

The End (Is the Beginning)

The First Sunday after Christmas

December 31, 2023

Luke 2:33–40

On December 31 we usually come to church in the evening at the close of another year that God has blessed us with. This year New Year's Eve falls on a Sunday and we're going about our normal Sunday schedule. Since we're not gathering this evening we can do a little reflecting this morning as we close out this year. Coming to the end of something can bring about all sorts of emotions. Sometimes you are sad when something ends, especially if you don't want it to come to an end. Endings can be a good thing. When you to the completion of something you worked hard for or have looked forward to you are fulfilled and feel good about it having come to an end. You may be ready for this year to end, you may wish you had more time to do the things you wanted to. Ready or not, when one year ends, another begins. The end is a beginning in a sense.

Our reflecting on another year passed coincides with the festival of the Church Year today of the First Sunday after Christmas. We usually think of Christmas as the beginning, and it is. Jesus is at the beginning of His life. His accomplishing of salvation is just beginning. But even here there was an end of sorts. He was in Mary's womb for nine months. The completion of a pregnancy means a beginning, the birth of the baby. The Gospel reading today tells us what happened after Jesus was born. What Matthew tells that happened is actually of an end in that he talks about things that came to a completion. In showing this to us we see that it is actually just the beginning.

In the verses before today's Gospel reading we are told that Mary and Joseph had Jesus circumcised at eight days old. At that time He was also given the name Jesus. All of this, Matthew says, was in accordance with the law of the Lord, which we find all spelled out in the Old Testament. Then Mary and Joseph brought their forty-day old Son to the temple to complete everything instructed by the law of the Lord. At the end, that is, once they were done, they went home and raised their child. The completion of this meant that it was the beginning. He would grow. Matthew says that He grew up and became strong, He was filled with wisdom, and that God's grace was on Him. He would become an adult. In His ministry He would bring about the very things two people there on that day in the temple had spoken of. That day in the temple was the end, the completion of the law's demands, and thus the beginning of everything Jesus would do to accomplish our salvation.

There in the temple on that day Mary and Joseph were new parents. Jesus was a new baby. Everything was new and just beginning for them. But we are told of two people there on that day who were also in the temple. They were now toward the end of their life. Simeon spoke words to Mary and Joseph that amazed them. Anna spoke words to the people who were there in the temple of who this little baby was.

Simeon and Anna were not long for this world, they were coming toward the end of their life. But the things they spoke about were things of beginning. This child, this baby, would grow, and Simeon said to Mary and Joseph that many hearts would turn to Him. But there would also be many who would be opposed to Him. In fact, this opposition to Him was what brought about His own end. This is the very reason that Jesus came. He was born into this world in order to die. His own end on the cross, suffering for the sin of the world, even to the point of death, was why He came. This was to save us from our sins.

His life coming to an end on the cross was just the beginning for you and me. Jesus came to His own end so that our life would not come to an end. Not eternally. He died so that we would not die forever. His life came to an end so that we would live forever. Though it is an end, your death is actually the

beginning. When we die we are no longer bound to our sinful nature. We are no longer in this fallen, sinful world. It is the beginning of eternal life. This is what Simeon and Anna had longed for and now toward the end of their life they were seeing their Savior in the flesh, in the arms of His mother.

As Christians we have this same longing. You don't need to be at an advanced age as they were to see that your life will come to an end at some point. But you also see that it will be the beginning of eternal life. The Savior Simeon and Anna saw and spoke of to the people there in the temple is the Savior that we look back to as we hear His Gospel proclaimed of His suffering, death, and resurrection. Because He accomplished salvation for us we know that death is not the end but the beginning.

But that is still to come. We do not even need to wait until our life comes to an end to have a new beginning. This comes about through coming to an end. You and I will die some day, but in fact we have already died. Our sinful nature has already plunged into death. In Baptism we died to sin and were joined into Christ's death. This is so that we could be raised up to new life in that very same act of being baptized. In Baptism we were given a new beginning. And we live in this Baptism. Each day in fact is a new beginning. As we live in our Baptism we daily die to sin and are raised up to new life. Daily we die to sin, confessing our sin, repenting of our sin, turning from our sin. And daily we rise up to new life in which we live to serve others.

Think of a time when you hurt someone and you were ashamed and told them you were sorry for what you did to them. When they forgave you you now had a new beginning. They were not holding this sin against you, that guilt came to an end. You now had a new beginning in which instead of hurting them in the way that you had you could help them and be supportive of them and love them. When you are forgiven of your sin, you now put it away. You need to stop. You and I will always struggle with this.

This is why what Jesus accomplished there at the beginning of His life was so important. In being circumcised and presented at the temple in fulfillment of the law of the Lord He was accomplishing what you and I cannot do. We are unable to fulfill God's law. It's true that circumcision and being presented in the temple no longer apply to us as Christians. Our Lord has replaced those things with new things. The end of them as regulations upon us means a new beginning. He has given us Baptism which is new life. When He was soon to come to the end of His life He instituted a new meal, a meal in which He gives His body and blood to us to eat and drink. This body is His very own which He offered up on the cross and His blood is that very blood He shed on the cross.

When things come to an end you have time to reflect. You may have missed some opportunities this past year, you may have some regrets, you may have some people you need to reconcile with. Tomorrow is a new year but today is a new day. Each day is a new day. Christ has accomplished your salvation so that you may live in love toward others. Living in Baptism and partaking of your Lord's holy Supper you are ready each day to die to sin and live each day as a new beginning. Each day is a new opportunity and as you make your way through life you are ready for the end of your life when it pleases your Lord to call you home. That end will be but the beginning of eternal life. Amen.

SDG

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