

“In Conclusion, Let Me Begin . . .”

*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature:
old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*
(2 Corinthians 5:17, KJV)

“In our end is our beginning . . .”
(Natalie Sleeth, *Hymn of Promise*, 1986)

*“That’s the effect of living backwards,” the Queen said kindly:
“it always makes one a little giddy at first.”*
“Living backwards!” Alice repeated in great astonishment.
“I never heard of such a thing . . . I can’t remember things before they happen.”
“It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,” the Queen remarked.
“What sort of things do you remember best?” Alice ventured to ask.
“Oh, things that happened the week after next,” the Queen replied . . .
(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 1871)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Fifth Sunday of Easter, **April 29, 2018**
(Volume 1 Number 41)
Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

I’ve offered you above a medley, a potpourri, a three ingredient recipe of ways to come at my theme, which I’ve expressed in a rather unusual title, *In Conclusion, Let Me Begin . . .*

Imagine a speaker – one of the “3 Ps” (Politician, Professor, or Preacher) going on and on for, oh, let’s say 30 minutes. The talk has been good, neither so tedious and dull as to elicit yawning and a craving for it to be over, nor so profound and inspiring as to leave the mouth agape in awe so that listeners are thirsting for more. The moment arrives when the welcome words are spoken, *“In Conclusion . . .”* You hear that as a signal to begin to pack up, knowing it won’t be long now until you’re headed to the parking lot. Now imagine if, instead of proceeding to concluding remarks, he continues, *“In Conclusion, Let Me Begin . . .”*

How absolutely backwards! An Ending with a Beginning to follow. A Last with a First to follow. An Omega with an Alpha to follow. Sounds like Easter, if you ask me! Easter backwardness in which life is born from death, and what appeared to be the *Conclusion* of the Christ story – a stone sealing the tomb – becomes instead a *Beginning*, that stone a curtain drawn back to open a new act in the Christ story.

I love that brief passage from Lewis Carroll’s 1871 children’s book, *“Through the Looking Glass,”* sequel to his earlier *“Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.”* Everything seems backwards when seen through a looking glass, and when Alice confesses to being confused, the Queen replies, *“That’s the effect of living backwards . . . it always makes one a little giddy at first.”*

“Living backwards!” Alice says, astonished. “I never heard of such a thing . . . I can’t remember things before they happen!”

The Queen replies, *“It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.”*

Alice asks the Queen, *“What sort of things do you remember best?”*

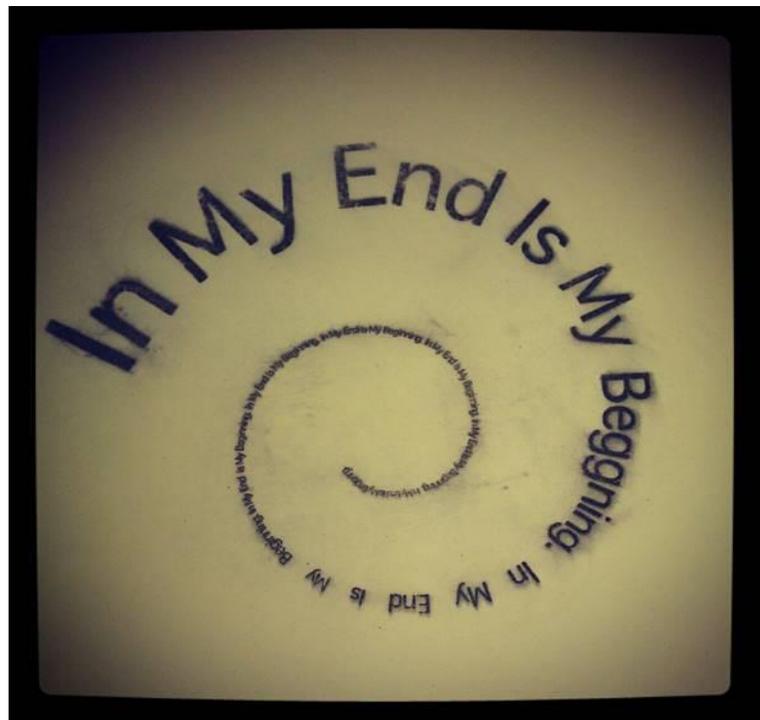
The Queen’s reply is my favorite line, *“Oh, things that happened the week after next.”*

If this confusion of the tenses disorients you, you may be sure it confused Alice as well. How can the future be referred to in the past tense? *“Things that happened (past tense) the week after next (future tense)?”* Surely this is children’s fantasy, not the real world.

It is a children’s book, after all. And yet, is not this backwardness a liturgical phenomenon our church relives each year? I’ve sought to illustrate this with a spiral image of T. S. Eliot’s famous words, *“In my end is my beginning.”*

At any point along the spiral one doesn’t know whether one is at the Beginning or at the End. In the same way, our church’s liturgical calendar is a repetitive cycle, a spiral taking us on a ride from Advent to Christmas to Lent to Easter to Pentecost.

