

## YOU HAD ME AT HELLO

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*Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen."  
(Nehemiah 8:6)*

Soren Kierkegaard was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher who is often called "the father of Existentialism." He was also a Christian, and thus a frequent hearer and occasional critic of church sermons. At one point he wrote of his experience in the pew:

When a preacher has luckily reached the third point of his sermon and already is so far along in it that one who knows the proportions of clerical elocution ventures with a good deal of security to assume that he is about to hum and say Amen – then it may be anguishing when he, instead of pronouncing the significant Amen, becomes gossipy, and adds one period after another, while the knowing hearer may say that essentially the sermon is over and essentially the Amen has been said. This is an example of accidental length, recognizable by the fact that it begins where, essentially viewed, the Amen should have been said.

Kierkegaard then goes on to compare the lengthy, "accidental" portions of sermons to an experience that perhaps you know. Imagine this: You host a dinner party. The evening advances, the food is eaten, and the conversation begins to wane. You send all the polite non-verbal cues to your guests that it's time to go, but they are deaf to the signals. You stand up and stretch. You clear the table. You start the dishwasher. You do all but come downstairs in your pajamas. The party is finished. The significant Amen has been said, but there sit the guests for another hour. This, said Kierkegaard, *is like the sermon which begins where the Amen should be said*. Both the dinner party and the sermon provide *examples of accidental length, the sign of which is the negative category, beginning when one should stop*.

Ezra the priest certainly hadn't read Kierkegaard's words, and he probably wouldn't have heeded them if he had. Twenty-three hundred years before the time of Kierkegaard, the Jews had recently returned to Jerusalem. Their long ordeal in Babylonian exile had ended. They were home. Their first task would be to rebuild the Temple. In the Book of Nehemiah, we read how the renewal of life in Jerusalem inspired the Jews to renew their covenant relationship with the living God, and experience anew the power of the Lord who brought them out of their bondage in Egypt and home from their exile in Babylon. So the people gathered in the city square before the Water Gate, and Ezra the priest stood on a high wooden platform that they had made for the occasion. All eyes were upon Ezra as he opened the law of Moses. He began reading in the early morning and continued until midday – about six hours in all.

At one point in the sermon the people lifted up their hands and cried "*Amen, Amen.*" Without exception Biblical commentators find great reverence in how the people reacted to Ezra's sermon. Indeed, they conclude that the shouts of Amen were signs of approval, even a desire to hear more. But I wonder: could it be that the cries of "Amen, Amen" – at least among some of them – meant "Stop, Stop. Enough already. We get it." Was Ezra deaf to the signal? Apparently so, because he kept right on going, until finally picking up on the not-so polite, non-verbal cues: *all the people wept when they heard the words of the law*. Ezra finally pronounced the significant Amen by saying, *Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those*

*for whom nothing is prepared.* The sermon may have been interminable, but Ezra eventually wrapped it up with a cheerful message: Go forth into the city, he said. Live your life and be God's faithful people. Enjoy the blessings of the land and share them with the less fortunate. *Amen.*

Nearly five-hundred years after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, it was Jesus' turn to preach the sermon. We've heard in the Gospel of Luke how on a preaching tour through Galilee, Jesus stopped in his hometown of Nazareth and went to the synagogue. It was the Sabbath, and Jesus was to be the guest preacher. He unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and began to read: "*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.*" The passage from Isaiah would have been well known to the Jews of Jesus' day. They would have understood it as a prophecy foretelling the coming of the Messiah. The key word, "anointed," would have rung a bell in their minds. They would have thought, "Ah, this is about the coming king God has promised us. This is about the One whom God will send to fulfill the dreams of Ezra and Nehemiah and all of us faithful Jews."

When Jesus finished reading he sat down to teach, and all eyes were upon him just as they were fixed on Ezra centuries ago. What would the hometown boy say? How long would he go? He began the sermon with these words: "*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" And with that he finished the sermon. It was a one-liner. Jesus served up what has to go down on record as one of the shortest sermons ever preached. Why? It's not that he was a practitioner of today's prevailing pulpit etiquette. The current thinking goes that our postmodern brains have been so molded by the internet that anything longer than a short little talk will exceed the bandwidth of our attention span. Thus, the preacher or the professor or any orator who forges past the ten-minute mark enters Kierkegaard's negative zone of *beginning when one should stop*. Whether or not you agree with the current trend (and apparently I don't, since I'm told I frequently pass the ten-minute mark twice in the same sermon), it doesn't explain the brevity of Jesus' one-line homily. Indeed, on other occasions he went on all day, and would have given even old Ezra a run for the money.

