

## **Of Endings and Beginnings**

Jesus the Christ – Christ the King Sunday  
November 25, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007  
Gates Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Luke 23:33-43

The late George Burns, who had the rare opportunity to “play God” in a couple of movies, made a profound statement about sermons:

The secret to a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending, and having the two as close together as possible.

Today, I reverse the logical order of endings and beginnings because, as we have shared already, today is the last Sunday of the church year and next Sunday we start the cycle again. Like others, as I get older, time collapses and like George Burns’ “good sermon,” church years’ beginnings and endings get closer and closer together. It seems only yesterday we experienced the event we call “*the tree*,” that enormous tree we struggled to cut, move, haul, erect, cut again and then enjoy in the Sanctuary as it, at half its original size, filled that space behind me.

Today, nearly a year later, we again “look in on” and bear witness to some of the final events in Jesus’ earthly life. In a literal sense, we are reminded of some endings. In a few moments, we celebrate what we call The Last Supper, the last time Jesus dined with His disciples before His arrest, trial and death. Our reading from the Gospel of Luke reminded us of some of the words spoken by Jesus when dying on the cross. Then, as though in a time warp, next Sunday we start a process of preparing for Jesus’ birth!

For those of us of the Reformed Tradition, this cycle – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost - is important. Each year, we are able to spend time coming to terms with the promises and gifts of God that are ours in the promise, birth, revelation, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection and reign of Christ. Like most mortals, I find the sequence helpful as I find it difficult to mix and match too many motifs and themes and ideas at one time. We realize that for God, past, present and future converge in a continuum and although there are some in our midst who can better grasp that non-sequential concept of time, others like me want a clear outline. This came first (a beginning), then this, then that, finally culminating in an “ending.”

Earlier this week, I was reading – or better put, trying to read - some writings of T.S. Eliot from “Four Quartets,” a small book given to me last month as a gift by Jennifer Incardona’s new husband, Jeffery Blanchard, an English PhD candidate. I sat in my office and confessed out loud how I was struggling with Mr. Eliot’s abstract, less than concrete writings, words that force one to sit back and contemplate if not work hard to comprehend. To my chagrin, two church staff members in hearing distance announced how much they or their family members *love* T.S. Eliot. That commentary made me try all the harder to concentrate on the words in front of me. I had reason to turn to T.S. Eliot’s work because, having thumbed through the small book, I recalled some of the first lines of “Burnt Norton” and how they applied to the idea of time, of endings and beginnings. The words spoke to my wrestling with how to present my message this morning.

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.

[Burnt Norton, I, lines 1-8]

- The promise (Advent) of Jesus was fulfilled in history, but is not the wonder of God's promises played out time and time again as people come to understand what it means to anticipate, to hope, be patient and to wait (which fewer and fewer of us in the twenty-first century do particularly well)? Perhaps in this coming Advent season we will learn the gift of waiting, the gift of patience, the gift of promise and the gift of hope!
- The fulfillment (Christmas) occurred in a stable in a far off place more than two thousand years ago, but are not too many people waiting to have the reality of Christ unfold in the lives? Perhaps in the coming days of Christmas we will learn the true meaning of giving – and of receiving – love, grace – and redemption!
- In similar fashion, the revelation of Christ (Epiphany), the passion (Lent), the crucial events of Holy Week (Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday) leading to the resurrection (Easter) and to the empowering of the church (Pentecost) are events that have been – but can, as foci of peoples' lives and faith, give direction and purpose to us in time of struggle, times of loss, times of joy and times of fellowship.

In the climatic twenty-third chapter of the Gospel of Luke, when we read of the events of Jesus' trials and death on the cross, two persons are quoted professing their faith in Jesus as the Christ and/or the power of God. In the words we heard read today, it was one of the two other men crucified with Jesus who, in asking to be remembered in Christ's kingdom, found grace and promise – and Paradise. The other wasn't a Jew but was the commander of the Roman troops who upon Jesus' death "praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent.'"

In the closing moments of Jesus' life before His death on a cross, we hear invitations that come to us from the distant past and shakes us in our present and becomes, to tweak the words of T.S. Eliot, more than "speculation" and more than "perpetual possibility." In an anguished exchange with a convicted criminal who knew he did wrong, Jesus reminds us of the grace that is ours if we but profess Christ's reign with God. Backing up in time just a bit, to but two days earlier in Jesus' life, we have a Last Supper that in our tradition unfolds as the Sacrament of Communion, reminding us of a specific event in time when Jesus gathered with His followers for a Passover Meal. Significantly, the particulars of that event transcend time, transcend space and unite all of our endings and all of our beginnings, all of our past, all of our present and all of the potential and reality that is our future. In the miracle of that table, we are reminded of all who have come this way before us, we are challenged to be faithful as we sustain the church for generations to come, and we are touched in ways we can hardly comprehend much less vocalize – that God is with us, right here, in this place, in our fellowship, at this table, at the end of a church year and on the cusp of a new one, but perhaps most importantly, in our hearts and souls and being.

Amen.