

Endings and Beginnings

Welcome to the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new church year when we shall pick up with St Luke as he shares with us the story he has come to know in Jesus.

Now a new church year is nothing like a new calendar year.

A new church year brings us that much closer to God's ultimate kingdom, that much more is asked of us in living out our faith, in taking on the foolish message that love is stronger than hate, that forgiveness destroys revenge, that peace between enemies is not only possible, it is inevitable.

And we mark this deepening journey with colors that are different: purple for royalty, purple for bruises.

Given the events of recent days, the purple, especially for bruises, is especially appropriate.

Not long ago, hundreds were injured and killed in Paris through savage attacks, and just the other day, things got especially scary when a Turkish missile killed three Russian airmen over Syria.

Not to be lost in all of this bloodshed was the attack by our own military on a hospital run by Doctors Without Borders in Afghanistan that killed over 30 patients and staff.

And while politicians are whipping up fear and xenophobia about refugees badly needing a safe place to call home, the fact remains that over 30,000 people are killed each year in America by the guns we so steadfastly refuse to regulate or control.

We don't have to go much farther than the front page or the evening news to see that violence seems to rule the day.

The often heard quote from Paris this week, echoed in all of those places where violence runs amok, is how difficult it is to prepare for Christmas in the face of such horrors.

Even those untouched by violence often share that sentiment simply because the news of it is never ending.

So you might expect this first Sunday in Advent, as we get to our gospel lesson, that at least today we'd hear a word of comfort, a sort of collective "there, there" from God to us.

Of course, as you know, we've got no such reading today.

Instead we are warned of fear and foreboding, of distress and the shaking of the heavens themselves.

It's all about endings, and not a word about cute babies or delighted parents or even a comforting "there there" from the almighty.

Truth be told, Christmas really isn't about cute babies and delighted parents after all.

Christmas is all about endings, and that's what Advent is trying to prepare us for.

But what kind of endings?

It's this....

Christmas is all about ending our way of doing things.

Just last week one of our members sent me an email inviting me to debate over how we see our world and the solutions to it.

This friend of mine comes from a position of common sense and good business judgment, all with the underlying philosophy that God helps those who help themselves.

And frankly, **that is** our way of doing things.

And why not?

How well have the powers of love and forgiveness and gentleness worked in our world?

Many can and do argue that these are fine feelings, but they just don't cut the mustard when face to face with life as it is.

That's exactly what's happening in Jeremiah this morning.

The people have been crushed, all hope is lost, and the power of God to make things better in the real world seems like a hopeless pipe dream.

But the prophet sees a shoot, a green leaf, sprouting from what for all the world looks like a dead as doornails tree trunk.

Just so is Christmas that shoot, that green leaf, budding on the dead wood of our way of doing things.

Christmas ends our way of doing things.

It ends tit for tat and getting what you deserve.

It ends "looking out for number one" and it ends karma too!

Christmas is God's doorway into an entirely new way to live life.

It is the doorway into the hard, but life-giving path, of acceptance and forgiveness, and gentleness, and peace.

This is not some kind of naïve sentimentality.

The cross stands just as firmly in the manger crib as it does at Golgotha, because to live this new way often leads to undeserved suffering, unwarranted injury, even to unjust death....the cross, you see, ensures that the full measure of this life is paid in full.

This new life that Christmas brings actually means being willing to die rather than to kill, to let go of loved ones rather than killing enemies, to trust that death is not the worst thing, because in Christ, death is no longer permanent, it is merely an interruption.

There are endings of all sorts.

There is the cosmic ending that so many look to the sky waiting for: the actual and literal end of all that is.

There are endings of a political nature with regimes coming and going, the nations fighting one another to the gory end.

There are also personal endings: whether it is a marriage that can no longer survive, or children who have grown and moved to distant places, or simply a body that no longer functions in a way that once seemed so natural.

What Advent invites us to see is that when we face any of these endings, we need not be afraid, but rather, that we look to Jesus and ask for the grace to follow his Way.

If it's the cosmic end that were worried about, he reminds us to hold our heads up high and wait with confidence.

If it's war or national security or ISIS that's got us so flustered that we start making enemies out of orphan refugees, he reminds us of the power, and the foolishness, of the way of the cross.

That terror cannot be defeated by more terror nor can death be defeated by more death.

No, it is willingness to take up our cross, as individuals, as communities, and yes, as a nation, to say to those who would harm us: "we forgive you."

"We will not retaliate."

"We will suffer death rather than inflict it."

This is what it means to be Christian in today's world.

Perhaps our friends in Paris, who feel so empty as they decorate Christmas trees in the aftermath of such horror can remember this.

Christmas is not about cute babies and delighted parents.

Christmas is about ending our way of running the planet.

Christmas is about the beginning of God's way of running things.

And perhaps that beginning is our hope.

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