Why then at Nazareth did Jesus speak only nine words? Actually, the case could be made that his sermon, at nine words long, was nine-times longer than it needed to be. You see, what he was doing by saying, "*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,*" was making a messianic claim. He was declaring that he himself was the living ultimate Amen to all the hopes and dreams of the Jewish people. The great sermon that God was preaching to the world through the particular history of Israel was reaching its climax in Jesus. His mere presence was not a significant amen to any one prayer, but the ultimate Amen to all the prayers of the people and promises of God. A lengthy discourse wasn't needed. Jesus read the text about the Messiah, then sat down and essentially said, "Hello."

I'm reminded here of a movie scene that contains what has been judged one of the great lines in Hollywood history. It comes from the 1996 film *Jerry Maguire*. Jerry Maguire, portrayed by Tom Cruise, finally decides that Rene Zellweger's character, Dorothy, is the love of his life. He goes to her home, interrupts a party by saying "hello," and publicly launches into a lengthy declaration of his love. She finally cuts him off, even telling him to "*Shut up. You had me at hello.*" The point is, merely showing up and saying hello was all the sermon he needed to preach. And so it was with Jesus. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He came to his own. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. When Jesus stretched out his arms upon the hard wood of the cross and said, "It is finished," he spoke the great cosmic Amen to God's work of salvation. Henceforward, all sermons would be footnotes to Jesus.

Allow me to anticipate two objections. The first is this: Jesus and Nazareth were both long ago and far away. If salvation history came to a climax then and there, where does that leave us

who dwell in 21<sup>st</sup> century America? Many people today can't make the leap. Even if they concede that all these wonderful things may have happened back in those good-old Bible days, that was then and this is now. So the tendency is to look at Christianity with all the enthusiasm one might give to Tom Brady's playing in yet another Super Bowl, to say nothing of winning it. Enough, already! We've seen this act before. Amen, Amen. Here we have entered into the phase of accidental length. Who can be excited about endless footnotes?

Here's the second objection: if God *has* spoken the Amen of salvation, why then is the world in the mess that it is? It would seem that a good bit of the sermon still needs to be preached. Well, the sermon does still need to be preached. Far too much of the world has not heard or has failed to believe that the victory of life is won, and thus still thinks that the ways of sin and death win the day. Far too much of the world knows little of basic nutrition, and nothing of eating the fat and drinking the sweet wine as Ezra described. Indeed, given our current state of affairs, far too much of the world concludes that God – if God exists at all – does nothing and does not intervene.

Does God intervene in the world? In his First Letter to the Corinthians (12:12-31), Paul the Apostle wrote: *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.* God works in the world by merging his Spirit with our spirits. God merges his Spirit with our spirits through the Word and Sacraments, through prayer and worship, through the fellowship of the church. God merges his Spirit with our spirits and we become the Body of Christ. We become the eyes, ears, hands, and feet of Jesus connected with his great work of salvation. If Christ is the ultimate Amen, then each one of us is a significant Amen. Sometimes merely showing up and saying hello is the gift of life you can bring. Others may dare to stand on high wooden platforms and risk more words. Regardless of your calling – and a calling from God everyone has – you can be part of it. Your life can be part of the great ongoing chorus that sings Amen from the rising of the sun to its setting.

One of the great musical compositions of all time is George Frideric Handel's, *Messiah*. The conclusion of it all is a chorus that speaks just one word – you guessed it: *Amen*. Whenever church bulletins, concert programs, or album notes print out the texts of musical pieces, this one always looks a bit odd. Just one word. How long could it take? The choir is about to hum and say Amen. Yet in truth the chorus is nearly four minutes of unfolding, overlapping, intermingling, harmonious Amens, sung by individual sopranos, altos, tenors, and bases, who each form a section and then finally a single choir. The work is done, the prayer is said, the sermon is preached. But the Amen goes on and on.

And so it is with us. The great body of God's people in the world is like the Amen of Handel's final chorus in *Messiah*. We overlap and intermingle with an ongoing choir, even angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven. They have names like Ezra and Nehemiah, Isaiah and Paul, Handel and Kierkegaard. They have names like yours and mine. Regardless of name, place, or time, we are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it. We are the choristers showing up and singing Amen to the composition of God's salvation. So let the Amen sound from God's people again, because *the Spirit of the Lord is upon us. He has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us 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.*

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