



Beginnings and Endings

[and what happens in between]

Maggi Dawn

Daily Bible readings from Advent to Epiphany

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Introduction

Advent marks the beginning of the Church year and a time of preparation for the celebration of the coming of Christ into the world. It marks the beginning of the Christian era in the birth of Christ, and it looks further back to ancient roots in the lives of the patriarchs, in the earliest human stories of Adam and Eve, and into the timeless eternity of our beginnings in God. So there is an obvious connection between Advent and beginnings.

Advent is also about endings, though, because it anticipates the second coming of Christ. In Christian belief, this idea symbolizes the end of the present era and the fulfilment of the kingdom of God. It's a clearly held hope within the Christian faith, yet at the same time, like all future hopes, it is shrouded in mystery because precisely what the hope means in reality is as yet hidden from us. Here, too, the Bible tantalizes us with promises that cannot be fully understood.

The biblical accounts of beginnings and endings are incomplete, and don't give us the crystal clarity of factual evidence that we would sometimes like the Bible to deliver. But this does not indicate that they have no meaning for us. Even science and rational thought, in which we invest so much trust, cannot give us a full account of our beginnings, and the prediction of the end is even more a matter of conjecture and likelihood. The Bible is neither a scientific manual nor a magical book of fortune-telling. It does not aim to explain science or to predict the future; rather, it gives us stories, histories, songs, experience and spiritual meditations to aid us as we make sense of the lives we live and the world we inhabit.

The biblical accounts of beginnings and endings tell us that the Christian faith is a journey that starts somewhere and goes somewhere. It's a journey that develops through time, rather than simply going round and round in an endlessly repeating cycle. The season of Advent, too, reminds us that we come from somewhere and we

are going somewhere, and thinking about beginnings and endings helps us to rediscover meaning and purpose as we live in these times that are ‘in between’.

There have been periods in history when the Christian hope of a second coming and an afterlife has been used to mollify people instead of addressing issues of justice, or even to frighten Christians into submission. It is healthier to understand our faith as an anchor to the present and a way of discovering the possibility of living in freedom and enjoying depth and abundance in our life now. We do not live in the past, and neither do we want to hasten our own end.

The opening section of this book deals with ‘beginnings’, looking at how the Gospel writers and the writers of the Genesis accounts reveal their ideas about where our story begins. The following sections touch on each of the themes symbolized by the candles in an Advent wreath—the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Each of these themes marks a stage, a new beginning, in the story of salvation, and each of them looks toward the ending in a fresh way.

In between, we shall pause to consider ‘angels and announcements’. The nativity stories are renowned for the appearance of angels announcing new beginnings. This section connects them up with some older stories about angels and offers some meditations on how we hear God’s voice and how we respond to the call to new beginnings in our own lives.

The holy family themselves become the focus of our readings in the first week of Christmas. As we look back on their story, we see how it dramatically marks the end of one era and the beginning of another. Yet, as they themselves lived through it, it was as much a time in-between as our lives are now. This family has much to teach us about the meeting of heaven and earth, the extraordinary and the ordinary, within everyday life.

Finally we will look at endings in the Bible, although (and I hope this isn’t too much of a spoiler!) we shall discover that as the Christian faith is built on the hope of resurrection, endings are always new beginnings.

I invite you to join me in this meditation on *Beginnings and Endings* this Advent. It has been a real pleasure to write on a theme that seems to open up new depths every year, and I hope that you will enjoy these meditations as much as I have enjoyed writing them. I wish you a happy Advent.

Where do I begin? The Gospels and the salvation story

The beginning of Advent is a beginning in a number of different ways. Advent is an ancient season of preparation, both for the celebration of the first coming of Christ into the world and for the anticipation of his second coming. There are themes that carry us through Advent, which are highlighted by traditional readings and by an Advent wreath with four or five symbolic candles.

The first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the Church year, the liturgical journey that explores not only the story but the meaning of salvation. Creation as the start of everything is a theme that is often highlighted at this time.

It is also the beginning of our preparations for Christmas—and, as Christmas celebrations are creeping further and further back into December, Advent is focused more on Christmas than it ever used to be. The preparation for Christmas, and the stories of the nativity, are a key part of the later weeks of Advent.

This first section of the book will visit these overlapping ideas and will also include a look at the beginning of each of the four Gospels, to see how their chosen starting places for the story of salvation connect up to the big themes of Advent.

[1 December]

Early or late?

*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*

*When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall.
Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.*

*One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.*

*For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.*

*Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.*

*Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!
'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'*

*Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!
If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.*

*Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.
Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.*

*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.*

*Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!*

PSALM 27

If you're reading this on the first of December, you may well already have had a Christmas card or two fall through your letter box. I love receiving Christmas cards, from the first ones that arrive on the first of December and those that arrive with a slightly panicked message of lateness on Christmas Eve, to those that come with a sheepish apology around the third of January. Whenever they arrive, early or late, I'm always cheered up by this annual reminder of how many good friends I have.

I have to admit that I find it slightly depressing that Christmas always seems to begin way ahead of schedule, when shop displays and Christmas lights go up in November or even earlier. So when the very first cards arrive in the first few days of December, I'm usually still feeling a bit 'bah-humbuggy' about it all! But when the last posting day is upon us and I realize I'm behind schedule, then I envy the foresight of my early-bird friends and vow to be more like them next year. Certainly Christmas can sometimes feel less like a feast to be celebrated and more like a deadline to be reached. It's often, though not always, the woman in a household who carries the stress of having everything ready for Christmas, but Christmas creates deadlines for all sorts of other people too—church leaders, school teachers, retailers and many others. Such moments focus very sharply our sense of time, and of being bound by time.

