

## Our End Is Our Beginning

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“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” -- Luke 21:28

Because we're the Christian church, we're supposed to march to the beat of a different drummer, and that beat should be a bit more distinctive – perhaps even disruptive – when it comes to the rhythm of the world than the little drummer boy's.

We do things differently if we're Christian – at least, we're supposed to – and today is one of our annual reminders of that fact. Today is the start of our year, and if I were a gimmicky sort of pastor and you were a gimmicky sort of congregation, I would have had the ushers distribute paper hats and the various noise-makers that one finds at New Year's Eve celebrations. And I'd wish all of you a Happy New Year and you'd do the same for me, and we'd all make a bit of noise and feel a little silly at our moment of manufactured hilarity, and then we'd get on with the real business at hand, which is worship.

That's what we might do if we in this church marched to the beat of the little drummer boy, whose musical story is being piped through every mall in America these days.

But we're not Little Drummer Boy Christians, you and I, and the proof that we're not is your presence here this morning. You and I are here on this first Sunday of Advent, about which the world knows little and cares even less, not because we can't wait for Christmas – this isn't a doorbuster service, after all – but rather because we want to hear again, to rejoice in, and to be part of the whole story of Jesus the Christ, of which Christmas is but one relatively slim part.

And that story begins not with his coming as a baby, but rather with his coming as our savior, about which we read in Luke's gospel. The story of Jesus begins – and ends – in heaven, not in Bethlehem. And although that would appear to make his story quite different from ours, in fact, it does not, for our stories, too, begin and end with God, and where God is, that is what we call heaven. Our stories, like Jesus's, are heavenly stories, and that's why the gospel reading for this first Sunday of Advent begins Jesus's story not in the manger, but in the clouds. And if we are to pay attention to that story – his and ours – we must, as Luke bids us, stand up, and raise our heads, because our salvation is drawing near. That half-verse and that idea is my text for this morning: the end for which we were all created – salvation – is where we begin. We begin the church year with salvation, we begin the story of Jesus with salvation, we begin the story of Christianity with salvation. Salvation is the name of our game, or, as I put it to the search committee who recommended me to you as your pastor more than a dozen years ago, the church is in the salvation business, one soul at a time.

Now I suspect that if you and I were writing Jesus's story, we'd follow that very sensible advice the King of Hearts gave to the White Rabbit in Alice's adventures in wonderland, which was to begin at the beginning, go on till you come to the end, then stop. That's how the world tells its tales, but that's not how we tell ours, because the

story of Jesus has no beginning as we commonly think of beginnings because his life had no conventional beginning.

The beginning of the life of Jesus the Christ is rooted in eternity, according to John's gospel, and the end of the life of Jesus the Christ leads us to the same place; so that Bethlehem, Galilee, Calvary, and all the rest of those earthly punctuations in his story are neither its beginning nor its end, but simply are, as Kierkegaard put it, stages on life's way.

But for us who must grapple with both time and eternity, we have to begin somewhere, and that somewhere, according to Luke, is with Jesus's return at the end of time, what we call Christ's second coming, what New Testament scholars call the parousia or the eschaton.

When we in the church tell the story of Jesus, we make the end our beginning because it's the end that is the point – end not in the sense of having simply run out of story to tell, but end, rather, in the sense of why we tell the story at all: end as destination, goal, or purpose.

For us, the story of Jesus is about salvation, and because salvation is the point of Jesus's story, and because Jesus's story is the point of our story, salvation necessarily becomes the point of our story as well. And salvation is something we modest, self-effacing, self-reliant, suburban Midwesterners do not like to talk about. It's very personal, it's very important, and it can lead to arguments, and above all else, we want to keep the peace.

And so we leave it to the minister to talk about salvation, which I'm happy to do, because I believe there is such a thing as salvation – I'm not talking about life after death, I'm talking about your God-given life before death – and I also believe there is such a thing as being lost or not being saved. To be saved by Jesus Christ from sin and death is not to say that you will neither sin nor die. It means, rather, that sin and death no longer define your existence; you are now free to live a kind of life that is not compromised by sin or bounded by death. Salvation is about quality, not quantity, because Jesus recognized, unlike Voltaire's Professor Pangloss, that this is most assuredly not the best of all possible worlds.

This past Thursday, Thanksgiving Day, I attended a most remarkable and moving service in a Christian tradition that has always recognized and preached and sung and taught the centrality of salvation in the Christian life. It was the Umoja Karamu service held annually at Mt. Zion UCC in University Circle. I literally stumbled upon it, as I'd gone down to the church to help them serve their community Thanksgiving dinner, but their hospitality director urged me to go upstairs first and attend the service, and I'm extremely grateful that she did. It turned out to be one of the greatest Thanksgiving blessings I've ever received.

