**In the Beginning is my End**

A sermon for the First Sunday of Advent

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“In the beginning is my end” wrote TS Eliot in his famous poem East Coker. He returns this motif again and again throughout all four of his Four Quartets. The entire masterwork plays on the idea of time as a kind of gyre, a spiral that brings us back around to our beginnings over and over and over again. But not exactly to the same starting place. Somewhere familiar, but something is different. And of course, that something is us.

In the beginning is my End. For Eliot, the tension in his poem is whether this constant returning, constant beginning again, is more like vicious cycle, in which we, humanity, are doomed to repeat ourselves year after year, century after century, era after era – or more like a pathway to some kind of progress. The best example of this in modern storytelling is an episode of Star Trek, in which Picard, Data and the rest of the crew are stuck in a repeating time loop. It begins innocently enough, with the desire to do what they always want to do – explore a strange new phenomenon. And it ends with their own self-destruction at the hands of the very phenomenon they sought to explore. They repeat this vicious cycle many times, until somehow, someway, they start to get a vague sense that in fact each new beginning is not entirely new at all. They sense that they have been here before, but only in a vague shadowy kind of way – like Eliot walking through the ruins of Burnt Norton or East Coker and wondering if humanity hasn’t been walking through its own ruins again and again and again. The Star Trek crew eventually becomes able to bring a new End from the same Beginning, freeing itself from the destructive loop in which they find themselves, but only when they figure out how to pass information from one journey through the loop into another -- only once they figure out how to be different at the beginning will they find freedom at the end.

Some Episcopalians like Star Trek. Most like TS Eliot. But nearly all like the Liturgical Year. It’s our own kind of gyre, a spiral that each year brings us from our endings into a new beginning. And it starts today on the first Sunday of Advent. A liturgical faith, that is a Christian community that lives by a repeating calendar, faces the same dilemma as Eliot and Picard: will this time through the loop bring us insight, resolve, change, and freedom? Or will it be just another lap on the same track? A new beginning, but the same end.

Another way to ask that questions is, “Are we in fact different today, as we gather together to begin again our church year?” And what will this new beginning bode for us as the wheel turns round once more? What is our hope? Our expectation? Our desire for new and deeper partnership with God and each other? What is different about this year’s new beginning for you, that might invite a different end? And to complicate it just a bit further, End is a double meaning. The word end doesn’t just mean final moment. The word end also means intention, purpose, aim, hope. Our final outcome depends on our initial end, our initial intention. How we start is a good indicator of how we will finish. In the beginning is my end.

Our Lectionary, the cycle of assigned Bible readings for each Sunday, takes Eliot’s idea literally. We begin with the ending. I’ve always found it a bit odd, that the lectionary doesn’t begin at the beginning of the Bible. With Genesis. The story of Creation. Or, in the New Testament, with the stories that lead to Jesus’ birth. They will come starting next week, but today is the beginning, and we are hearing about the End. The end of time. Luke’s apocalypse, as Biblical scholars refer to today’s Gospel lesson.

Most Episcopalians don’t spend a lot of time contemplating the second coming of Christ and the end of the world as we know it. Probably because when we do, to paraphrase the band REM, we don’t exactly “feel fine”. Readings like this, and there are others throughout the Old and New Testaments, can leave many of us feeling uneasy, suspicious, perhaps a little afraid. And possibly bored. After all, Christian history is replete with dramatic predictions of the end times coming very soon. The early Christians really believed that Jesus’ return and the end of time would occur within their own generation. And even the second and third generations believed they, too, would see the end of the world. And yet, here we are all are…still here. Still beginning again each year.

It would be easy to remove these kinds of predictions from our Lectionary, as anachronistic and perhaps even damaging to the Bible’s credibility. But we don’t. We keep them. Because the purpose of this Gospel lesson today, isn’t about when or why or how the world will come to end (although it’s remarkably prescient in its allusion to rising waters as an initial warning sign). No, the purpose of this Gospel passage is to affirm that we believe someday it will end…and to invite us to think about what that means for us as spiritually beings. Biologically, we are programmed to try and not die. It’s kind of like goal number 1. Both individually and, perhaps even more so, as a species. That deep-seated drive, has gotten us to a species population of what, about 7 billion? And yet, it also drives us to war, short-sighted resource use, and at times an almost fatalistic overindulgence in pleasure. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. It’s almost an irony that the more we allow our fear of endings to drive our actions towards ourselves, others and our planet, the more quickly we hasten our own demise.

But the Gospel today offers us some good news here. Specifically, it invites us, as we begin the loop again, to start with new information, new wisdom, and a new attitude about the idea of an end. It’s an attitude of spiritual confidence leading to humble actions.

The central contrast in the passage is between “the people” who react to the idea of the world ending by fainting, literally lying down, perhaps burying their heads in the sand…and “you” (that is, us, people of faith) who are told to stand up and raise our heads. We are invited to be confident that whenever the end does come, it is not in fact the end. Earth may pass away, even Heaven may pass away, but the Word, the companionship of Christ, the very presence of God with us, will not pass away. Ever. In any age or time. Our body’s deepest desire may be to live as along as possible and pass along our genetic material. But our soul’s deepest desire is to be united to the mystical, redemptive, unending love of God. And this Gospel proclaims that even when the seas rise and the wars come and the Second Coming is at hand, the mystical union between our souls and God will still be true – perhaps even truer than it is now.

And this confidence, that we will obtain our soul’s desire to be united in the love of God, leads us to humble actions. Humble does not mean little or unimportant. Remember the word humility comes from the root word hummus, or earth. Our confidence about what will happen someday far into an almost mystical future, should lead us to humble actions – earthly actions. We should live here and now in bold ways that reflect our confidence that our souls’ desires have been and will be met for ever. Specifically, we should not let our hearts be weighed down (or a better translation might be “lulled to sleep”) with overindulgence, overconsumption, or paralyzing anxiety. We are called to wake up! To realize that even here, at the very beginning, we already have what we need most in the end: the love of God. We already have it. And so our end, our aim, our intention, should be lives of appreciation, adoration, gratitude, and generosity for having already received what matters most. Christ’s promise, God’s gift, is more than just the gift of love. It is the gift of freedom – freedom from the need to begin again in the same way. Freedom from the compulsions to acquire, consume, compete, and perfect. Freedom from the shadow sides of these biological drives: the violence, the self-loathing, the hatred, and the despair. And freedom to live with our heads raised and looking around for Jesus, not coming down on a cloud, but all around us here and now -- in the faces of neighbors and strangers, and children, and all vulnerable people…which, by the way, is all of us.

In the beginning is our end. And having confidence in our end with God, we can today make a new beginning here on earth -- for ourselves, for each other, and for the world. Amen.