

**THE SEVEN
FIRST WORDS
OF CHRIST**

Jim Somerville

© 2020

Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,
www.nurturingfaith.net.

Nurturing Faith is the book publishing arm of Good Faith Media (goodfaithmedia.org).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-63528-094-4

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To the Members and Friends of
Richmond's First Baptist Church:

You inspire me.

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps you have been to one of those Good Friday services that focused on the seven *last* words of Christ, with seven different preachers taking as their texts what Jesus said from the cross: three sayings from Luke, three from John, and one that is shared by both Matthew and Mark. I've been to those services. I appreciate them. But I've also noticed that the Jesus in Luke's Gospel, for example, is a good bit different from the Jesus in Matthew. One says, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." The other says, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?" It's a reminder that the Gospels are different and that each evangelist is telling his own story of Jesus, in his own way, for his own reasons.

When I saw that most of the Gospel readings for Epiphany, Year B, were from the first chapter of Mark, I wondered if I could put together a sermon series on the seven *first* words of Christ in that particular Gospel. I asked myself: What would happen if we looked at the opening chapter of this earliest Gospel and let Mark tell the story of Jesus in his way? Of the many things Jesus said in his life, which would Mark want to include in his Gospel, especially at the outset? If what Mortimer Adler says is true, that the most important parts of any book are the beginning and the end,¹ then what would happen if we paid attention not only to the seven last words of Christ but also the seven first?

So I went through Mark 1 with a fine-toothed comb, and what I found was some words and some deeds, but in the end seven distinct episodes from that action-packed chapter: 1) Jesus is baptized; 2) he begins to preach, 3) calls some disciples, 4) teaches in the synagogue, 5) heals the sick, 6) defines his mission, and 7) cures a leper. In order to include Transfiguration Sunday, I combined 5 and 6 and added the Transfiguration story from

Mark 9, but in the end the series came together so well that I've decided to share it in this little book. I've had to do some pushing and pulling to package the lectionary readings for Epiphany, Year B, as the "Seven First Words of Christ," but I don't think I've done violence to the text. My hope is that by the end of it you will not only have a fuller appreciation of Mark 1, but also a brighter and clearer picture of the Christ he wants us to know.

Finally, this may be a good place to express my gratitude to Bill and Elizabeth Childrey, who provided the funds to turn this idea into a book. May their generosity be rewarded by a deeper knowledge of the Christ who inspired these pages.

—*Jim Somerville*

Note

¹Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Touchstone, 1972), pp. 32-35.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The Rev. Dr. James Green Somerville is pastor of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia. He is only the sixteenth senior pastor since the church was founded in 1780. A gifted preacher and a seasoned pastor, he has preached on the Chicago-based “30 Good Minutes,” the internationally broadcast Day1 radio program, and was one of the featured preachers at the Festival of Homiletics at the Washington National Cathedral in 2004. His articles and sermons have been published in *Christian Century*, *Leadership*, *The Upper Room*, *Preaching*, *Lectionary Homiletics*, and *Preaching Great Texts*. He was awarded the Clyde T. Francisco Preaching Award while a student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Jim served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, DC, for seven years before coming to Richmond. Prior to that, Jim served as pastor of Wingate Baptist Church in Wingate, North Carolina, for nine years. While attending seminary, Jim was pastor of First Baptist Church in New Castle, Kentucky.