

“Words That Last”

“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Snapchat is a social media website that allows its users to set a time limit for how long recipients can view their “snaps,” after which they will be hidden from the recipient’s device but not deleted from Snapchat’s servers. Unlike many email servers and others social media outlets, Snapchat is, in the words of one reviewer, *“an ephemera generating and sharing machine.”* It was established in response to one of the realities of electronic media: unlike words in older formats (such as newspapers, audio tape, and notepaper), words that are shared online can last for far longer than we might imagine or desire (as we are learning through scandals involving Hillary Clinton and a certain notorious website that encourages people to engage in adulterous affairs). Words can last longer than ever before – but has their impact changed? Are the messages contained in these words that are embedded in these programs any more effective now than when their “shelf life” was much shorter?

Words play a critical role in our Christian faith. We are a “people of the Word,” people who gather every Sunday around the Word of God that is at the heart of all aspects of our worship service, not only the Scripture readings that are heard in our presence. For Martin Luther, it is through God’s Word that we find Christ: *“No one will find him any place except in God’s word... Christ cannot be known except through his word; without this word Christ’s flesh is of no help to me even though it were to come today.”* The Word of God was so important to Luther that he translated the Bible from the Latin of the Church, which was understandable only to the educated elite, to the German of the common people so that what was realized on the day of Pentecost might once again be made real: *“in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”* (Acts 2:11). The centrality of God’s Word in the life of the Church was clearly established in our Lutheran confessional writings, which state that *“God’s Word alone ought to be and remain the only guiding principle and rule of all teaching and that no person’s writing can be put on a par with it, but that everything must be totally subject to God’s Word.”* (Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration). In our congregation’s constitution, we boldly declare that *“this congregation confesses the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God, through which God still speaks, and as the only source of the Church’s doctrine and the authoritative standard for the faith and life of the church.”* Of all the blessings that have been handed down from generation to generation, it is God’s Word that is our great treasure as the Church:

- “God’s word is our great heritage and shall be ours forever; to spread its light from age to age shall be our chief endeavor. Through life it guides our way; in death it is our stay. Lord, grant while time shall last your church may hold it fast throughout all generations.” – Nikolai Grundtvig, *ELW* Hymn 509.

The Word of God that is at the heart of our church’s faith and life has been presented in many formats over the centuries. Before the dawn of Gutenberg’s printing press, the Bible was painstakingly copied by hand, which meant that very few copies were available. The printing press brought the Bible into wide circulation, including Luther’s German translation, so that people had access to God’s Word in their homes and churches. Modern technology has made the Bible available in a number of formats: you can access Scriptures on your computer, tablet, or phone, and a simple click of a mouse or touch of an onscreen icon opens up the fullness of the Word of God to us wherever we are. But it is not the media through which it is presented that defines the lasting nature of God’s Word; it is the message it conveys, the good news that it communicates to us that allows the Word of God to endure even if the means through which it is presented does not last. Printed Bibles may wear out; worship bulletins that include the Scripture lessons for a particular Sunday may be thrown away; even electronic versions of the Word may get lost in cyberspace – but the message that the Word of God speaks to us is eternal because it comes to us from our God who is eternal, whose Word endures because God endures.

Today's Gospel lesson is the final portion of Jesus' teaching that began with his miraculous feeding of the multitude, which the crowd who had witnessed it took as a sign that *"this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."* (John 6:15). But Jesus is far more than just another prophet; in his extended teaching that follows, Jesus points to the bread that had satisfied their hunger on that day as a sign that really points to him as the source of that which will satisfy our deepest hungers as can no mere bread:

- "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." – 6:35.

But Jesus' offer of himself as the bread of life that "satisfies the hungry heart" is met with resistance by those who cannot conceive of how someone they know so well can possibly be such a blessing from God: *"Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"* (6:42). In spite of Jesus' repeated efforts to explain how he is truly the one whom God has sent to nourish and sustain God's people as no person could, his invitation is met with rejection: *"Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."* (6:66). What John had addressed in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel has now come to fruition, that Jesus *"came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."* (1:11). Jesus is the suffering servant prophesied by Isaiah: *"He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account."* (Isaiah 53:3).

The still of rejection is still reverberating through Jesus' body when he turns to the Twelve, those disciples who – at least for the moment – have remained by his side. Wondering if they too will follow the others, Jesus asks the twelve disciples, *"Do you also wish to go away?"* (6:67). These disciples are presented with a choice: they must choose whether to accept or reject the offer God has made to them through Jesus.

Simon Peter, who is given the role as the spokesperson for the Twelve (a role he assumes throughout the Gospels), stands up and affirms that though others have turned their backs on Jesus and rejected his word, they will remain with him because only he has the gift that no one else can offer:

- "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." – 6:68-69.

Peter's words function as a confession of faith; the words "believe" and "know" are at the heart of confessional statements that place one's trust and confidence in God alone:

- "But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." – 10:38.
- "If you know me, you will know the Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." – 14:7.
- "Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God." – 16:30.

