
At the End of Things

A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 29, Year C

This morning, we arrive at a threshold.

The Last Sunday after Pentecost. The Feast of the Reign of Christ. The end of the liturgical year.

Our church calendar brings us here every November, right to the threshold, to the boundary line between what has been and what comes next. We stand at the end of the Christian year with Advent waiting just on the other side of Thanksgiving. I love the rhythm of our calendar: the expectation of Advent, the joy of Christmas, the revelation of Epiphany, the repentance of Lent, the solemnity of Holy Week, the triumph of Easter, and the steady faithfulness of Ordinary Time. And then we do it all again! And again! The cycle of the Church calendar is a built-in reminder that the Christian life is always lived on the edge of something ending and something new beginning. Endings are simply a part of the Christian story.

But I don't like endings. I don't like change. Surely, I'm not alone in that. Even good change is difficult!

When I was little, I had a farm-themed bedroom. The walls were painted sky blue. Green grass grew up from the baseboards. My headboard was made of white fence posts. Paintings of cows hung on the walls. And one day, while I was away at preschool, my mother decided the room needed something special. She painted fluffy white clouds drifting around the top of the walls. Soft, gentle, happy clouds. What a sweet labor of love!

I hated it.

I did not quietly dislike it. I did not politely question the change. I threw a fit. A full, sobbing meltdown that only a snack and a nap could fix. Why? Because the room I knew, the room I was used to, had been changed! Never mind that the change was good! Never mind that the room was objectively better! I actually loved the clouds! But it was different! And different, in the mind of this child, felt like loss.

Even a good change can feel like a bad ending.

Endings unsettle us. Change disorients us. Endings do something to the human soul. Change strips away the familiar and leaves us standing in territory we did not choose and cannot control.

Some endings arrive quietly: a child growing older, a friendship changing shape, the slow shift of a season in life.

Some endings arrive suddenly: a surprise diagnosis, a job loss, a tragic accident.

Some endings are joyful: a graduation, a relocation for a dream job, being declared cancer-free.

Others come as a chronic aching of the soul: the demise of a dream, the end of a role once treasured, a loss of long-held identity.

Whatever shape they take, endings confront us with the same truth: we are not in control. We cannot hold it all together through willpower. We cannot make life stay the way it was. And coming to that realization does not usually feel holy or hopeful. Endings feel like loss, like standing on the edge of something unknown. And yet, scripture insists that these very places, these places where we feel the most uncertain, are often the places where Christ meets us with the greatest clarity.

Our Gospel reading this morning brings us straight to the greatest of those endings: the crucifixion.

The crucifixion is the starkest ending the Christian imagination can hold. There is nothing symbolic or metaphorical about it. It is the real, brutal, horrifying end of Jesus' earthly life. It is the end of his breath, the end of his strength. To the world, the King of the Jews' crucifixion is a failure, the unravelling of Jesus' whole story.

The crowd knows this, the leaders and the soldiers know this, and so they mock Jesus on the cross: "If you are the Messiah of God, if you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" They taunt Jesus with the same confusion that persists today: the false belief that real power avoids suffering, that real kings escape all consequences, that real Messiahs do not bleed or die.

The tragedy of that mockery is this: they do not understand who he is or what he is doing. They imagine a Messiah whose task is to avoid death. They cannot fathom a Messiah whose mission is to enter death fully and transform it from the inside.

Beside Jesus hangs a man in the same agony. A criminal whose life has collapsed into this final moment. He hears the mockery, feels his own body collapsing. And somehow, in the shared suffering of their dying, he sees in Jesus what no one else sees: the true King does not come down from the cross but reigns from it. So, with nothing left to offer but his need, he turns to Jesus and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

The thief does not speak to Christ as some distant, untouchable deity. He speaks to him as a man dying beside him, a man whose shoulders slump under the same weight, whose lungs burn with the same struggle, whose life arrives at the same ending.

And into that man's ending, that last, gasping moment, Jesus speaks the most astonishing blessing in all the Gospels: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Today, in the midst of this ending, in the midst of this death, in the place everyone else thinks is God-forsaken, today you will be with Me. Jesus promises Paradise through the very death He is dying. On the cross, Jesus sanctifies death by entering its pain completely. He takes the place we fear most and makes it the place God waits for us. He takes the ending we cannot escape and makes it our entry into Eden. And because Christ has entered death, no ending, large or small, joyful or sorrowful, is beyond his reach.

St. Paul tells us that Jesus is the "firstborn of all creation," "before all things," and "in him all things hold together." It is through the blood of his cross that God is reconciling all things, things seen and unseen, things in heaven and on earth. Which means this: the Christ who meets the thief in his ending is the same Christ who stood at the world's beginning, and the same Christ who will stand at its completion. And if Jesus holds together the beginning and the end, then he holds every middle place we inhabit: every change, every fear, every ending we cannot yet make sense of. We do not endure endings because we are strong. We endure endings because he holds us together when everything else feels like it is coming apart. We step into new seasons not because we know the future, but because we trust that Christ is already there, reconciling all things to himself. This is why the Church ends her year with Jesus enthroned on the cross as King, to remember the truth that Christ stands at every threshold. Christ sanctifies every ending. Christ carries us into every new beginning.

I want to invite you, gently and honestly, to name whatever ending, small or large, you are facing right now.

What change unsettles your soul?

What chapter of your life is closing, whether you wish it would or not?

What fear stirs when you look toward what comes next?

Whatever it is, Christ is there. He has walked into the ending ahead of you. He has blessed it. He has filled it with his life.

"Today, you will be with me in Paradise."

Because wherever we go, Christ has gone first.

Amen.

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