The Umoja Karamu service dates from 1971, and its purpose is to provide an African-American alternative for the Euro-American celebration of Thanksgiving that we're all familiar with – the Pilgrims, the *Mayflower*, Plymouth Rock, Squanto, the Wampanoag, that first harsh winter, and so forth. The Karamu service tells the story of America not from the perspective of shivering, starving Pilgrims, but rather from the perspective of kidnapped, enslaved, and broken Africans, who came to these shores not seeking a better life, but rather as a chained and manacled labor force so that the lives of their European masters might be made better by their unspeakable suffering.

Slavery reached these shores in 1526, in a short-lived and little known Spanish colony in what is now South Carolina, and chattel slavery officially ended 337 years later. On January 1, 1863, the federal government of the enslavers proclaimed to the enslaved, "You're free," and the suddenly and formerly enslaved asked, "Free for what? Free to do

what? With what?" and for another century, the struggle became to turn legal abandonment into meaningful freedom. And that struggle continues today.

But the service I attended at Mt. Zion on Thanksgiving morning wasn't just about struggle. It was also about celebration. It was a celebration of people deeply aware of, deeply connected to, and deeply grateful for their roots. Color abounded in traditional African dress. It was a celebration of a culture of art and literature and dance and music. If I've heard "We Shall Overcome" once, I've heard it a hundred times, but never have I heard it sung as gloriously and movingly as I heard it sung at Mt. Zion on Thursday morning. And the service celebrated the black family anchored by the black church, where Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in 1930 that the future of Christianity lay. At Mt. Zion I understood very well, perhaps for the first time, why Bonhoeffer made that observation. The black Christ, he said, is preached with "rapturous passion and vision," and the passion, the commitment, and the sacrifice of authentic African American Christianity throws into bold relief our European American Christianity as "God's frozen chosen."

Black Christianity is fundamentally eschatological, which is a fancy way of saying that black Christianity focuses not on what is but rather on what is yet to be. People who are still organically connected to suffering – not simply because of their past, but more importantly because of their daily lived reality of prejudice, discrimination, deprivation, and the lack of privilege enjoyed by whites – folks like that get Christianity in a way that we comfortable suburbanites never will. And that's why Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." He never said blessed are the comfortable, and that fact alone should make people like us very, very uncomfortable.

"Grow old along with me," Robert Browning famously wrote in his poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "the best is yet to be. The last of life for which the first was made." That, poetically expressed, is what eschatology is all about – the last of life, for which the first was made. Christianity is about the end, the end of our lives individually and the end of life collectively – the purpose, the goal, the destiny of our life here on earth.

My only real job as your pastor is to try to help you get yourselves ready for that end. I'm not talking about a living will, although living wills are very useful things to have. I'm talking, rather, about the will to live, to live as God in Jesus Christ calls us to live. Not marching to the beat of the Little Drummer Boy, along all the other mall and e-commerce masses, but living, rather, that abundant life that you can only live when you cast yourself entirely on the love and mercy of God and pray for the grace and the guts to live daily the life that God and God alone can give you.

God already knows not simply who you are; God already knows who you will be. God already knows our end. God outlives all of us, and not one of us will outlive God.

But much more important than knowing who we will be – in our childhood and in our adulthood and in our old age – God also knows and is waiting to show you who you were meant to be, from the beginning of time.

I knew you, God said to Jeremiah, before I formed you in the womb. That's not God's anti-abortion position, as it's sometimes pressed into being; it is, rather, God's foreknowledge of our place in what Paul Tillich called God's "eternal now." For God, there is no being bound to past or future, as there is for us; there's only now.

"I am who I am" is the name God gave to Moses from a flaming bush, and it is that eternal "I am," filled with more possibilities than this world dreams of, that we are called to live.

Who you were in a former life is of no great concern to God, and who you will be in any life to come is already known and therefore equally of little concern to God. Who you are right now, with all of your hopes and dreams and abilities and possibilities is what interests God, and whether you will turn all of that over to divine empowerment for the

sake of God's realm. That is God's only interest in us, and the extent to which we surrender ourselves to that interest and that will is the extent to which we will – or will not – be saved.

So I could wish you a happy new year on this first Sunday of Advent, but I won't. What I will say instead is this: “Stand up and raise your heads” -- and start living, for God's sake – “because your redemption is drawing near.”