland: "I have tried so hard to do right."

By contrast, the dying words of the poet John Greenleaf Whittier were, "Love to all the world."

I think that if we could, we would all like for our final words to put a fitting period on our lives, to sum up the values and meaning that have guided our lives. We act as if it is our last words that matter. But equally important, perhaps even more important, are our first words. Whenever a new President is elected, people pay close attention to the inaugural address because it is intended to give a picture of the hopes and dreams that the new President brings to the office. You could say the same thing about the first sermon of a new pastor, the first words that a husband and wife say to each other as they begin their married life—these first words are important words because they set the tone for what is ahead.

This scripture that we read describes Jesus' first sermon. Jesus came to his hometown of Nazareth, and he went to the synagogue for Sabbath worship. He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and he stood up to read. The passage Jesus chose was from Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

With that Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. All eyes were fixed on him waiting for his first words. Jesus said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

All of Jesus' hearers on that Sabbath day were well familiar with these words of Isaiah. It had been 500 years since Isaiah spoke them. And when they were first spoken, they gave a wonderful vision for the future—that someday the poor would hear good news, and some day the

captives would be released, and some day the blind would see. But in those 500 years, the Jewish people had experienced great hardships—rebuilding the destroyed city of Jerusalem and its temple that had been razed to the ground. They had been a pawn that was pushed around in international affairs between the great powers of the day—Persia, Greece, Rome. It has been a long hard time since Isaiah had first spoken those words of promise, and it didn't seem that they would ever really come to pass. Maybe some day...but not today. Some day this wonderful vision of Isaiah would become reality, but not today.

And then Jesus spoke, and the very first word he spoke was “Today.” “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” No more some day...today!

We understand very well how this “some day” versus “today” thing works.

“Someday I’m going to quit working so much so I can spend more time with my family.”

“Someday I’m going to be more honest with my colleagues at work.”

“Someday I’m going to tell _____ how much he/she means to me.”

“Someday I’m going to simplify my life and get rid of all this clutter.”

“Someday I’m going to be more generous.”

“Someday I’m going to do better about reading the Bible and praying.”

Someday...but not today. We are so good at persuading ourselves that today is not the right time. How can we cut back on our work when we have so many bills to pay? So, when I get my house paid off and my kids’ college education paid off, then I’ll slow down. Some day...just not today.

Or how can we afford to simplify our lives and be more generous when we have so many obligations that we have taken on? We’ll do it someday...just not today.

Someday I’m going to be more devoted to the faith: I’m going to read the Bible more; I’m going to be more regular in my church attendance; I’m going to go to Sunday School; I’m going to help out with Room in the Inn; I’m going to share my faith with others. Someday, I’m going to do those things.

For those of us with so many “some days” we need to hear this first word that Jesus spoke: Today.

I understand how much of what we talk about in church has a “someday” quality. We talk about that day when God’s kingdom is a real on earth as it is in heaven; we talk about that day when we stand before God to give account of our lives; we talk about that day when there will be no more tears or pain or death. All of these have a “someday” quality. We know that someday they will be true, but they are not true today, at least not fully. So it’s no wonder that we treat our practice of the Christian faith as if it were one of those “someday” things—something that will happen someday.

But hear again what Jesus said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled.” Not someday...today! What Jesus is doing here is pulling that future someday into the present today. The practice of the Christian faith is not a someday thing; it is a today thing. When Joshua was speaking to the people of Israel as they were claiming the promised land that God had given to them, he said, “Choose this day whom you will serve.”

You all know the problem with the “someday” philosophy. It is that “someday” never comes. It is always sad to me when I hear someone describing his or her life with regret over missed or wasted opportunities. “I always intended to tell _____ how much I loved him, but I just never got around to it.”

For Jesus there is no more “someday”; it’s today.

So lesson one from this scripture is this: Today is the day. Don't keep postponing your life until "someday." And if that's the lesson you draw from this sermon today, then that's a good lesson to learn: No more procrastinating; today is the day.

However, there is a particular quality to Jesus' "today." That day when Jesus preached his first sermon, he said that today is the day for bringing good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind; it is a day for proclaiming the Lord's favor.

That is what Jesus is calling you and me to do today. If today we choose to follow Jesus, then today is a day for telling good news; it's a day to proclaim God's favor. Jesus lists people who have so little good news in their lives—the poor, the captive, the oppressed, the blind—and he says that today is the day that they will hear good news.

Who is the person you know who needs to hear a word of good news? Who is the person held captive by some addiction or by prejudice or by ignorance? Who is the person who is blinded by pride or selfishness? Who is the person who feels oppressed bearing the weight of the sins and failures of the past? That is the person who needs to hear a word of good news from you today. Today is the day for proclaiming the Lord's favor.

Today is the day to do something real and meaningful for the people of Haiti who so desperately need to hear good news.

Today is the day to tell Linda Davenport that you will help with the ABRO program so that the children of Belarus will hear a word of hope and freedom.

Today is the day to sign up to help with Room in the Inn so that our homeless neighbors will know that they are children of God, loved by God and God's people.

Today is the day to pray for that person who you know is struggling with some problem.

Today is the day for you to pray for God's guidance for our church as we seek to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor to the people of our world.

Today is the day.

And if we will do these things, then when we do come to the end of our days, perhaps the last words that are said of us will be: "He/she fought the good fight; finished the course; kept the faith." Amen. ☩