

I

The first words my wife Amy ever spoke to me were, “Hi, are you Richard.” I know I’ve shared that story with you before, but I will remember those first words until the day that I die.

In the 24-plus years since that day, Amy has spoken countless more words to me, and I have spoken my share of words to her. This is not something I think about often, but we made a vow to one another until death do we part, and though I hope and pray that that day is a very long time from now, sometimes I wonder, which one of us will get to say the last words, and what will those words be?

II

Having the last word is a big concept in our culture, isn’t it? The one who has the privilege of speaking the last word gets to put something of a final stamp on the conversation. Having the last word means that the one who has it gets to tie everything together, to assign some sort of meaning to all that has come before.

III

And that brings us to our text for this morning.

Today is the final day of our summer-long sermon series on the Book of Psalms, which, as we’ve said all along, isn’t a book in the classical sense of the word, but rather an anthology, a collection of poems and prayers and hymns that was composed and collected

over a very long period of time in biblical history.

And I think that’s important for us to remember, especially today. The Book of Psalms is a collection, which means there was an editorial process that went into putting it together. And just like in any collection or anthology, the editor or editors not only had to make decisions about which material to include and which to leave out, they also made some important editorial decisions about the order in which the materials would appear.

All summer, we’ve been preaching our way through the Psalter. We haven’t had time to explore all 150 Psalms, but we’ve been moving our way through the book from beginning to end. We’ve explored beloved and comforting texts like Psalm 23, wherein we contemplated the notion that the Lord is our shepherd. We’ve explored texts of painful lament like Psalm 88, in which the final word of the psalm is darkness. Last week, we wrestled with the deeply troubling cries for revenge in Psalm 137.

And today, we come to the final psalm in the collection, the final song of the album, so to speak. So listen now for a Word from God from Psalm 150.

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;

praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

*Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing
cymbals!
Let everything that breathes praise the
Lord!*

Praise the Lord!

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

As I've shared with you before, I am by no means a scholar in biblical languages. I enjoyed my ordination exams in Greek and Hebrew so much I took them three times. But there's something happening here in the Hebrew of this Psalm that I think is worth our attention.

In English, Psalm 150 begins and ends with the same three-word phrase – Praise the Lord!

But that three-word phrase in English is rendered as a single word in Hebrew. And that word is this – Hallelujah.

The final word of both this Psalm and indeed for the entire Book of Psalms is “Hallelujah.”

And I think that's not a coincidence. I think that was an intentional editorial choice.

As we've said, every emotion that we're capable of feeling as human beings can be expressed somewhere within the 150 psalms in the bible. You name a feeling, and it's in there. – Love, joy, peace, hope, to be sure, but also pain, anger, envy, rage, and despair, and every emotion in between. There are countless words in the Psalms. But the final word is Hallelujah.

IV

Earlier this week, as I flipped the page from August to September, I came across some notes I had made in my calendar back in January of this year, and I just had to shake my head and smile. Not much about this year has gone according to my plans.

And I suspect it's the same for you, my friend. I don't know about you, but I have very much grown tired of the phrase, “the new normal.” This pandemic and all that it has brought with it has been going on for six months now, so I don't think we can call it new. And it is by no means normal.

And so if you're struggling these days, my friend, you're not the only one. If you're wondering if there's a point to all of this, you're not alone. And I hope that as you have read and prayed the Psalms, you've noticed that the Psalmist is never hesitant to tell God exactly how he or she is feeling. You need to pull any punches or hide from the God who made you, who redeemed you, who sustains you.

But I hope you'll pay attention to the final word of the Psalms. Because the final word of the Psalms is Hallelujah. And that gives me comfort, my friend. That gives me hope.

The Psalms aren't just a random collection. They're full of words, and some of those words are hard to hear. Some of those words are expressions of pain, of despair, of rage. But those aren't the final words.

Martin Luther once called the Psalter the "gospel in miniature." This life can be so very hard, my friend. There is too much pain and suffering and injustice in our world today. But there is a point to all of this. There is an ultimate destination to this journey. This life is leading somewhere – to Hallelujah.

What you're going through right now, the pain, the struggles, the frustrations, the fear, all of that is real. But because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it will not be your ultimate reality.

Just last week, I had the privilege of leading a memorial service for a dear saint of the church who died. As the service drew to a close, I came again to these words. I began to pray:

You only are immortal, O God, the creator and maker of all. We are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. This you ordained when you created us, saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return. All us of us go down to the dust."

Those are words that I've read hundreds of times at hundreds of funerals and memorial services over the years. But the next phrase caught me up short this week.

I continued, "All of us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song: alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

Someday, I hope very long from now, you will breathe your last and die. But because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the final word spoken over you won't be pain, or suffering, or despair, or even death. Because of Jesus, the final word for you, my friend, will be Hallelujah.

V

There is so much uncertainty in our world these days, my friends. No one is certain what will happen with the virus, with the upcoming elections, with protests and unrest, with financial markets, with school, with sports, with anything. A quick scan of the headlines and social media feeds reveals that lots of people are claiming to have the last word on these things, but no one is for certain. A friend of mine who works for the Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina says that this season is like trying to drive the mountains in heavy fog – we can only see that which is right in front of us – everything else is shrouded.

But this is also a time for we who claim the name of Jesus Christ to shine light into the darkness. This is a time for us to speak with clarity about our

conviction that the best and final hope for the world is not dependent upon an election, or a vaccine, or a financial market. The best and final hope for all humankind is in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is a time for we who claim the name of Jesus Christ to be about the work of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God.

This is not new, and it is not normal. We don't know what tomorrow holds. But we who bear the name of Christ know the One who holds tomorrow. We know how the story ends. In the end, when all is said and done, love wins. The final word is Hallelujah.

Praise the Lord!

Amen.