

1 Advent B
BEGINNING AT THE END

November 29-30, 2008
Mark 13:24-37

Today, the First Sunday of Advent, begins the church's new year. It is the year of Mark. Most, but not all, of the gospel readings will come from Mark during this church year. Today's gospel lesson is not about a beginning, but the ending – the end of the age – the time when the Son of Man will come again. We begin at the end. That's an important lesson to learn.

Mark's readers were struggling for their lives. Mark was written during a war. Jews in Palestine rebelled against the Roman Empire that had been in control of Palestine for 100 years. For seven years they were fighting. About halfway through this war, the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. During this time, Nero was persecuting Christians. Both Paul and Peter were executed in Rome during this persecution. That's what was going on in the lives of the first people who heard these words from this gospel.

Their faith was not so much about looking back at the past: God's creation of the world, the proclamation of the prophets; or even the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. These events in the past are vital to the Christian faith – they are the foundation of our faith, but the foundation is just the beginning of the building. There is much more to add to the foundation.

Those early Christians were anxiously looking ahead for the return of Jesus Christ. They were looking ahead for the new heaven and new earth. The present earth wasn't too great for them. They were looking ahead to a time when there would be no more persecution or suffering or pain or sorrow or death. They were looking ahead to what God had promised to do.

When they heard the words: "In those days, after that suffering," they assumed that it was the suffering that they were going through right now. They needed to be alert and awake right now. They needed that end to come and put an end to their suffering right now.

Sometimes we face similar turmoil in our lives. After my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he talked about not wanting to leave because his life had been good here on earth. "Why would I want to go to heaven when I've had heaven here on earth," he said. He was looking to the past – and there were a lot more good moments than bad ones. At the same time, he was also very much aware that a better future lay ahead for him – especially as his health deteriorated. He was willing to leave the good past for a better future.

What do these words say to us who are not in much suffering, who are not being persecuted for our faith, who are not ostracized by our families because we follow Christ? I think that the great success of Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, is an indication that we need to have a vision about where our personal lives are going; rather than just memories of where we've been.

Before he wrote that book, he wrote one called, *The Purpose Driven Church*. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of congregations who live their lives by looking back. Old time members look back at what they used to be – and they grieve. They are no longer that congregation. They will never be that congregation again. They need to discern what God is calling them to do and be in the future – and then be pulled ahead by that vision.

Consider these two different ways of planning. One group looks at last year's calendar and says, "This is what we did last January, what date shall we do it again this year?" Such a planning method just relives the past.

Another group looks at their Vision Statement, where they want to be in the future; and

then they decide what they might do every month to move them closer to that vision. It might be the same thing they did in the past. It might be something entirely new. Whatever it is, it is determined by the vision of the future – where they want to be – where they believe God is calling them to go; rather than just repeating events – good events – of the past.

The story I told for the children's message comes from a book called: *Transitioning: Leading Your Church through Change*.

Travis and Garrett are each given a block of wood and a knife. Both boys immediately begin whittling. Both are working hard. Both are serious about their work. Both are enjoying the task.

When they are finished, the two boys have quite different results. Travis has carved a boat. Garrett has whittled his wood away into a pile of shavings.

What was different about the two boys? Travis had a vision – which meant he could see the end result. He also understood transition – how to get from where he was to where he wanted to go. He had a purpose, a target, and a strategy. Garrett – while working equally hard – was just whittling.¹

It illustrates the need to begin with a plan; to see in our minds what we hope to become – both for this congregation and for each individual. Then we concentrate our efforts on making that vision happen. Without a vision of the future, all of the energies and efforts created nothing – except, perhaps, bad toothpicks or bedding for animals.

My guess is that even though Travis had a vision of a boat when he started, as he was whittling that vision got modified as aspects of the wood led him to make modifications of his vision, or perhaps a slip of the knife or something in the wood caused a change in his vision from a boat to a frog.

Your transition team has been working hard to survey the members so that together a vision for this congregation has been created as part of the Mission Site Profile – or MSP. The plan is to have this approved by the council this month and then pass it on to your Call Committee and to the Northwest Washington Synod. They will try to match up this vision with pastoral candidates that can help lead you to fulfill the vision.

In our text, there are the commands to keep alert, be on watch, stay awake. On one hand, it means that we are always to be looking towards the end – for that day when Jesus will return. On the other hand, I think that it also means to watch out for the forces that are present today that would lead us away from that future vision. Forces that would have us center on the past – both the good and bad things in our history rather than the positive future God has promised.

As we will hear next week, the key message related to the coming of Jesus is repent. Literally that means giving up the past to move towards a new and different future with God. It means having a change of direction in one's life. In theological terms it is dying to the past and being raised by God to a new future.

I certainly believe that God plans to work through each and every one of you in the future. I certainly believe that God plans to work in and through this congregation in mighty ways in the

¹ Dan Southerland, *Transitioning: Leading Your Church Through Change*, p. 13

future. But turning a block of wood into a boat takes not only a vision, but also planning, tools, and effort.

Both Travis and Garrett were given a knife and a block of wood. What they did with these gifts varied greatly because one had a vision – a purpose, a target, and a strategy; and the other didn't. Similarly, every congregation has been given gifts by God. Most importantly, the gift of the gospel – forgiveness of sins now and salvation from eternal punishment and a resurrected life with God in the future. We also have the gifts and abilities of each member. What congregations do with these gifts vary greatly. The primary difference is having a vision – of beginning at the end. That is happening here. Next will come the planning, tools, and effort to transform the vision into reality.

Another resource on congregations raises this question: “Are the best years ahead of us or behind us?” God is giving us a vision for the future that will mean the best years are still ahead of us. We rejoice in the future that is coming rather than lament the past that is gone.