

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 26, 2022**

**ULTIMA:
OR, THE END IS NEAR**

1 Peter 4:7-11

Well, this is it. My sermon two weeks ago was my *penultimate* sermon as your pastor, *penultimate* being Latin for “that which is almost last.” Today’s message is the *ultima*, the finale, the one coming at the end. Not the ultimate in the sense of being better than all the rest, it is simply the last in 25 years of having the privilege of speaking to you from God’s Word.

By the way, there is a precedent in the Bible for giving a long farewell sermon. You can read about it in Acts 20. Paul was in the city of Troas, on his third missionary journey. On his last night there, since he was planning to leave the next day, he kept on preaching until midnight. (If I were to do that I’m pretty sure I would be talking to myself, because I would be the only one here!) Paul, however, still had an audience. Among those listening to him was a young man named Eutychus (he was probably just a teenager) who, not unlike some of us, had some trouble staying awake in church. The longer Paul talked, the sleepier Eutychus became, until he was sound asleep.

The believers in Troas weren’t meeting in a church building like ours. They were meeting in an upstairs room in a house, and Eutychus was sitting in a third-story window. After falling asleep, he fell from the third floor to the ground below.

By the grace and power of God, the story had a happy ending for Eutychus. When they picked him up off the ground, he was dead. But Paul threw himself on Eutychus, gave him a big hug, and God restored Eutychus to life. They went back upstairs, had something to eat, and then Paul picked up where he left off and kept on talking until morning.

Fear not, I’m not going to do that today. Even though none of you are sitting in a third-story window, I don’t want to risk any Eutychuses. ☺ But I do have some parting words I want to share with you all. For some biblical perspective, let’s turn to 1 Peter 4:7-11. As always, let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

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“The end of all things is near.” No, it’s not the end of my 25 years as your pastor that Peter has in mind. This *is* the end of a chapter, a 25-year chapter in the life of our church, but it is *not* the end of all things. (I know you know that; I just want to be sure you know that I know it, too!) We’ll come back to what Peter means a little later.

We have been through a lot in the last 25 years. Things like Y2K hysteria, the nightmare of 9-11, and the war in Afghanistan. Building Phase 2 of our church facilities. Planting a daughter church. It didn’t take root and grow the way we hoped, but a lot of good things came from it. We’ve experienced lots of highs and lows, comings and goings, and joys and sorrows over the

years – births, baptisms, graduations, marriages, and promotions, as well as divorces, illnesses, suffering, loss, and the deaths of loved ones.

One of the defining experiences of my life was what I went through – what Mary Sue and our family went through, what we went through as a church family – in 2008 and beyond when I had brain surgery to remove an acoustic neuroma and then suffered a traumatic brain injury that could have led to my death. And yet, by God’s grace, here I am! Yes, I lost my hearing in my left ear. But by God’s grace, I can still hear in my right ear. Yes, I had serious balance issues and had to learn to walk again. But by God’s grace, I can walk and ride a bike and do most of the things I used to be able to do.

Out of my own experience of suffering, I learned at least two invaluable lessons. First, I came to understand grace in a way I had never understood it before. I learned it from Mary Sue, and from others, too, but mostly from Mary Sue, who modeled grace and love to me in my season of extremity in such a beautiful way. I was practically helpless. But even when I could do next to nothing for myself, she faithfully, sacrificially, graciously cared for me. Her example of grace when I needed it most both opened my eyes and changed my life. I am so thankful for it. For *her*.

Second, through that experience of suffering, I gained a deeper understanding of compassion for others in their experiences of suffering. I really believe compassion, like love, joy, peace and all the rest, is a fruit of the Spirit that God wants all of us to develop and express in our lives. Because of what I went through in that time, as well as my ongoing struggle with chronic daily headaches that are my constant companion, I have become more empathetic, sympathetic, and compassionate toward others in their experiences of suffering.

In the EPC, we have what are called “Transitional Pastors.” I have a dear friend who served two years as a Transitional Pastor in Philadelphia for a church without a pastor. Now he is doing the same thing for a church in Washington state. The purpose of a Transitional Pastor is to help a church work through conflicts, make some hard decisions, and prepare the way for a new pastor. As I think back on the last 25 years, I feel like I have been a transitional pastor, but in a different way. Our church has been in a constant state of transition since its earliest years. Because of the transient nature of this area, people are constantly coming and going (and, in some cases, coming back again!). We are continually saying goodbye to members of our church family as they move on to their next assignment or to the next season of life. At the same time, we are continually blessed to welcome newcomers into the life of our church family. The fact that we are constantly in transition has shaped our life together over the years.

We have experienced a lot of transitions in our church staff. In the last 25 years, we’ve had seven full-time youth directors or youth pastors: Nelson Chapman, Dan Rose, Justin Sembler, Nathanael de Poix, Jarrett Van Tine, Mike Bittenbender, and now Pastor Chris. In addition, we’ve had a couple of “interim youth directors:” Adam and Rita Rice filled the gap for us after Nelson left to go to seminary in 1999 until Dan came in 2001, and Mike and Auline Platt filled a void after Nathanael left in 2009. Julie Cloutier served as our Children’s Ministry

Director for 12 years, until she stepped down in 2020. Now Pastor Chris fills that role, overseeing both children's and youth ministry.

One area where there has been great stability in leadership is our music ministry. In the history of our church, we've had only two Music Directors: Dan Franssell and Adam Rice. Dan served for almost the first 20 years of our church's life, and Adam has been the main music man for the last 16 years. All the while, Pam Osborne and Beth Mailand have been our organist and pianist, Pam since the beginning and Beth for the last 30 years or more. Wow! What blessings they all have been!