With Easter’s resurrection promise we sense that the new that is born has been here before, that the erasing of sin and death on the cross is in fact the restoration of what once was. So when we look at the future and its eschatological promise at the End of the tracks of time, we don’t so much anticipate it as new as we recollect it as what was, always intended in the will of God and now accomplished through the redemptive work of



Jesus. The Conclusion made possible by Easter restores us to what was in the Beginning.

An ancient Hebrew legend has it that when each child is born, an angel touches its upper lip and speaks one word, *“Forget.”* And, along the journey of life, Forget is what we do, our Divine beginnings dimmed and obscured by living. The legend regards the indentation on our upper lip as the mark of the angel’s touch, the proof of our forgetting. But, in those times when in the sorrow of loss we tremble, when in the face of death our lip quivers at the mystery of what lies ahead, it is the sign that we are at last remembering who we are, that at the Conclusion of our journey, we are remembering, at last, our Beginning.

We are Easter people. We look to the Conclusion of life and see a Beginning. “*So if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,*” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “*we have building made by God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*”

With such a spiral of our Being (in Creation) and our Becoming (through Redemption), it is no wonder the church “*remembers best*” the things that “*happened the week after next!*” All along the rhythmic cycle of the church’s liturgical calendar we are *Remembering Forward*, because our life is in this Jesus, who is “*the same yesterday, today, and to forever,*” the One who is Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, First and Last.

“*Pastor, what things do you remember best?*” Oh, I remember best the things that happened three weeks from now, on Pentecost when the church was quickened, is quickened, will be quickened to new life by the Holy Spirit.

Yes, and I remember best the things that happened 33 weeks from now, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus to a virgin named Mary in Bethlehem, hearing again the angels saying to the shepherds, “*Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people, to you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the King.*”

Oh, and I remember best the things that happened 51 weeks from now when we will again visit the empty tomb and hear the angel say, “*He is not here. He has risen. Come see the place where the Lord lay.*”

You see, our faith *Remembers Forward*, inviting us to imagine the future within the context of faithfully embracing the past.

So, “*In Conclusion . . .*” Well, *In Conclusion, Let Me Begin*. In this sermon in which the *End* is the *Beginning* and the *Beginning* is the *End*, I now come to what might have been my opening, a sharing of one of my pet peeves in modern English translations. It’s the reason I’ve given you our text from 2 Corinthians 5:17 in the translation of the King James Version (1611), highlighting a single word, “*Behold.*”

Now, to be sure, I love the New Revised Standard Version, published less than 30 years ago (1989). With this text, though, I prefer to *Live Backward* into the KJV’s lyrical quality that rendered it beloved. I regard the editor’s decision in most modern English versions as vapid, bland, and tasteless. Here’s the NRSV: “*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*”

No, no, and no! I prefer a weak “*Behold!*” to the strongest, “*See!*” “*See*” is just too common. “*Did you SEE this, did you SEE that?*” We use it every day. It’s too pedestrian. It’s unimaginative, uninspired, even humdrum. Don’t get me wrong. “*See*” is a Fine word, but lodged into this passage it is insipid and pale, colorlessly insufficient adequately to express the heights of the hope being declared.

For an uncommon hope, let us have an uncommon word, something to startle us to attention! “*Behold!*” Don’t tell me the word is antiquated. Its meaning is anything but lost to modern

readers. We use it still, describing singular experiences as “*A sight to behold.*” Surely no one in the English-speaking world, no matter how young, would miss the impact of that phrase.

We Christians should be in the business of *Beholding!* Barbara Brown Taylor said that the parts of the biblical story that had drawn her and hold her still are not so much the “*Believing Parts*” appealing to the intellect, but the “*Beholding Parts*” evoking a sense of wonder and awe. I like that. Let me share from the KJV some of the Beholding parts of our faith:

“*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and shall bear a son and you shall call his name Emmanuel.*”

“*Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the peoples.*”

“*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*”

“*Behold, I show you a mystery, we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump.*”

In each of the well-known verses above modern English translations replace “*Behold*” with “*See*” or “*Look.*” If you ask me, that diminishes the impact of wonder that is intended. How so? Well, I think because a common word like “*See*” speeds things up, while the word “*Behold*” slows things down. Slowing down can be good.

I think now of those disclaimers at the tail end of radio ads, spoken at unnaturally breathless pace in which understanding each word is not the point. It’s a paradox. The ad pretends to scream, “*See! Pay Attention!*” but, has the opposite effect.

Seems to me that to *Pay Attention* we need to slow things down, not speed things up. Gathering for congregational worship we pass through the foyer as those transitioning from the hurried pace of living into a sanctuary where we are intentionally slowed, giving us space to *Behold!*

In this sacred space I long for you to enter a spiritually creative nebulae, surrounded by images prompting contemplation and eliciting wonder at the majesty of God. In this sanctuary the measured pace of hymns and their deep truths, the steady ritual movements observed through millennia, the rhythmic readings of the psalms, the well-rehearsed choral anthems – all is meant to invite you into a stillness where you might *Behold* God and where (in this Easter season it is especially timely) you might be reminded that you are Easter People who look at a *Conclusion* (even Death) and see a *Beginning*.

Let’s now stand and sing *Hymn of Promise*, rejoicing especially in the 3rd stanza, “*In our End, is our Beginning.*”