

1 Advent, November 27, 2016

Beginning at the End then Circling Back

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Back in the mid-late 1980's and into the 1990's there were quite a few popular TV shows and movies that featured time travel. One of the more notable was a movie trilogy called Back to the Future. This trilogy featured a teenager named Marty McFly portrayed by actor Michael J. Fox who accidentally went back in time in a time machine created by his friend, the eccentric scientist Dr. Emmet Brown played by actor Christopher Lloyd. The trilogy consists of the two main characters repeatedly going back in time and having to overcome many challenges in order to get back to the future, which is really the present (depending on how you look at it). The challenges they overcame led to changes in the present that made the lives of the people Marty loved better, happier, and healthier. But through mistakes and failures, the characters discovered the ability to time travel carries with it a burdensome responsibility as changes can also be made that made life in the present (or future) worse.

The Back to the Future movies also showed us something interesting about time: that there is a way to look at time that is not linear. Time doesn't just move from one point to another, being affected only by what immediately preceded it. Time is far more complex, where the past can influence the present in ways that deeply affect the future that link to back the past. The movie trilogy brought this aspect of time to light because in the movie time was defined by the lives of people, not historical events. In the lives of people, time is understood through stories: the stories of not only an individual's past, but their family of origin's past, and these stories are often repeated or told in the present, especially at family gatherings like Thanksgiving, which many of us just celebrated a few days ago. Perhaps at Thanksgiving gatherings some of you were at, you heard or remembered family stories you have heard many times before. One of the reasons we tell those stories is so we don't forget them, but also because there is a sort of a hope that those stories will influence the present and affect the future which is informed by the past. That's how family recipes and other traditions get passed down from one generation to another, through that circuitous cycle.

The idea of telling time in a circular pattern is how the Church tells time too. We see this most clearly as the Church starts a new year today and a new season. The Church does not start its new years the way many of us start a new year: there are no big parties, no resolutions to ensure this year will be better than other years, there are no planning sessions, there are no expectations laid out, or calendars organized, or vacations planned. Instead, the Church year begins with the end, not just the end of last year, but the reminder that there will be an end of time. Some call this the apocalypse, others call it the Second Coming of Christ. But most of us don't talk about it all.

Perhaps this is because of an idea a priest named John Nelson Darby had that he called "premillennial dispensationalism" which became the theory of the "rapture" and has been the subject of several fictional novels that clearly identified the type of people who would be saved and taken up to heaven when the hour struck, and who would be left behind to suffer punishment. However popular Mr. Darby's theory has been, it is not based on the Scriptures, even though he used images like what we heard in our Gospel today, which might be why some of us have been so shy or downright embarrassed to talk about the end of time.

But the end of time is an important Christian belief, for all Christians, even Episcopalians, and it has less to do with the fictional rapture and more to do with how the Church tells time, that is why we begin every new Church year and every season of Advent with Jesus talking about the end.

This ending is not necessarily some terrifying catastrophe of devastating destruction that we need to be afraid of. The end, both the Old and the New Testaments tell us, is something we have seen before, in the story of salvation. The end is going to be the final coming of the Kingdom of God, where God is going to put all things in all places to rights, or make life what God has always wanted or dreamed it could be. If you are discouraged with the injustice in the world, or weary of fighting for God's justice, then the end isn't something to be afraid of, it is what we hope for, we long for, and pray for. The reminder that the work of Christ is just beginning in his resurrection is indeed very good news, which is why in our Gospel reading today Jesus wasn't trying to frighten his listeners into behaving a certain way as much as he was reminding them to "stay awake" or pay attention. So that they will recognize Christ when Christ comes again.

Today's Gospel is not only the reminder that there will be an end, it is a call to us for how we are to wait for and live into God's Kingdom that has come into the world, comes into the world, and will come again; or to put it another way: how to live in Church Time. Part of how we wait for God's Kingdom is to keep telling the story of salvation year after year. I once had a parishioner tell me he was bored with the stories of the Bible. He said he didn't understand why we can't have new stories, more exciting ones, or more relevant stories. And while I heard what he had to say, I believe he was missing the point. The purpose of the Bible isn't to entertain us, or inform us, it is to help us become so familiar with the ways of God we can recognize Christ in our lives and in the world. Just like knowing our families' stories, when we know the stories of faith well, we can use them to help us interpret our present times, to help us as we make our daily decisions, which can influence the future because we are creating not just a present life, we are also adding to the past. Knowing those stories and the cycle can also help us recognize when we see something that is harmful, and not of God. Knowing the cycle and the stories can help us learn to trust in God, even when we live in uncertain times. And they can help us learn to trust God and not be afraid. The best way to get to know those faith stories so well, is to tell them and listen to them again and again.

So today it begins again, this annual cycle. Today we are reassured, as we proclaim every Sunday, Christ will come again. Maybe this is a good year to reflect on what this means for us. To take a look at our lives and see where we have gotten bogged down with stories that are not life-giving, or distractions that are starting to wear on us, or anger and resentment that are causing us to unfairly label people based on where they live or how they voted, or fear of the future might be getting in the way of being fully present now, or causing us to misread the past. All of these things can make us forget that Christ has come – that God loves us so much God became human and shared our joys and suffering with us. And that Christ has died- that our response to God with Us was not to embrace God's Presence but to violently destroy it. And Christ is Risen. And that is our hope, for while we don't have time machines to travel back and forth to check out how our actions will affect the future, we have something from the past that is also of the future that is better than a time machine: Christ's Resurrection from the dead, the reassurance that this life is not all there is, that God can and will redeem even our worst acts and bring us into Resurrection life, when Christ will come again.

Now this can be pretty heady stuff, and not as easy to translate into daily actions, so we might need some help. Which is why there are so many resources available for study and reflection during the season of Advent. Forward Day by Day is one resource I recommend, so is the Living Well through Advent book which happens to focus on practicing simplicity and talks about ways we can all be more aware of things that get in the way of living our faith, and focus on this season of waiting for Christ to come again. There are other resources, and I encourage you to find one that works for you so that we can all accept the Church's invitation to reflect on the end by beginning a new Church year and enter once again into the amazing story of Christ that is ours to hear, to share, to live, to believe, to hope, and to pray, Come, Lord Jesus.