When our family first moved to Virginia in 1997, our kids were 14, 10, and 5. Erin was just starting high school at West Springfield; Lindsay was entering 6th grade at Immanuel Christian School; and Nate was starting kindergarten at ICS. Now, 25 years later, they are all married and established in their adult lives. Mary Sue and I have four grandchildren, whom we love to pieces. We look forward to seeing more of them in retirement. We rejoice that all three of our kids and their spouses love Jesus and are following Him.

Many of you know this, but some of you may not have heard that by God's grace Mary Sue and I have sold our home in West Springfield. We are renting it back until the end of July. We are building a townhome in Atlee, Virginia, near Richmond (the mailing address is actually Mechanicsville), and are on track to close on it in mid-July. There is an EPC church about five minutes from our new home. We actually found the church before we decided to land there. We felt strongly that we should find a church home before deciding where to live in retirement, and we believe God led us to this church and to the community where we will live.

I hope you don't mind me taking time to share these personal thoughts and reflections this morning.

When Peter says: "The end of all things is near" (4:7), he uses the same word that both Jesus and John the Baptist used in their announcements that "The kingdom of heaven (or of God) is near" (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15). As we saw two weeks ago, the kingdom of God – His reign in the hearts and lives of His people – came in the person of Jesus. It is here. The kingdom of God has arrived. But it is not yet fully here. There is more to come. It will come in its completeness when Jesus returns in power and glory.

Because of Jesus' first coming, Peter understood that the end is near, even if he didn't know when the end would actually come. Peter recognized that our perspective is not the same as God's, since God transcends time and space, and we do not. For God, as Peter points out in 2 Peter 3:8, "a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." Even if, like Peter, we don't know when the end will come, we know that we are living in what the Bible calls "the last days", which began with the first coming of Jesus. So, the entire period between the first coming of Jesus in the past and His second coming in the future *is* "the last days."

When the end will come, we don't know. What we do know is that every day we live brings us one day closer to the day of Christ's return, when it will be true that "the kingdom of this

world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). Amen, Lord, let it be so!

In the meantime, what are we to do? What kind of people are we to be as followers of Jesus in this world? Let’s look very quickly at what Peter says:

First, he says in verse 7, we are to be clear-minded and self-controlled so that we can pray.

We live in extraordinary times. These are serious times for the world, for America, and for the church. It is no time for fuzzy thinking. It is no time to be thrown off-balance by ideas or arguments that appeal to our emotions but are not grounded in the truth. It is no time to be confused or deceived into believing lies.

God does not want you to be like a leaf blowing in the wind, tossed around by every new idea or doctrine or philosophy. He wants us to be clear-minded. He wants us to keep our heads, even when people around us are losing theirs. He wants us to have a clear and accurate understanding of the times in which we live, so we will know what to believe and what to do. He wants us to look at all of life through the lens of the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and to set our hearts and minds on things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:1-2), so we can keep things in proper perspective.

He wants us to be clear-minded and self-controlled *so that we can pray*. So that we can pray according to His will. God wants us to pay attention to what is happening in the world and to what He is doing in the world. He wants us to see things from His perspective so that we will know how to pray. And then do it. As *The Message* says: “Stay wide-awake in prayer.”

Second, we are to make love our highest priority. Look at verse 8: “Above all, love each one deeply.” *The Message* says: “Love each other as if your life (depends) on it.” With every fiber of your being, love one another. Let love be something you do, something you put into action, not simply something you feel.

One reason love is so important is because it “covers a multitude of sins” (4:8). Forgiveness is an act of love. And we are to love one another by forgiving one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32).

John Stott makes this comparison between people and fish. Fish, he says, were made for water. God created fish to live and thrive in water. What about us? If fish were meant for water, what are human beings made for? You could give a scientific answer and talk about oxygen and the atmospheric conditions necessary for human life. In a spiritual and relational sense, though, Stott says the biblical answer is love. We are made for love because God is love. When God created us in His own image, He gave us the capacity to love and be loved. So, we fulfill our destiny in loving God, in loving our neighbors, and in loving each other as Jesus has loved us. (Adapted from John Stott, “Freedom,” *Preaching Today*, Tape 102.)

Don’t ever turn off “the faucet of love” (Paul Cedar). Keep on loving one another. Keep on loving one another well. Look around for that person who needs to be loved and cared for,

because God means this church to be a place where every person counts. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16:14: “Do everything in love.” *Everything*.

Third, practice hospitality (4:9), which is an expression of love. The Greek word *philoxenia* literally means “love (or friendship) to strangers.” Peter is simply saying that we are to open our hearts and homes not just to our friends, but to others who may be in need. Our homes are to be places of refuge, places of welcome, and places of ministry.

Oh, and we are to do it without grumbling. Philippians 2:14 tells us to *do everything without grumbling*. I don’t know about you, but I have some work to do in this area.

Fourth, use your gifts (4:10-11). Whatever it is, whether it is a gift that involves speaking or serving or both, use it. Use it to glorify God. Use it “so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

The end of all things is near. It may be closer than you think.

For me, this is the end of my 25 years as the Pastor of this church. Never forget that God loves you – each of you – with an everlasting love, and underneath you are the everlasting arms (Deuteronomy 33:27). *His* everlasting arms.

Never forget that God’s grace is sufficient for you. Sufficient for salvation. Sufficient for life. Sufficient in suffering. Sufficient in life and in death.

Let this church always be a place of grace where Jesus is Lord and every person counts.

I love you all.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.