

**SLD11.27.11 First Advent**  
**EPC**  
**Mark 13:24-37**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Heart to Heart”**

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, which marks the beginning of a new year in the life of the church and in the story of our faith. The old year culminated last Sunday with the crowning of Christ as eternal King, Source of Life, Conqueror of Death, and Consummate Ruler over all powers, principalities, and possibilities. Today the story of our faith starts over again, in the manner in which all true stories begin, which is with an ending. Only pretend stories begin with beginnings. Because the truth is, beginnings begin only after endings.

“Once upon a time...” begins many a fairy tale, and something in us relaxes, for who of us doesn’t enjoy a good tall tale? Once upon a time there was a princess.... Well, the princess’s story didn’t *really* start that way; only *our* story about the princess. The princess’s own story began with her birth, and losing her baby teeth, and enduring zits and braces and the heartbreak of adolescence, and growing up privileged and protected and probably clueless to the suffering of others.

Actually, that’s not even right. Even the *princess’s* story started before her birth: with the glint in her father’s eye, and her mom’s difficult pregnancy, and a clever midwife who knew what to do when the baby presented feet first. But even before that, there was the drama of her grandparents’ arranged marriage, which ended the war between the great-grandparents, which really started because of the madness on her great-great-grandfather’s side, and...well...you get the idea.

There's always lots and lots of endings before any new beginnings. We just don't generally pay them much mind because we're more interested in where *our* story begins. Or, at least, where we think it does.

In any case, the season of Advent invites us to slow down a bit and maybe catch up a bit with some of those endings that precede the beginnings of the story of our faith. Which, of course, rubs up against even what we in the *church* want to be doing, since everything, and I mean *everything*, inside and out of us, wants to get on with the joyous season of Christmas and all that it means: fun, good food, good cheer, good music, beautiful decorations, time off, time with family and friends, a rise in consumption...much, quite frankly, of what we like best in life.

But when it comes to the birth of God and all the goodies that come with it, Advent is something of a Texas slide, Matrix Reloaded, the Messiah in slo-mo, the opposite of a "shortcut" on your computer. In fact, Advent is something of a "*longcut*" icon to Christmas, ignoring our, and the market's, urgency and slowing us down long enough to shuffle around in those uncomfortable endings that forever precede what we really want to be doing. Which is to get on with the Christmas carols, right?

'Well, too bad,' counters the Revised Common Lectionary and our Reformed tradition that honors it. You and I and Cecelia Elizabeth and Mason Chastain may *imagine* our stories began with our birth, but our parents know better. There is so much that went on before we arrived on the scene.

And among the things that were going on in Jesus' community before his birth was the age-old, I mean, we're talking millennia-old, expectation of the coming

of the Messiah. And as with any long-nurtured, communally shared, hope-filled expectation, a number of pretty firm beliefs accrued about what exactly that would look like. When the Messiah comes, the Jews would be united by a Davidic king, the temple would be rebuilt, and there would be peace on earth. Basically, when the Messiah showed up, God's kingdom would come; about that everyone pretty much agreed.

So come December 25<sup>th</sup> or so, the Jews weren't looking for a sentimental story about the birth of a God-child, they were looking for the coming of the Kingdom of God, which, to them, meant the end of the world as we know it; the beginning of the world as God intends it.

So, you all know the drill, Jesus gets born, lives, dies. He and his followers claim he's the Messiah and some seventy years later that story eventually gets spun and written down. Only, you recall how confusing Jesus was even to his own disciples who, believing him the Messiah, or trying to, kept wondering why things weren't panning out the way they'd been led to expect by Messiah lore. How come things weren't changing, calming down, lining up the way they were supposed to? How come Jesus wasn't winning? How come he hung out with losers? How come he died? And how come, after he died, everything seemed just as flat and confusing and hopeless as before? I mean, no matter how you spin it, Jesus came and went, and the world was pretty much in the same shape it was in before he appeared on the scene.

“Never you mind,” was the early Christian response; “Jesus is coming back. And when he does, by golly, *you’ll* see, in the twinkling of an eye.”

Only he *didn’t* come back in a twinkling of an eye, or even after a slow wink. In fact, the eyes of the ones who’d actually met him had already closed permanently and *still* he hadn’t returned.

“Well, he’s not back *yet* but he *will* be,” taught the church. And when he does, by golly, *you’ll* see.” But only if you’re looking. Only if you’re awake, only if you’re alert, only if you’re hip to the signs of the kingdom. Otherwise, you’ll miss it, and it’ll miss you, and you’ll lose out and be left behind. You miss the signs of the kingdom and it’s your own darn fault. Talk about a setup of eternal angst.

But what if we’re talking about two very different things here – a temporal reality and a spiritual reality. Jesus came and went – a temporal reality. Through his life, actions, teachings, he *manifested and witnessed* to the Kingdom of God – a *spiritual* reality.

