

Title: Starting from the End
Date: 12/4/2022 (Advent 2, Year A)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Isaiah 11:1-10](#); [Romans 15:4-13](#); [Matthew 3:1-12](#); [Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/AhazsCzwGTo?t=1425>

O God, grant that the spirit of wisdom rest on us
so that we may have the understanding
to turn and greet with joy
the way that has been prepared for our salvation.
Amen.

One lesson I learned over and over in seminary was that words didn't always mean what I thought they meant.

The first time I attended the Beecher Lectures, a special series at my seminary that always featured a well-known preacher, the title of the series was "The End of Preaching."¹

I was both excited and confused. Thomas Troeger had taught homiletics, the art of preaching, at YDS. It seemed a bold thing for a professor to proclaim the end of something that feels like an important part of our regular worship and, well, given who is telling you this, the role of a priest,

Perhaps, now that we are more aware
that people have all kinds of learning styles,
sermons aren't the best container
for sharing this kind of knowledge and understanding.

Perhaps, now that it feels like
this is the only time we have everyone's undivided attention,
or at the very least, a somewhat captive audience,
preachers are trying to do **too much** in any given sermon.

But...what would the alternative be?

So, I eagerly filed into chapel with the rest of the crowd and found a seat.

And a few minutes into the lecture, I realized I had *totally misunderstood* the title.

He wasn't talking about the end of preaching, as in it is over, done with, stick a fork in it. He was talking about the END of preaching, as in the **goal** of preaching, the **purpose** of preaching.

Last Sunday, I shared this verse from T.S. Eliot's poem, "Little Gidding."

“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.”²

Then I followed up with the question, “What is the end?”

This week, my question is, “What does it mean to start from the end?”

In the structure of a church year, Christmas and Easter serve as the end, as in they give us the framework for the rest of the church year.

From December 25, we count back four Sundays, and that gives us the first Sunday of Advent. So, even though the Advent calendars sold in stores usually have 24 boxes or windows, sometimes 25, the season of Advent is a different length every year.

Likewise, we work backwards from the date of Easter (there’s a fancy chart on BCP 881 for that) to determine the date of Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday marks the end of the season of Epiphany, and the beginning of Lent. With the date of Easter in hand, we also look *forward* fifty days to determine the day of Pentecost. Then the season after Pentecost, also called Ordinary Time, ends when Advent begins.

All this is to say, starting from the end, knowing the end we are moving toward, gives us a sense of purpose. This helps us live with intention; this gives us a framework to make plans.

I’ve just thrown a lot of terms at you, so another way to conceptualize the church year is to think of it as a growing season.

I came to this because one of the Chinese characters for “thinking” is made up of the character for “field” set over the character for “heart” or “mind.” This analogy changes a little as I learn more about growing things and the more I go through these seasons, but here are the broad strokes.

With Christmas comes the light of Christ. So, Epiphany is the season of light, of realizations that bring illumination. The light of Christ reveals important truths about Jesus, about the world, about the field that is our hearts and minds.

Based on what we see and hear during Epiphany, the goal is to enter Lent with practices or habits that help clear the weeds and rocks from our field. By removing these obstructions, we can be more present to the things and people that are genuinely important to us. Instead of focusing on what the world is telling us about who we are or should want to be, we can concentrate on the person that God is calling us into becoming.

Having cleared the field during Lent, Easter is the season for picking out and planting seeds. When we are baptized, we die to our old self and we rise to new life in Christ, and

Easter is the season for reflecting on the spiritual gift or the aspect of ourselves we want to give life to, or perhaps resurrect, now that we have prepared the field for planting.

Then Ordinary Time, the season after Pentecost, is the long growing season. Week after week, we diligently water and fertilize the field. We faithfully do all the seemingly boring and tedious but essential tasks that will enable these newly planted seeds to sprout and grow.

At the end of the church year, we reap and share the fruits of the harvest and give thanks. Then in Advent, we are invited to rest and reflect.

