

Every Ending is a New Beginning
 Isaiah 64:1-4; Mark 13:24-37
 November 29, 2020

It was one year ago, on the first Sunday of Advent, that I came to be your pastor. What a year it has been! We got to worship together inside for 3 ½ months, and then covid shut things down. So here we are at Advent again.

Advent originated in the 4th century AD, and comes from the Latin word meaning, “to come.” So, what is to come this time around? More on that shortly. Today is one of the most important Sundays in the church year, and I’m so glad that we can be together to worship in person, for those who were able.

The first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of a new year in the church. Today the cycle of liturgical and gospel readings and rituals begins anew. Some people such as the Celts actually began a couple weeks ago on November 15 and runs for forty days.

The rest of us begin our Advent journey today. So Happy New Year! Every year when we come to this day in the lectionary on the first Sunday, we hear a gospel about an ending. It often makes us uncomfortable. This year it’s Mark 13:24-37. According to St. Mark, Jesus says,

“In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”

There are people who may be tempted to close their bibles and not read any further after that! Please don’t. I know it sounds like the end of the world, the grand finale. That’s certainly how many have heard the gospel stories associated with the First Sunday of Advent over the centuries.

The early Christians, including the Apostle Paul, fully expected Christ to return within their own lifetimes. It didn’t happen, at least in the way they expected. But there is more at stake here. For most of us, I suspect, there is often some fear and anxiety about the end of life and perhaps endings and transitions in general. In a year of covid, perhaps even more so.

As a young man, when I heard the preacher preach on the end times, I was afraid that if Jesus came back, somehow I would not be among them. After all, when he got around to separating the sheep from the goats, there was probably a bit more of the “goat” in me than sheep! There was a movie series out about that time based on the book, Left Behind, which underscored the fear and dread, where Jesus would come back, and one person would be taken to heaven, while one was left behind.

But what if there is something more positive in this story? Something to be gained today from this ancient text? Maybe today’s gospel is more about a new beginning after one kind of end or

another. Maybe beginnings and endings are two sides of the same coin, recognizable moments of growth and transformation in Christ that deepens our life and enriches our beliefs. After all, it is Christ who joins and unites our endings and beginnings in this life and in the next.

So every beginning finds its fullness in an ending, and every ending is the context for a new beginning. Christ called himself the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Perhaps that's why the new church year and this season of Advent begin with a story about an ending.

I like the way the poet T.S. Eliot puts it—

“We shall not cease from exploration,
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started,
and know the place for the first time.” --T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

Maybe it is a poetic way of saying every ending is a new beginning. We just didn't know it at the time. Today's gospel confronts us with a necessary ending that makes space for a new beginning. It reveals a darkness from which new light will shine. It shakes us awake to watch for the One who is always coming, if only we had the eyes to see. That is the gift and good news of this First Sunday of Advent.

Sometimes we need to wake up and face the necessary endings so something new can be born. It happened for Nicodemus when he encountered Jesus and discovered a new beginning. What are your Advent stories? Advent is not just a season of the year, but a season throughout our lives – a series of endings and beginning -- some happy, some sad, but ultimately all of them have been consecrated by Christ and woven into the fabric of faith.

Jesus is telling his audience that they will need to let go of their old view of life in order to embrace the new. He said in another place, “You cannot put new wine in old wineskins.” Perhaps Advent is like a taste of new wine. At any rate, Advent can create a space for a new beginning.

This Sunday offers an assurance and a promise -- the assurance that it is safe to let go of the old stories and fears that might not serve us well anymore, and the promise that this is not the end, but the context for a new beginning – a positive, hope filled beginning, which would be quite an accomplishment during this time of covid, would it not?

We hear it in John the Baptist's words, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” a preparation that opens us to “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” We see it in Mary, the one who gives birth to a new life and a new story, the one who will give birth to flesh and blood, not only in her day but in ours. Maybe this year we can create a bit more space for a new story than we did in previous years.

Let me just venture a guess and say we are all ready for covid to come to an end, or at least see its' power greatly diminished. There has been far too much death; far too much suffering; too much economic loss and mental anguish. We are ready for a new chapter and a brighter future. It will come to an end, and there will be room for a new beginning. This is the work of Advent –to prepare us for new beginnings.

What will you put in the place of death and suffering when it has past? What will be the light that shines in the dark places of your life and those of friends and loved ones? Think of the people you have longed to hug and see again. Think of those with whom you have longed to share a meal. The grandchildren you have missed seeing. The trips that have had to be put off, but maybe in the future you can take. Think of worshipping together and singing.

We are longing. We are waiting, hoping and praying. We are doing the work of Advent, and know it or not, we are praying for Christ to come again, just in case we missed it the first time. These words and experiences of Advent are not new to us today, but as old as the prophets talking and praying for the One who is to come.

To be human is to hope – to hope for a better world, a better tomorrow, a better, richer, more fulfilling life – and not just for us, but for all people. There are verses from our scripture today that give me a lot of hope. In Isaiah we hear, “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait.” 64:4 God works in those who wait.

In Mark, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” 13:31 “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.” 13:33 These are words that too often have been spoken in a rather ominous tone throughout Christian history, as if to scare the daylights out of some who may not have measured up to God’s commandments and statutes, which would be pretty much everyone!

As a younger man, I heard these words with fear and trembling. But what if these words could take on a more hopeful, positive tone? Hear Isaiah’s words again from a hopeful perspective: “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait.” 64:4

I suppose it depends on how you view God – whether you see God as angry and vengeful, coming in wrath to condemn -- or whether you understand God as the One who comes in love to comfort God’s own people; to remind them that they are not alone, and that no matter how bad things get, life and love will ultimately prevail.

Every ending is a new beginning. Even to die is to live in Christ, as Paul observes. Don’t be afraid for the coming of God. Welcome it. Pray for it. Long for that day. Perhaps that day is closer than you think – perhaps as soon as you realize that God is both here for you now *and* in the future.

The apocalyptic literature is not usually depicted in a positive light, but perhaps the better part of wisdom teaches that there is nothing to fear. Ponder the words of that beloved hymn, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel –

*O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer,
Our spirits by Thine advent here.
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel*

At the end of all of our longing there is joy. At the end of the night, there is day. At the time of death, there is life. Only life. “The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time,” as you heard from T.S. Eliot this morning.

There *will* be life after covid. Indeed, there *is* life – real life right now. There are joys large and small that even a pandemic cannot wipe away. So many of you have said as much, about things that bring you joy. Just talking to each other on the phone or seeing your face on Zoom is a great source of joy.

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Mark ends today’s reading this way – “And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (13:37) Keep awake ... Watch ... be alert ... be ready. These are the words of Advent. These are words of life. This is the work of the season for us to do, even when it is difficult.

God has promised to wipe away every tear from our eye. Only if we travel the advent road can we be ready to embrace the message at Christmas that Christ will surely bring to you – new perspectives, new insights and ideas, new hope, new life. The Advent road is waiting for you. Let’s get started. Amen

Isaiah 64:1-4

64:1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--

64:2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

64:3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

64:4 From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait.

Mark 13:24-37

13:24 "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,

13:25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

13:26 Then they will see 'the Son of God coming in clouds' with great power and glory.

13:27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

13:28 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.

13:29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

13:30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

13:31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

13:32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only God.

13:33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

13:34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

13:35 Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,

13:36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

13:37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."