

WE BEGIN AGAIN

And so we start again. Given the proximity to the end of the calendar year and the still-shortening days, the idea of beginning again may not immediately come to mind. But in the tradition of the Church, the beginning of Advent marks a new liturgical year and its seasons. Awareness of the continual round of feasts and seasons, the reliable cycle of the seasons of nature, and the round of familiar holiday rituals, may give us a degree of comfort. It may also evoke the incredulity of the swift passage of time and the sense that we've only recently been through all of this. I've heard many people note the difference between this year and where we were a year ago, yet anxieties linger. Last December, we may have felt the optimism brought about by the imminent promise of vaccines and a change in the political winds. But we seem to have taken a couple of steps back, and some dark clouds remain on the horizon.

Advent is supposed to be a season of hope, but the scripture lessons on this first Sunday are hardly consoling. We begin again by being asked to think about the end of things, complete with dire predictions and warnings. Just what we need! You may wonder why Jesus seemed so invested in painting such a gloomy picture of where we are heading, when we seem to be struggling with so many things to worry about in the here and now. But I think that's the point. There's a good bit of evidence that these dire predictions are not so much about the future than they are reflective of the trauma that early Christians were confronted with, particularly when things seemed to fall apart toward the end of that era, and everything seemed to be coming apart at the seams.

Sound familiar? This is part of the great cycle of history. We might read about some awful period in history, and say something like *thank God that's over with!* Then, suddenly, *Surprise! Here we are again.* And yet,

it is also true that history doesn't just keep cycling in the same old rut. Recoveries are made. Consciousness grows. Reconciliation and healing takes place. Change can be real. I believe that the long arc of history does bend toward justice.

There is no shortage of doomsday predictions throughout the course of human history, and there's a pretty big industry within Christianity that keeps predicting the end of the world as we know it. And scripture itself paints several pictures which are as dramatic as they are vague. The unifying affirmation is that in the end, God will be triumphant, and the smart bet is to be on the right side of things when that day comes. Jesus himself did not paint a pretty picture, but the interesting thing is that he also didn't seem to suggest that there was much we could do about it, except to be strong of heart. So in this context, what's the point of hope? Do we have any power whatsoever in the face of the endless round of the cycles of life and death as well as the relentless journey toward what might be a less-than-ideal future? In the face of so much that seems out of our control, how do we respond in a way that's in keeping with our fundamental Christian faith? Jesus does tell us to pay attention to the signs all around us, so we really shouldn't be surprised when the skies darken. On the other hand, we shouldn't collapse when the going gets rough, but *should stand up straight and raise out heads*. Everything changes. Everything comes to an end, except the Word of the Lord. We may not always feel courageous or strong, but there's something to be said for *whistling past the grave* as we move through life. Where we are called to focus our attention in order to strengthen hope is to notice that all of this isn't just one self-defeating episode after another. We're headed somewhere. God continues to birth creation. There is light at the end of the tunnel. At the same time, let's not worry so much about the future, but let's attend to the things in the present that call for our attention.

But how do we sustain ourselves so that we are really engaged and attentive to the emergence of the holy? I think this all comes down to

something which sounds very simple, but which is also very hard to achieve—a change of heart. *Metanoia* is the Greek word that has been used throughout the history of Christianity to describe something that is both amazingly profound and very simple: All progress in the life of faith requires a change of heart—sometimes in dramatic fashion, as when one renounces an orientation of destruction in order to embrace a more life-giving path—and often in a more humble moment of turning from a negative attitude about someone or something toward a more generous perspective. It can be a once-and-for-all decision or a series of incremental changes that alter our perception of things. This is why we need continual new beginnings, because it is most always a work in progress. That’s why we confess our sins every time we come together for Eucharist—not because we are always bad—but because we are unstable and need to right ourselves on a regular basis. But this isn’t merely about seeking forgiveness for sins. As one of our Eucharistic Prayers in the Order of Worship says: *Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.*

The paradox is that in spite of the cyclical repletion of so much of life, newness continues to emerge. It is so easy in life to fall into a deadening routine of sameness, to become cynical about the possibility of change, and to accept a mediocrity of low expectation. This can be a kind of “soul death.” Yet what if we felt a call to something new? *Been there, done that...*

Change—metanoia—is hard. Sometimes we are forced to change, but change is impossible without the desire for things to be different. What if we turned toward God whenever we had the awareness that we had gotten off the track, even if we’ve had to do this a thousand times? Would it protect us from so many uncertainties and fears? Would it make the potential brutality of life go away? Maybe. But at the very least, it might make us more courageous in the face of trouble. More creative in the face of banality. And, even—dare I say it? Hopeful.

Looking toward the light instead of into the dark abyss. Recklessly optimistic in the face of the escape into the overly pragmatic.

This is advent. We begin again on our pilgrimage toward what has been promised.

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