We let the field lay fallow for a bit as we ponder endings and beginnings. We ponder the purpose for which we are cultivating this field that is our hearts and minds. We ponder the end we are working toward.

When John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, he proclaimed, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” When he tells us to repent, he isn’t trying to shame us. He’s trying to warn us that we might be looking in the wrong direction; we might not be working toward God’s end, for God’s purposes.

Other translations of John’s proclamation include,³

- “Change your hearts”;
- “Turn away from your sins”;
- “Change your old way of thinking”;
- “Turn to God.”

This is John preparing the way of the Lord; this is John asking us to examine the field that is our hearts and minds.

Have we been growing the right things? Are we taking our cue from God? What are we using as our equivalent of the Farmer’s Almanac?

John cuts quite a striking figure. Dressed in camel’s hair and snacking on locusts and wild honey, he tears into the Pharisees and Sadducees. He calls them a brood of vipers. He tells them that every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down, and the axe is already lying in wait.

He tells them that one who is coming after him and is more powerful and will separate the wheat from the chaff, the outer layer of the wheat that we cannot eat, and will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.

He’s really hammering home the whole “The end is near” bit. Basically, if you’re not nervous about whether or not you’re right with God, you should be.

Yet, he also encourages them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

Other translations of this include,⁴

- “Produce fruit consistent with repentance”;

“If you have really turned from your sins to God, produce fruit that will prove it”;
“Do the things that show you have really changed your hearts and lives.”

Most of our fields probably have a mix of the right things and the not-quite-right things. The ratio probably changes from season to season. Yet, John is not saying that it has to be perfect, just that we need to bear fruit worthy of repentance. All we need to do is show that we’re turning to God, that we’re *working on* transforming our hearts and lives.

We need to live with intention and purpose AND we need to be aware of the consequences of our thoughts, words, and deeds. When we consider a rule of life, we need to consider both the input and the output.

This is a reminder that we can’t just go on autopilot. He tells the Pharisees and Sadducees that they can’t assume that they are right with God simply because they are the children of Abraham.

If he were standing here, he would tell us that we can’t assume we are right with God because we’re sitting in church. We can’t say things like, “We give money to the church, we’re good,” Or “We’re nice people that help other people, we’re good.”

Drawing on the other scriptures assigned for today, we are right with God when our hope is grounded in steadfastness and our reading of the scriptures. We aren’t just making it up as we go along, trusting in our own wisdom above all others. Traditions are imperfect, and they have been tested over a period of time longer than we’ve been alive AND they make a good starting point, a helpful conversation partner.

We are right with God when we live in harmony with one another in accordance with Jesus Christ. Note the addendum. We don’t get along just to get along; we need to be guided by the spirit of the Lord. Where Paul says “do not repay anyone evil for evil,” my old bishop, Marc Andrus, always adds, “but make no peace with oppression.”

We are right with God when we welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us, for the glory of God. People can feel the difference between desperation and genuine hospitality, between saying all are welcome and living by those words.

We know we are right with God, we can feel it in the depth of our being, when the God of hope has filled us with all joy and peace in believing. Not fear of retributions, not an eagerness to judge others, but joy and peace.

These are the fruits of repentance. These are ends we start from. To start from the end means that we know where we’re going. To start from the end means that we’ve identified our purpose.

Last week, I said the first rule of having a rule of life is to talk about having a rule of life.⁵ The second rule of having a rule of life is to know our purpose, the fruits we seek to bear.

So, think about the end you want to work toward.
What does it mean for you to turn back to God?
What are the old ways of thinking you'd like to set aside?

Then let us work backwards from there to create a plan, a framework, to prepare the way for Jesus to enter our hearts, to prepare the field that is our hearts and minds for this year's harvest.

Amen.

¹ To watch the lectures for yourself <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFWYr1BamBI>

² [T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding"](#)

³ <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Matthew%203:2>

⁴ <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Matthew%203:8>

⁵ Take that, Fight Club!