In devotional terms, though, following the seasons of the Church year can leave us with this feeling that things never happen at the right time. The realities of life rarely match up with the mood of the Church year: they always come too early or too late. If, as we travel through Lent or Advent, life is delivering abundant joys and happiness, the sombre tone of the season never quite hits home. But it's even harder to deal with if you are feeling down or low when Christmas or Easter arrives. A few years ago, a friend and I

wrote to each other all the way through Lent, sharing our reflections on the season. She was a great devotee of retreats and silent space; I was the mother of a newborn baby, and silent spaces were few and far between. Our Lenten experience was quite profound that year, as we were both going through extreme lows for quite different reasons. On Easter Day my friend emailed to say, 'I'm so fed up with the Church year. Resurrection? I don't think so. I feel like I need to stay in Good Friday for a good long time yet.'

All too often we have this dislocated feeling of being out of time, out of step, and Christmas is a particularly difficult season to negotiate if you don't feel like celebrating. It's not only the Church but the whole culture that feeds us an exaggerated image of happiness and celebration, which sets us up to feel very low if we are not in a party mood. Most of our life is lived in this in-between place where things come early or late, but never on time.

Psalms 27 is sometimes given the title 'A triumphant song of confidence'. I think it reads more like a defiant song than a triumphant one. The way the psalmist mixes up his tenses creates an interesting effect of reflecting on past promises fulfilled, asking for something to happen right now, stating that it's already happened and confidently predicting that it will happen in the future. He seems, at one and the same time, to be giving thanks for something that is already here and asking for help in the midst of trouble. There's an urgent anxiety about his cry for help: 'Do not cast me off, do not forsake me...' (v. 9). Perhaps there's even a touch of the childish promise to be good if God will only help him: 'Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path' (v. 11). The psalmist's experience reminds me of the dislocation of our lives from the Church seasons. God's gifts do not always come according to our timetable or at the moment when we think we need them. Advent and Christmas promise us God's presence, and yet it seems that sometimes God hides his face and is nowhere to be found. God's timetable is not the same as ours, and our sense of need or urgency doesn't twist God's arm into a response.

When I was a child, we had a maiden aunt, a remarkable and

wonderful woman, who always, absolutely dependably, forgot all our birthdays. But at some random time of year—May or July or November—a big parcel would arrive full of presents. They might say ‘Happy Birthday’ or ‘Happy Christmas’, regardless of the time of year. It seemed madly exciting to us to get a completely unexpected present just when life was going through a tedious moment. It was always books (she taught English literature, and was bang up to date on the latest releases) and they were always wonderful. The same aunt, when we went to stay, would sneak into our bedroom just before sunrise, pull jumpers over our pyjamas, and put our bare feet into shoes with *no socks* (against Mum’s rules!), and quietly exit the house with us, leaving everyone else asleep. Then she would pile my sister and me into her very old Austin and drive us down to the beach. This was in Somerset, where the beach goes out for about two miles at low tide. There she would actually drive across the sand—again, strictly against the rules, but there’s no one there at sunrise to make you obey the rules—and out of the car would appear a Primus stove, an omelette pan, eggs, butter, salt, pepper and fresh bread. We ate omelettes and drank tea as the sun rose over the sea, and then went paddling in our pyjamas, breathing in great gulps of early morning salty air. The woman was a genius, and we adored her.

Whenever I forget a Christmas card, a birthday card or whatever, I think of Auntie Margaret. Please, God, let me be like her. I hope I never become the kind of person who demands diamonds and perfume on the right date. I hope I do become the kind of person who remembers to send gifts that someone will love, instead of gifts to satisfy a deadline. Whenever God’s gifts elude me—when there is no joy at Easter, no wonder at Christmas, or simply no sense of God’s presence in between times—again I think of Auntie Margaret. The gift will arrive at the right moment, even if not on the ‘right’ date. Joy on demand is joyless indeed, but omelettes on the beach and presents in July, I can seriously live with.

If we confidently depend on the knowledge that God’s gifts, unlike Santa’s, are not delivered to a deadline, then we can live

within the seasons knowing that the gift they represent will come to us, unexpectedly, not necessarily on time. We can say with hope, or even a little holy defiance, 'I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living' (v. 13).

Advent is all about beginnings. It's the beginning of the Church year, and its themes include the beginning of creation, the beginning of Christianity, and the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth. Most of these beginnings are born out of the ending of something else—an old era giving way to a new one.

These beginnings and endings are on a cosmic scale, but most of what happens in life happens 'in between'.

Our everyday lives are full of small-scale beginnings and endings—births, deaths, marriages, careers, house moves and so on. How do the grand-scale beginnings and endings of Advent help to guide us as we seek to follow Jesus in the 21st century? This book reflects on the stories of six groups of people and individual characters from the Bible; each provides a focus in some way for the idea of beginnings and endings, and each gives us a glimpse into—and draws ancient wisdom from—the human experience that happened in between.

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978-1-84101-566-8
UK £7.99



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Illustration: Frank Wesley, Artist of India

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