

The final stanza of T. S. Eliot's poem *Little Gidding* states: "What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from." Today we are at the end of a year long journey through the Gospel of Mark. While we've dipped into John and had a series on Ephesians, Mark has been our companion from last Advent until today. Next Sunday is Christ the King which is the final Sunday of the church year, and then we begin a new year with Luke and Advent on November 28. Today we say goodbye to Mark, and we will not revisit him until 2024. Dry your eyes.

Mark has been a great companion for this strange year of 2021 where hope has felt both fleeting and present. Mark's original audience were all-too familiar with needing to persevere through hardship. If we think back to Easter Sunday, Mark is the only Gospel where we don't even see the Risen Christ. The women at the tomb are told that Christ is risen and that he has gone ahead of them, but the story ends before they ever see him. I think the idea is that we are given the same assurance they were. Though you may not see Jesus now, he has gone ahead of you. If you want to see him in the present, then go back to the beginning. "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near." Repent, change your minds. Experience the joy of being wrong. Then you'll discover that God doesn't love you because you get things right. You discover that God loves you simply because you belong to God—no more, and no less. That love is unchanging, even when the world around us crumbles.

The end is where we start from. Do you remember the first scene in Mark's Gospel? It is my favorite passage in all of scripture, where Jesus is baptized in the Jordan river, and the heavens are torn open, and the Spirit descends on him like a dove, and a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Jesus emerges from the water trusting in his own belovedness. With that security, he freely engages the world from a posture of abundance. He demonstrates that with God there is enough, enough and some to spare. We don't need to jockey for power and position, but we are free embrace our vulnerability and weakness, because God loves the whole of us, not just the parts we are proud of. Learning that takes a lifetime, doesn't it?

Here we are at the end of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is about to be crucified, but before he is, he has been in the Temple, teaching and confronting the religious leaders. As they leave the temple, one of his disciples says, "Teacher, look! What awesome stones and buildings!" Every time I read this, I think of my first visit to New York City in 2007. I was studying at Princeton Seminary, and Sarah and I took the train in from Jersey. Walking through the canyons of the buildings I'd seen in movies countless times, I was in absolute awe. How could humans create something so incredible?

For these country boys from Galilee, they couldn't believe what they were looking at either. And Jesus is quick to burst their bubble saying, "You see these enormous buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished." Wah-wah. That's a bit of a downer, Jesus, pun-intended. I guess we shouldn't be surprised that when the disciples are impressed by the power they see in Jerusalem, Jesus is not. He's been telling us how we need to stop thinking of power as control and instead as service. If the religious establishment in the temple was

oriented toward serving those in need rather than power and self-preservation, then Jesus wouldn't predict their downfall. Whenever an institution serves itself above serving the common good, given time, that institution will fall. That's true of the temple. It's true of governments and businesses. It's also true of churches.

In our time where church pews across the country are emptier and emptier, the temptation is either to turn inward and preserve power, or to despair. It should surprise none of us that Jesus isn't fond of either option. Whether it's the physical body we inhabit, or the physical buildings we occupy, eventually they all break down, and that's OK. All endings give birth to new beginnings, even when it appears that all hope is lost. So, when the stuff hits the fan, how do you keep your head about you? When the apocalypse comes, what are we to do?

Every year at the end of the church year, and at the beginning of Advent, the lectionary always brings us apocalyptic readings. Just when we're getting out our decorations and preparing for the holidays, the lectionary sings us the familiar carol, "It's beginning to look a lot like the apocalypse, everywhere you turn." And it is, isn't it? Between the collective breakdown of institutional trust, ongoing refugee crises, once a century floods and wildfires happening every year, and the looming disaster of climate change, it is beginning to look a lot like the apocalypse. Of course, every generation thinks that to one degree or another. In the 20th century there were many apocalypses: two World Wars, the Dust Bowl, the threat of nuclear holocaust. There's humility in realizing that every generation thinks this is the end, and to this point, they've all been wrong. Are we really going to fall for this again?

And yet, even as I say that, the threats in our world are very real, and we are foolish to minimize them. So, what are we to do when it appears the world might fall apart? Jesus says, "Watch that no one deceives you. Many people will come in my name saying, 'I'm the one!' They will deceive many people." In other words, Jesus warns us that in times of crises, we should expect people to rise-up and say, "I will save you! Put your trust in me, and I will deliver you." Expect this, and don't be deceived by these people. Charlatans emerge in every age, and in times of crisis, we can all fall prey to their deceits of a strong man. Don't be deceived, Jesus says. There's no hero coming to save you, and the truth is, you don't need one. Why not? The Spirit lives in you already, which means all the power you need dwells within. So, instead of waiting for a hero to save you, use the power that you have for the benefit of the community.

He also tells us not to be surprised by wars, violence, and disasters. We live in a world that thinks violence is the answer to our problems instead of the source. And when we see violence around us, we are tempted to think we need to use violence as well. All this forgiveness and compassion stuff is great until you feel threatened, but Jesus invites us to stay the course and trust in nonviolence to the end, no matter what. Then Jesus says something of the utmost importance, "These things are just the beginning of the sufferings associated with the end." Now, that sounds like really bad news, doesn't it? But I'm telling you, it's great news. I love the Common English Bible, but if you look at almost any other translation, it won't say, "sufferings associated with the end." Instead, they'll say, "These things are just the beginning of the birth pangs." The Greek word is "*odin*." It doesn't mean sufferings in some general sense,

but birth pangs—the travail that comes upon your body as an indication that something new is about to be born.

Having witnessed my son’s birth, I don’t minimize the suffering of birth pangs. Seeing Sarah give birth was the most physical pain I’ve ever seen, and nothing I’ve experienced comes close. So, yes, birth pangs hurt, but they are not without purpose. They are the indication that new life is being born—the end of this suffering is the beginning of something new and good and beautiful. And that’s Jesus’ promise to us when it seems like it’s the end of the world as we know it. When strong men rise, when nations wage war, and the creation groans in pain, through it all, God is bringing forth new life and possibilities. This doesn’t mean God is causing the pain, or that the pain is in-and-of-itself good, but what it does mean is that in every ending, God is birthing a new beginning. We can’t always see it, but we can trust it’s true. What’s true for Christ on the cross is true for us as well. When our bodies fail and buildings fall, the way of love remains our first and last hope. “What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.” We begin and end in love, so when things fall apart, and the pain seems as though it will overtake you, trust that God is bringing forth something new.