

Everything Has an End

Everything has an end. We often hear that expression when something is happening that we want to come to a close; something that is difficult or hard to understand; something that causes unhappiness or loss. I have heard and seen thoughts like that expressed about this year of 2020; thoughts which seem to think that the things which are happening around us that are unpleasant will somehow miraculously disappear with the end of this time period we call the year 2020. Well, the year 2020 will definitely come to an end on December 31st as years past have, but the effects of our actions during this year will continue into the next and into the next as well in some ways...just as the effects of what people did in October were reflected in what happened this November and what happened this last week of Thanksgiving will be seen in the coming weeks as we approach Christmas. Another fairly well known expression refers to time as an ever flowing stream. Both of these expressions are based on observations made about the world around us. They are descriptions of the realities of our existence: cause and effect are very real things: our actions set events in motion. Time goes in one direction only—you cannot reverse it; you don't get to redo yesterday, although we do often get to repeat the same mistakes in a new time period. These things are often easier to discern when they are the events outside of our own personal lives, observations about events that happened long ago or events that happened elsewhere are clearer to us. However, they are universal truths about how we behave. We begin this season of Advent with what seems like a paradox between the liturgy we lift and the readings from scripture. We light the candle of hope and the passages we read do not seem to be very hopeful at all. The tone there seem to be either dire or urgent or both...as Isaiah speaks of the Lord being far away from the people, angry at their unrighteousness while Mark sounds an apocalyptic note of warning to be alert as heaven and earth will both pass away when judgment suddenly arrives catching some asleep and unprepared for it. Advent is the season the church sets aside as the time nears to celebrate the arrival of God-with-us in the form of that infant in the manger as the time of preparation to consider God's intervention into history. To consider the depth and breadth of God's love and the plan for our redemption that was revealed; this is the reason we begin with the candle of hope. Because it is not just the birth of the child that brings hope, it is the completed plan which Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled which brought about our reconciliation and gives us our hope for eternal life. There is a book called Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes¹ by Cynthia M. Campbell which describes each of the four gospels as a home decorated for Christmas. It begins describing Mark as a spare, simple home which is very apt. Mark's gospel has no birth narrative. It begins with the assertion that what he is recording is the beginning of the good news. For Mark the beginning of the good news is not in Bethlehem but in the proclamation of John the Baptist who was the herald who announced the arrival of Jesus on the scene. For Mark the hope we have lies in what Jesus did. Mark reminds us hope is found in the manger only because it is found first on the cross. The hope that Mark offers is not in spite of suffering; it is hope that has been through suffering and has emerged on the other side. From the beginning of Mark's brief narrative we know that Jesus is headed to the cross, we know that

¹ Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes, Cynthia M. Campbell, WJK Press, Louisville, KY, 2019

although it is counter intuitive that following him is the way of the cross, but this is God's way. So while we begin with hope, we also begin with the warnings which remind us that there is work to be done before the hope of God's reign being present on earth is realized. Our Advent season begins with what might be called the presentation of the book ends which God has placed before us. The beginning and the ending of God's story of salvation and reconciliation are both here as we begin our Advent journey. Both beginnings and endings are important in many areas of life and our attitude about both applies in our life of faith and our relationship with God as well. I collect coins, and am especially fond of one particular coin which is not found in circulation. Unless you collect coins you may never have heard of it. It is called the American Silver Eagle and is produced by the US Mint. It was authorized by Congress under the Liberty Coin Act and first minted in 1986. It has the same image on one side as what was known as the Walking Liberty Half Dollar. That is why I like it so much. That image is my favorite coin, but most of them are so worn from being in circulation that it is hard to see the beauty of the design. Since the Silver Eagle isn't circulated, it remains pretty. The act that created the coin also stated that if the image was changed, the change could only be done once every twenty five years. A new coin is minted every year. The design has not changed on either side since 1986, but in the fall of 1919 the Mint announced that 2020 would be the last year the design would remain unchanged. In 2021 there would be a change in the image of the eagle on the reverse side of the coin. The presenter on TV show I watch about collecting was ecstatic. Now, he said, collectors could have a complete set of the American Silver Eagle. The series would be complete with the 2020 coin. He has spent much of this year speaking about this completeness; of the need to have both the beginning and the end. It is somewhat ironic, that because of issues with the pandemic the Mint is not going to actually change the design until the middle of 2021, so there will now be another Silver Eagle with the same design so the set isn't quite complete...yet. But there is a lesson in this fascination with completeness for us. It points out how much we like to know and have defined points of starting and stopping. When we enter the Advent season we are often uncomfortable with the beginning readings from the Hebrew texts which are focused on the waiting which Israel did for the Messiah, for the darkness and the iniquities which happened while they waited. It seems the gospel readings from Mark are not much better for they are full of warnings of judgment and the need to be alert. We want to prepare for the arrival of the infant Jesus, to celebrate with the angels and keep watch with the shepherds. We don't really want to think about how we are in the in between times, that we are like the nation of Israel---waiting for the story of redemption to be completed with the coming of Christ in glory. We don't like this reminder of the unknown nature of the ending of the narrative which we tell. We like to think that the story was completed on that Easter morning...and in reality...God completed God's role in the redemption of creation...God came down as the Psalmist asked...as Isaiah pleaded...but the work isn't completed until we surrender our wills to God's. I sometimes think when we pray every Sunday that prayer that Jesus taught, we overlook some important things in this familiar prayer. We are asking for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, but how often do we really expect or seek to do that. Do we sincerely seek to give up our will so that our choices are according to the ways Jesus taught...all the ways Jesus taught? Jesus walked the countryside of Galilee proclaiming that God's reign was near and told us how that was to be done....the ways are given to us...but we seem to have trouble with the following of them. And I think that one

of the reasons we have so much trouble with this is that we don't know when the other bookend is going to happen. If there was a defined schedule by which these things God desired of us had to be accomplished...would we be better at it? God has given us an open-ended schedule to get this citizenship in the kingdom done...we know what God desires of citizens in the kingdom...that we love and care for one another...that all in the kingdom have their needs met...the gleanings are left in the field according to the scriptures as far back as Deuteronomy...the resident alien is not oppressed...according to the teaching in Exodus...when Jesus walked the countryside the only ones who angered him were the religious leaders who were hypocrites...those who were more concerned with the cleanliness of what went into the mouth than what came out of the heart... But since we don't know when we will have to give that accounting that Jesus speaks of in those parables we just read from Matthew's gospel, and it has been so long...we have plenty of time to get it right...to see that the least, the lost and the last are taken care of before Jesus comes back...or perhaps the fact that they are not being taken care of is why Jesus is taking so long to come back? I know the book of Revelation is not a favorite of many, although many are surprised to learn how much of our beloved hymns' lyrics are derived from those verses...there is much about that apocalyptic text that is revealing indeed. The theme is the sovereignty of God and God's ultimate victory. The ending victory finds God coming back to dwell on earth...an earth that has been reclaimed by God and the Lamb. But the Advent journey to Bethlehem is beginning, and as always it begins with hope...hope that the light that came down will shine brighter this year, will find welcome in more hearts and glow stronger in all of us as we prepare be more awake and witness more truly. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.