

I am about to do a dangerous thing as a preacher. I am going to ask you to imagine your favorite movie. Now I run the risk of all of you having your own private showing of your favorite flick sans the popcorn. Although I am being told that the ushers will be coming down the aisles periodically to keep you from propping up your feet on the pew in front of you. But I really do think it will inform our time together this morning if we think of a favorite movie, or even a favorite novel. I'll bet more than half of you immediately thought of how the story ended.

The bad guy gets his just desserts...

Circumstances finally pan out for the couple we have been rooting for all along to finally fall in love...

They ride off into the sunset...

The ragtag band of heroes save the world...

The evil doers vow emphatically to return and we are immediately excited for a part II...

And just to keep your attention, I am gonna hold *my* favorite ending until the end of the sermon...

But what is it about endings that are so important to us? There are reasons that we have invented phrases like "spoiler warning" or "spoiler alert". We care about the end of the story and we don't want to have it ruined by a reviewer or even an excited friend. We get disappointed when a long-running tv show has a lackluster ending or leaves us somehow unsatisfied. Human beings love stories, but more than that we crave the closure of a satisfying THE END.

Just try and tell a cliffhanger of a bedtime story to a five-year-old. They might be up all night wondering, "What happens next?" I can't wait until tomorrow night!! Can I sleep in the bed with you?

Well today, in case you haven't already figured out where I am taking us, today is the THE END of the church year. This is the last Sunday before the new year begins in Advent. We call it Christ the King Sunday. And trust me, the church was well aware, centuries before Thomas Edison invented moving pictures, even before the first modern novel was published, the church knew about our need for closure and good endings. Even before the foundation of the world, it seemed that God knew of our affinity for stories. One of the chief ways God has chosen to reveal himself is through the story of salvation history in Holy Scriptures.

We are presented with a unique set of scripture readings this morning. It is not often that we are presented with essentially a pair of bookends to one particular story. The canticle we read this morning is taken from the first chapter of Luke's gospel, and the Gospel text that I just read came from the next to last chapter, almost near the end of Luke. We are confronted in this set of bookends with the heights of joy and expectation and the lows of despair and defeat. What a perfect picture of that in-between time I spoke about last week.

I love Canticle 16, also known as the song of Zechariah. And in general, I love this aspect of Luke's Gospel. If someone can sing what they are thinking, they do in Luke's gospel. And we are presented with a well-worn story beat at the very beginning. Elizabeth and Zechariah are having trouble conceiving a child. Students of scripture's should have goosebumps. This is one

of the classic ways that God acts in human history. SO when we hear about this couple's trouble we know that God is about to do something. Remember last week, when God is about to do something, when God is fixin' to do something... we should get excited.

Now whether in a weak moment of disbelief, forgetting these classing stories of people giving birth beyond their prime years, or maybe just in shock, Zechariah is dumbstruck, unable to speak until the baby is to be born. And as soon as they brought the baby to him he was able to speak but he just ran right on through plain old speech and he started singing. He was excited about what God was fixin to do. This child was the one who would prepare the way for Jesus. Preaching repentance and heralding the savior who was promised through the prophets. There is some deep foreshadowing... this savior this King will save us form our enemies but also have a peculiar quality of the tender compassion of forgiveness:

In the tender compassion of our God *
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, *
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

And that is the beginning of the story. And if we were all at the Three Star Cinema with our popcorn and Dr. Pepper we might turn to our friends beside us and say (quietly, of course) "This is gonna be really good."

FAST FORWARD

We're 2 and a half hours into this movie (because that's unfortunately how long movies are now), and we're thinking this has got to be near the end, but simultaneously we don't want it to be the end because we are now seeing Jesus being executed along with two others at a place called the skull. How can this be? This is not what we were led to believe when at the beginning we heard not only one song, the song of Zecheraiah, but also the Magnificat:

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."

The bad guys are winning and we don't know how or why. All these different modalities of salvation were promised in these fantastic opening numbers... these songs promised a win for us. And now being king is just a joke they wrote above him. "He can't even save himself, how's he gonna save us?" And we're tempted to join in, because we're disappointed or confused or just tired. And then just like the angel interjects at Zechariah's lowest point, the thieves have something to say to Jesus. Like us, one of them is ready to give up and join in the mocking of this king who seems to have failed, but there is another one who realizes the truth of the

situation. Jesus's apparent failure doesn't disqualify him from being king, from being the savior, the one who came to set us free. In fact, it may be possible that putting himself at risk, by becoming like one of us though by the thief's own testimony Jesus had done nothing wrong, this vulnerability might be the most supremely kingly action ever. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And I am crying into my root beer at the Three Star Cinema watching all this. Ugly crying as Jesus promises to meet the thief in paradise. To finally deliver on what was promised, though not in the way we expected.

And that is exactly how Jesus operates. Christ the King defies expectation, because what we expect is not really what is best for us. Somewhere between the expectant joy of our deepest hope for our world, for ourselves and our families, for our church... we might even sing about it... somewhere between that joy and the inevitable reality of our disappointment.. that is the kingdom of Christ the King. That is where he lives and reigns forever and forever. Christ the King makes up the difference, doesn't take away the sting of our pain, but he lives through it alongside of us, assuring and reassuring even if we are blissfully unaware of what we are doing, promising paradise, providing a possibility, even though we don't deserve it.

THE END

That is the last word. Or is it.

Oh and I promised I would tell you my favorite movie ending. I have to ask: How come Luke Skywalker and Han Solo both get medals after they blow up the Death Star and Chewbacca doesn't get anything?

So back to our ending this Sunday... The Church has a funny geometry. We don't go from point a to point b in a straight line. Why? Because the church has figured out that we are human beings who wander in the wilderness, who even as we are in the holy part of the temple doubt the power of god, who mock Jesus from 10 feet away even though we are suffering on our own cross, who lie to ourselves even when looking at the face of Christ himself... no people like us need endings, but we also need cycles and circles and do overs. So next week, we'll start over again. Maybe we'll get some things right that we got wrong. Maybe we'll think of ways to mess up that we hadn't thought of before. Maybe it will be the best year you ever had. No matter what, God will still love you and Christ will always be king.