

We're going to start with a little quiz this morning, take you back to your high school English days. First topic on the table, famous first lines of novels. Alright, let's see how we do. Number one, "It was the best of time, it was the worst of times." Bingo. *A Tale of Two Cities*. We'll go a little bit more of a deep cut for this next one, "It was a pleasure to burn." *Fahrenheit 451*. Short and sweet, "Call me Ishmael." *Moby Dick*, full stop do not recommend personally. Anyway, one of my personal faves, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." *Pride & Prejudice*. Ok, last one for this category, and apt for this time of year, "Marley was dead, to begin with." Double dose of Dickens for us there, *A Christmas Carol*.

Ok, we did pretty well, but now we're going to flip to the opposite category. Famous *last* lines from novels. I'm going to aim to not be too spoilery with any of these, but let's see if the last lines are as recognizable as the first. A little Americana classic first, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." My favorite book of all time, *The Great Gatsby*. There's a hint in this one if you know the book, "He loved Big Brother." Ah the creepy vibe of *1984*. Next up, a Southern classic, "Tomorrow, I'll think of some way to get him back. After all, tomorrow is another day." Scarlett O'Hara, bless her heart, *Gone With the*

Wind. We'll go modern day classic, "All was well." The very last lines of the Harry Potter series. And we'll wrap it up with the most fitting, though obvious, "And so, as Tiny Tim observed, 'God bless Us, every one!'" *A Christmas Carol* has easily the best first and last line ever.

It's amazing how quintessential some of these quotes become. Even if you've never read the book, you probably know some of them, and the beauty of the perfect opening or closing line is that even without knowing the full story, those words make you *know* what is coming or what has been. When you hear "Marley was dead to begin with," you *know* this is going to be a ghost story. The last line of Gatsby tells you, here has been a book about regret and longing and the inescapable pull of the past. Somehow, in a few words, an entire story has been encapsulated. Now, of course, being the reader that I am, I would say still read the whole book, but the essence, the heart of the message, sometimes it's right there from the beginning, or sometimes all you need to read is the last page. Though if you are one of those people, please don't tell me. My heart can't take that.

So, now that we've primed our brains with a little storytelling vibe this morning, we're going to take it a step further and write our own little story, maybe not with those quintessential first lines, but a story nonetheless. On the window ledges, there are pieces of paper. I invite you to grab one

and then find a pen or a pencil, and obviously if you're online with us this morning, please do the same thing, find a piece of paper and something to write with as we begin this journey. Now, you're going to be writing kind of a timeline this morning and you are welcome to write that in whatever format you choose. You can make it a spiral, a flowchart, a hodgepodge, a legit timeline, however you're brain works best is what I want you to go with for this exercise.

First and foremost, wherever you are starting your story, write your full name and your birthday. If there are little tidbits or family lore around your name or your birthday, jot down a note about that too. Mine will feature the initials TNT, the initials my dad *wanted* me to have, only to have my mother declare I wasn't going to be named after an AC/DC song. And of course the word, tiny, because that's how I got my name. Next, write down the first two teachers' names you can think of from elementary school, or the name of your elementary school, or both. Mrs. R. Kominick and Mrs. Trombley at Dundee Elementary for me. One of the few teachers who had all three of us in school and the teacher that loved me through one of the hardest years of my life.

Ok, let's move on to those lovely years of life, middle and high school. Write down your least favorite class from high school and the name

of your middle school best friend. Chemistry and Nicole. I could go on and on about why I hated Chemistry, but Nicole was one of my favorite people in the world through the rest of school. One of the first people to make me think Ohio isn't so bad because she moved to Dundee from there when we were in sixth grade.

Alright, let's rapid fire some of these now. Write down, your first car. Where you went after high school. The first person to break your heart. Some of the places that you have lived, different states, towns, streets. The names of your pets, the names of your kids and grandkids. Your best vacation memory. The person you have lost and miss every single day. Something on your bucket list. Where you were on 9/11. Something you regret. A couple of your favorite movies. A date that means something to you that might not mean anything to anyone else, but you know what it is. An anniversary, the day your team won the World Series, a special birthday. Now, finally, somewhere in your timeline write down Matthew 1.23 and Matthew 28.20. Hang tight to those sheets and let me explain why we just did what we did.

Our gospel today, much like any good first few lines of a novel, lays out the message of what is to come in crystal clear clarity. Matthew 1.23: "They shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" Right

from the jump, Matthew tells his audience and us just who Jesus is going to be. This isn't just any baby to be born, this is God incarnate, God taking on flesh to walk amongst us, feel what we feel, experience all the slings and arrows, joys and wonders, sorrows and setbacks of being human. And then Matthew ends his gospel with these words, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” A reiteration of the same promise, that baby grew into a man, who was the Messiah who remained Emmanuel and who continues to remain Emmanuel for all of God's children. From the very start to the very end, from “In the beginning...” to the “end of the age,” and for every moment inbetween, God remains, God dwells, God is with us, Emmanuel, dwelling in the world, dwelling in our hearts, dwelling in each and every moment of our lives.

And thus we return to our timelines...the day of your birth, Emmanuel. In your first breath, that first echo of the Holy Spirit. In your first scream of what in the world is happening to me and why is it so cold? At school desks, whether you loved that teacher or couldn't stand them, in spelling tests and at recess, in the joy and in the angst, Emmanuel. That best friend, Emmanuel. God's love shown in another. Your first heart break, Emmanuel. You are enough and I am there through the pain and the hurt. That first car, Emmanuel, keeping you safe and in one piece, despite how

many unsafe things you did in that car. Your kids, your grandkids, your pets, your family, Emmanuel. God's love over and over and over again. In the missing of our loved ones, Emmanuel, God is with us and with them, to the end of the age. In our bucket lists and in our regrets, in our hopes and in our sometimes shattered dreams. On that day you can never forget, for better or for worse, Emmanuel. God is our beginning, God is our end, God is our middle, our inbetween, our everything. There is not a moment of your life that God has not been there, and there is not a moment of your life where God is not going to be there. Woven throughout every step of your timeline and all those moments we didn't write down, one word, Emmanuel. God is with us. That is the promise we receive today, and the promise we are about to receive this week in the Christ child, and the promise we receive every single day of our lives.

Our lives are a story, written by us through all that is to come and all that has been. They tell stories of love and loss, joy and pain, journeys and homecomings. But no matter the story, no matter the journey, for each of us, the first and last line remains the same...*Emmanuel*...**AMEN!!!**