

“The Beginning Is Near”  
*Matthew 3:1-12*

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Last year at Thanksgiving I was sitting with my then three-year-old nephew, Tyler, watching the live version of Disney’s *101 Dalmations*; and not long after the movie had started, he asked, “Is it over?” And I said, “No, it’s just beginning.” “Beginning?” he said. I could see the puzzled look on his face, as he carefully repeated each syllable. He was obviously learning a new word—beginning. It’s a word many adults would be wise to re-learn, especially in the Church.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” When it comes to relating John the Baptizer’s message many preach of “the end,” seeking to instill fear in the hearts and minds of their listeners in order to provoke them to faith in Christ. Such preaching turns the promise of John’s words into a threat. Amidst the shouting, you can hardly hear the good news that “the kingdom of heaven has come near!” Most stop short of standing on a street corner, wearing a sandwich-board with the words “The *End* Is Near!” and shouting, “Repent!”—but they might as well.

This kind of “end times” preaching not only ignores the biblical assertion that “about that day and hour no one knows”(Mt. 24:36), but it tells us what we *already* know too well—that the world is in bad shape, that *we* are in bad shape, that something is wrong. Turn on any local or national news broadcast and you will understand how bad things are around the world. And if you watch long enough, you will hear that bad news spun a hundred different ways; but (basically) it’s always the same—war, violence, murder, drugs, theft, abuse... Saturated with such bad news, many of us adjust our perception of the world and think that it’s just the way things are; and so bad news doesn’t really upset us until it includes us somehow. Until then we are numb to such news. So “end times” preaching, with its emphasis on wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines and plagues—is actually quite ineffective. By such calculations “the end” has already occurred several times this year!

Perhaps the biggest problem with preaching that emphasizes “the end” is that it belittles the gospel message. There’s nothing wrong with truth-telling that

describes our sad state of affairs. There's nothing wrong with telling us that something is wrong. There's nothing wrong with telling us that there will be an end to the world as we now see it. But the gospel is about so much more than "the end."

In order for us to speak compellingly and with integrity about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must speak about "the end" *and* "the beginning." In fact, the Christian life is about *multiple* endings and beginnings, with emphasis on the beginnings. One of the ways we enact this truth is through baptism. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans:

"All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism in death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (Rom. 6:3-4).

And in his letter to the Corinthians, he writes, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17). For those "in Christ," this is the nature of repentance—dying and rising. As Marcus Borg puts it, following the way of Christ "involves dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity, dying to an old way of being and being raised to a new way of being, one centered in God." (113) So, in talking about the Christian life, we must never stop at "the end," because the Christian life is ongoing. As I've said at Easter-time:

In Christ we are a "new creation." In Christ, the opening words of the Book of Genesis are repeated and echoed throughout eternity: "In the beginning..." "In the beginning..." Just when the disciples feared the worst, that the story, the good news of Jesus Christ had come to a tragic end, it starts anew. At the end of every episode in this Christian life appear the words: *To Be Continued...*

So if we talk about endings we must also talk about beginnings. And what began as a result of Jesus' *first* coming is the source of our hope, as we await his return in glory (his "second coming"). **What began was the kingdom of God here on earth.** "[T]he kingdom of heaven has come near!" It is many things, but one way I have conceived of the kingdom of God is that it is **a revelation of God's ongoing presence that calls us to greater compassion.** Yet how do we experience the presence of God, the nearness of the kingdom, even as we wait again for Christ's return?

Every year, I recall the poetic, Advent words of Walter Wangerin, Jr.:

...where can I look and I do not see you?

The city? Hot with human enmity, cold with old mortality, the city? Busy and fatigued; kissing below back alley stairs, lips as limp as rotten violets; and children cursing like their parents, parents careless; parties for wasted wealth on Saturday night, exhausted Sunday morning; cars and lights and sirens; ointments, rouges, polishes, colognes, and coin—the city? Turning to the city, do I turn from you?

No, my Lord, for you are in the city. In all the affairs of humankind, you are there. You were not ashamed to be born of a woman, flesh like hers and mine, troubled as she and I by all the bruises of that flesh. You emptied yourself to enter the city, and though your coming may not make it good, it makes you cry, and there you are. In the oily streets, damp with rain and human sin, lit by a single light, I see your face reflected. O God, your incarnation's in the streets. I see the city, and I cannot help but see you. (Ragman ix).

It seems naïve perhaps to believe that every person is a child of God and bears God's image, but to think otherwise is to be in denial of great love and responsibility. If we deny the God in others it becomes easier for us to find a reason to hang, hate, wage war against, or crucify them. And we may think we have good reasons. Often it seems that it's easier for us to see evil in another (even in ourselves) than to see God there. Yet in the midst of our busy, ordinary lives we are challenged to recognize the presence of God in and around us. It is the challenge of our faith to consider that even in the face of the one we may despise the most is a child of God waiting to be born.

My prayer this Advent season is that we will experience the presence of God, the nearness of God's kingdom as promise rather than threat; that we will repent out of an experience of God's love rather than for fear of God's wrath; and that our repentance will lead us to greater compassion for others. May we proclaim in word and deed that here in this city the kingdom of heaven has come near. This is our hope, and it's just the beginning...