Peter confesses that Jesus is the "Holy One of God," the one whom God has set apart to bring God's message of salvation to all God's people. As Peter confessed in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus is *"the Messiah, the Son of the living God"* (Matthew 16:16), he speaks for the Twelve and for all who remain faithful to Jesus as the one who has the "words of eternal life," whose life, death and resurrection has redeemed us so that *"I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true."* (Small Catechism).

This is most certainly true. Luther's affirmation echoes Peter's words of confidence that Jesus is the only one who has the true Word, the "words of eternal life," the message that endures long after the human words that convey this message fade away. While the means through which the Word of God has been shared have changed over

the years – from hand printed Bibles to books mass-produced on printing presses; from Bibles distributed on street corners and hotel rooms to numerous versions available online – it is the good news conveyed through these words that are truly everlasting: the message that God’s Word will accomplish its task of bringing the blessings of life everlasting to those who turn to Jesus as the living bread from heaven, the true and only source of that which endures unto eternal life. As Isaiah proclaimed God’s promise that *“my word that goes out of my mouth ... shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”* (Isaiah 55:11). We affirm that God’s Word is “most certainly true” because of our experience with the God of steadfast love who is always faithful in fulfilling what God has promised to us through his Holy Word, the experience that gives us hope even in life’s most difficult circumstances:

- “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that fears him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.” – Lamentations 3:22-26.

Lord, to whom shall we go? Peter’s question may have sounded familiar, since these are the words we sing as we come into the presence of God’s Word in worship. As the disciples affirmed their faith in Jesus as the one who has the “words of eternal life,” so do we affirm that we look to God’s Word as the source of our faith and trust, in comparison with those who turn their backs on Jesus and turn their attention to other words and other messages that offer hope that may sound attractive but cannot and does not endure. We affirm as God’s people that it is God’s Word that unites us, God’s Word that gives us hope, and God’s Word that is the only message that we will trust and obey.

- “Whether it is sung by the choir or a cantor or the congregation, the verse is usually addressed to Christ, who meets us here. The passage from John 6:68, included in most settings of Holy Communion, is paradigmatic: ‘Lord,’ we say to Jesus along with Peter, ‘to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’ Indeed, those words of life are about to be read to us; that Life-giving One is here with us in the reading.” – Lorraine Brugh and Gordon Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly*.

We place our trust and confidence in God’s Word not only because we know that it is a word that endures long after other words have faded away, but because it is the Word that brings us the message of life in a world that is surrounded by messages of death; it brings us the word of hope when other words overwhelm us with despair; and it brings us the good news that God is with us always even when we may feel lost and abandoned. It is the faith that we share whenever we join together in asking “Lord, to whom shall we go?”, knowing that the faith that binds us together is that which we share as people who continue to place our hope in God’s eternal word.

- “We yearn for words of eternal life in part because the evidence of death is so very present. We stand in faith and hope, but not yet in hope fulfilled. Indeed, in some ways, like the disciples so long ago, while we believe and have experienced that Jesus holds the promise, still we don’t yet fully know what the promise will one day mean.” – Janet Hunt.

Jesus’ “words of eternal life” give us the confidence that death is not the end of our the relationship that God establishes with us in baptism, which brings about *“forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it”* (*Small Catechism*). Jesus’ eternal word is also the basis for our hope for today, both our *“strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow”* (ELW Hymn 733). The “eternal life” that is ours in Jesus Christ is not only a future promise – it is a present reality.

- “The great mystery of the spiritual life – the life in God – is that we don’t have to wait for it as something that will happen later. Jesus says: ‘Dwell in me as I dwell in you.’ It is this divine in-dwelling that is eternal life. It is the active presence of God at the center of my living – the movement of God’s Spirit within us – that gives us the eternal life.” – Henri Nouwen.

In the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman*, the confrontation between Sgt. Foley and Zack Mayo reaches its climax when Foley encourages Mayo to quit naval aviator training, telling him that *"you can forget it – you're out!"* But Mayo refuses to quit, refuses to acknowledge that he had no future in the military, because *"I've got nowhere else to go... I've got nothing else."* The words of Peter proclaim that there is no alternative for us as well, that we have nowhere else to go to find the words of eternal life that only Jesus can provide. When we have decided to follow Jesus, there is "no turning back"; like Paul, we *"press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."*

- "Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ. Let those of us who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained." – Philippians 3:12-16.

People choose Snapchat because of its ephemeral nature, so that the words that they share will not last far longer than they desire. Words there are shared online tend to endure far longer than we may realize, and for some people that can bring negative consequences. But even the most well-preserved electronic words cannot endure forever, nor can they convey the message of eternal life that comes from only one source: the one who is *"the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14). Others may seek after other words, but for us there is nowhere else to go: only the Word of God that is ours in Jesus Christ is the Word of eternal life that in which we can place all of our trust and confidence. The only place for us to go is *"on Christ, the solid rock [that we] stand – all other ground is sinking sand."* Amen.