Temporal realities have a beginning and an end; spiritual realities don’t. Spiritual realities just are, all the time. Or really, we could say that in spiritual realities, time itself is simply not a player. Which is why, I think, we get all mixed up about first and second comings, and the “already” and the “not yet” of the Kingdom. We keep trying to soldier up transformation on a time-line, just as we do our whole holy history. It’s not our fault; it’s just how we think. Linearly. Beginnings. Endings. It’s how we make sense of things.

But what Advent does is shuffle the deck a bit, the deck of time, and say, “Hold on there. You think you’re getting ready for the birth of a baby who’s going to

change the world but that's not the beginning of his, or our, story. What we're *really* bellying up to here is the end of the world as we know it. That's what the Jews before us and Christians to this day claim: that this kid that's coming won't just patch things up the way we want. He comes, and the world as we know it comes to an end."

Do you hear how not jolly that is?

Me, I don't even like it when Windows comes out with a new version. I don't like it when manufacturers update their labels. I'm not all *that* comfortable when Elise changes her hairdo.

But "in those days (when Jesus comes)..., the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken," never mind the powers on earth, and by God, *nothing* will be the same!

But here's the thing: according to our faith, Jesus comes whenever we call him. In fact, according to scripture, before the beginning Jesus already was. Even according to our silly calendars, Jesus comes every year on December 25. And every time he shows up, he's this time-bomb blowing apart what we think we know.

Can you see what's off about getting caught up too soon in layettes and Christmas lights? What Advent does, it says, "Are you kidding me?! Careful what you ask for. This kid is dangerous. You're looking for a gurgly baby and God means to change the world as you know. *That's* the ending that has to come before the beginning, and there's no getting around it. And it's scary, folks.

Because what the end of the world as we know it means...is...we really don't know what comes next!"

And who of us is ready for that? That not knowing. That not planning. That not controlling. However much we pray it, are we really sure we want God's kingdom to come?

Generally speaking, our western religious imaginations are considerably more at home with God the Creator than with God the Destroyer. It's hard to imagine God bringing the world as we know it to an end, on purpose. Anyway, we're forever hearing that that's what humanity's about – destroying the earth through fear, greed, over population, nuclear annihilation, global warming. But according to scripture, the ending before the beginning is *God's* doing, not ours. And we're no more in control of the way of it than we are in what it spawns.

But...and this is the other aim of Advent, the assurance that something *will* be spawned. First, the world as we know it will end, is forever ending. And out of that ending God will spawn some new beginning. Maybe not what we expect, maybe not what we're hoping for, maybe not even what we can imagine, but *something*, some *divine* thing, is always spawned out God's divine endings. And *that*, my friends, is what we're meant to be looking for.

We all know what we want, how we want things to go, how we want things to be. We even imagine that by certain choices or behaviors we can assure, or at least, impact, the outcomes we desire. But Advent is not about what we want, what we imagine, what's in *our* control; Advent is about what God wants and intends and accomplishes with or without our understanding.

Life happens. Seasons happen. Age happens. Death happens. All, finally, outside our control. But peace also happens; justice happens, righteousness, forgiveness, healing, all happen, all signaling God's Kingdom among us. The season of Advent reminds us to slow down and look for those signs. To pay attention to them. To take them seriously.

Acknowledging, honoring, surrendering to, the end of the world as we know it, during Advent, we're summoned to look for signs of God's new beginnings.

Honestly, I'm not entirely sure how to prepare ourselves to do that. How does one prepare to relinquish control over something one never had control of in the first place? I don't know. Maybe it has to do with cracking illusions. Or mystical insight. Or maybe just growing up. Or maybe we can't really prepare ourselves but only remind one another that in the face of chaos, grief, confusion, and despair, all those cues of our own powerlessness, we faithful are meant to start craning our necks for the Kingdom.

At the very least, by thrusting before us the end of the world as we know it, the season of Advent raises the stakes of the birth of the coming Christ child, reminding us that this is not just a jolly time of year; it's our only hope.

It may be about as romantic as support hose, but the season of Advent may be just as helpful getting the blood to flow back to the heart. Which is where we suffer most dearly the inescapable signs of our world falling apart. *And* where we perceive most clearly the unpredictable in-breaking of divine possibilities.

Advent reminds us that Jesus came to change the world, a truth so precious that the one who finds it will give up everything she has to keep it, sell everything he

has to buy it, give up everything she *is* in order to *grasp* that tiny mustard seed of wisdom, that speck, that hint, that jot, that thought, that holds hidden in itself all the transforming power of our nuclear God.

We disciples of Jesus cannot help wanting what we want. But Advent is a time for us to quiet our wantings, and to wait, and to watch, for whatever comes next, not from our own imaginings, but from the heart of God.

So let's don't be fooled: the crowds, the rush, the press, the frenzy – depending on how you're wired, they may be fun, they may be daunting, they may be depressing, but for the faithful, they're just froth. The substance of this season is for our hearts to remember, recognize, anticipate, and participate in the all-consuming heart of God from which is forever issuing a spiritual, and temporal, reality that changes *everything* in heaven and on earth.

To the glory of God. Amen.