

Beginning At The End

Today is the first Sunday in our new church year.

It's a year we shall spend with the author of the very first gospel to be written: the Gospel of Mark.

Strangely, this new year doesn't start at the beginning of Mark's story.

We start near the end of it!

Our new beginning — begins with Jesus warning us — about endings.

How odd that we come to this first week of a new year with the focus entirely on the end of all things.

But when you stop and think about it, it actually makes perfect sense.

It makes perfect sense because we can't even take the first step on our spiritual journey without coming to grips with the fact of endings.

Coming to grips with the fact that things as they are, things we are comfortable with, things warm and familiar, will not only end, but they must end if we're going to make any progress at all on our spiritual journey.

Which is just another way of saying, if we're going to become who we are meant to be.

This need to accept endings as a first step in necessary growth is playing out before us on the national stage.

It's every night's lead story.

Every morning paper's headline.

We have a president who has lost an election.

He lost by a lot.

Which, given the state of the country and the rollercoaster ride of his four years in office, is not really a surprise!

But he can't bring himself to accept the fact of this loss.

So he creates alternate realities that seek to justify his refusal to come face-to-face with his own ending, in this case, the end of his term.

It's not so terribly different for us when we refuse to come face-to-face with change in our life, with the vagaries of life, with our own mortality.

If we don't face these things, we cannot even begin the journey whose destination is to be in intimate relationship with God.

Whose destination is even unity with God

That's because endings crack us open.

Endings force us to come face-to-face with our own mortality.

With our own vulnerability.

With our need for God.

After all, when everything is hunky-dory and my life seems to be in complete control, who needs God?

But hunky-dory-ness and being in control are two of the most fleeting experiences in life!

The truth of our life is — we are mortal.

Meaning, no one gets out of this life alive.

Meaning, that but for the grace of God, we are all of us only walking piles of future dirt.

The implications of our true situation, once they are embraced, almost force us into relationship; with one another, and with God.

Because, if I'm here for just a limited time, if any day now something can happen that ends what I'm used to, that throws my routines for a loop, then that uncertainty, that contingency, really opens my eyes to the fact that I need you!

And I need God.

We don't even have to use our imagination to face the fact that we really aren't in control of anything.

Right here at home, just a week or so ago, our dear friend Father Mafi learned that his brother had a discussion with his family, went to bed, and didn't wake up.

Another fellow, in his 50's, a dear friend of one of our members, has just learned he has Stage 4 colon cancer.

One of our Hawaii National Guardsmen died two weeks ago of COVID.

Perhaps you saw his passing in the newspaper.

His dad died shortly before he did.

These two deaths leave one of our Filipina elders widowed, and now, deprived of her son.

This is all pretty tough stuff, especially when you consider that we are preparing for Christmas.

And yet, this is precisely how the early church prepared for Christmas.

No one back then was shopping online for month-long Black Friday sales.

No one back then was putting trees up in their homes or inflating rosie-cheeked red-suited men with white beards to float around their yard.

No!

The advent of God is terrifying!

Not because God is terrifying.

But because when that day comes, that inevitable day when we must surrender our love affair with controlling people, places and things, we become terrified!

And yet, the good news of God, if we are to really hear it, requires us to undergo this terror.

And so we take that deep breath.

Facing the terror of letting go.

Of surrender.

As we forgive what we thought could not be forgiven, or ask for that forgiveness.

And lo and behold, wonderful things suddenly begin to happen!

We find ourselves free to live the life of joy and peace and service that we were always meant to live in the first place!

Freed from our obsessions, our grievances, our hurts and suspicions, we find ourselves on a road paved with joy!

By facing our endings we find ourselves at a new beginning.

Thomas Merton reflected on these truths from his calling as a monk — one who was to live alone and apart — yet who is also called to care for God's good creation.

"The freedom of the Christian life is not freedom **from** time, but freedom **in** time.

It is the freedom to go out and meet God in the marvelously indescribable mystery of God's dance with us, here and now.

In this precise moment, God asks our cooperation in shaping the course of history so that our history may come to reflect divine truth, divine mercy, divine faithfulness.

Therefore it seems to me to be a solemn obligation of conscience at this moment of history to [align myself with the people and movements] ... that are intimately connected with the obligations I took on in my monastic vows.

The vow of poverty means to identify myself with people who are denied their rights and forced to live in abject misery.

The vow of obedience implies a deep concern for the most basic expression of God's will: loving God's truth and loving our neighbor." Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, modified.

Yes, I know, you and I aren't monks.

We aren't subject to vows of poverty, chastity or obedience.

And, yet, by virtue of our baptism, perhaps we are.

We are most definitely called to be in solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

We are called to recognize the humanity of all people, which leads to a life of chastity, because we stop treating people as objects to be exploited.

We are called to obey the commandments of God: to love God and our neighbor — as we define "our neighbor" as anyone in need.

This is the life for which Advent prepares us!

By bringing us face to face with our endings — endings which await each and everyone of us — we are given the grace to discover a new beginning.

May this season of Advent find you asking yourself, and me asking myself:

What's got me wrapped up or nervous?

What worries, fears, anxieties or hurts continue to hobble the life of freedom and joy that awaits us — just around the corner?

What forgiveness have I withheld, either in the asking for — or in the giving out?

These are Advent questions.

We ask them because ours is a God who lavishly pours out every good thing, and we need only unclench our fists, and open our hands, in order to receive every last drop.

"Because the grace of God is given to you in Christ Jesus, you are now enriched in him in every way, in speech and knowledge of every kind -- just as the testimony of Christ is now strengthened among you -- so therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift — as you wait with joyful expectation for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." 1Cor4-5.

Welcome to Advent!

+amen.

