

Endings and beginnings. Our readings are all about the end times, a contradictory mixture of horror and hope. No one knows *when* the end will happen – not even Jesus it appears, but rest assured that it *will* happen! Coming up next Sunday is the feast of Christ the King and the end of our journey with Mark’s gospel. Advent is next, with my favorite gospel, the Book of Luke, taking center stage. Endings and beginnings.

A couple of weeks ago, I was in Boston visiting my Dad, who turns 92 on Tuesday. He’s in a retirement community on an assisted living floor and doing reasonably well. His memory is full of holes – he can’t remember a password to save his life, but he still recognizes people in his life and hangs on to the really old memories. As soon as I got home, I was reacquainted with my granddaughter, who is all of 13 months old. I couldn’t help but recognize the similarities between these two incredibly important people in my life, 91 years separated:

1. They both rely heavily on the kindness of others to get through their day, from bathing and dressing to feeding to managing their toys;
2. They both fixate to a great degree on bodily functions;
3. Naps are critical;
4. Walking is often more trouble than its worth;
5. It never hurts to be cute.

In our Gospel today, Jesus is very matter of fact about the end times. If you read the entire 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark, you’ll better understand his progression of thought. It starts with a visit to the temple, at which his disciples remark on the size of this impressive stone structure. Jesus dismisses their comments with the observation that soon not one stone will be standing on another. “When will this happen?” they ask. “Look for the signs!” is Jesus’ reply. Like what?

1. Wars between nations;
2. Earthquakes and famines;
3. Persecutions by governments;
4. Families torn apart, brother against brother, parents against children;
5. False prophets and messiahs claiming to be Jesus.

So, you’re all good people of the gospel. You look around and say to yourself, “Hmmm, wars, check. Earthquakes, check. Persecutions, check. Families torn apart by religious beliefs, check. False prophets, check.” I

guess the end is near – when will the angels come to gather me and the other elect? It all seems quite depressing, and you can imagine Jesus' disciples coming to the same conclusion.

Then Jesus tells the story of the fig tree. It's easy to miss these three verses as we look at the storm clouds. But don't miss it! Listen again. *Learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that he (the Son of Man) is near, at the gates.* The fig tree blooming is hardly a sign of death – it is a sign of life, hope, and good times ahead. The point is clear – don't look only at trials and tribulations, but also for signs of budding life.

Thomas Merton once said we spend most of our lives under water. Every so often our head clears the surface and we look around and get our bearings. Then *splash*, we go back under again. In the moments when we get our bearings, we realize, “Oh my God! Look how endlessly trustworthy life is! Look at the God-given nature of simple things!” Look at the blooming fig tree!

Do you ever have those God moments? I hope so. They're wonderful, transformative moments, yet *simple*. An amazing sunset. A Beethoven symphony. The touch of a young child searching for your hand. The taste of a chewy chocolate brownie. The smell of a gardenia. What do each of these experiences do for you? They push you abruptly and firmly into the present, the only place, by the way, whence God lives. They scream to you, “STOP! Stop worrying about the past, stop worrying about the future. Live now, be in My presence now. In heaven, remember, time is irrelevant. God's love is exactly this – a never-ending completely fulfilling absorption into the gift of life that he gives to each of us. An endless summer.

That's the one other thing my Dad and my granddaughter share – they each live radically in the present moment. My Dad is there because of his memory issues, my granddaughter is there because where else does a one-year old live? It's also, as I said, where God is most visible and available. This is what allows my Dad to confide in me, “When the aide helps me after my shower, she even dries in between my toes!” This is what allows my granddaughter to practically wriggle out of her skin with delight when she sees a puppy dog. There's a purity to these moments that absolutely signals God's presence. You can call them *fig tree* moments if you like.

Back to my earlier question, if we have this confluence of trials, tribulations, and blossoming fig tree moments already, why isn't the end happening right now? Why isn't the sun darkening and stars falling from the sky? Because, simply enough, the world isn't ready yet. As Jesus remarks just before this passage today, "The Gospel must first be preached to all nations." (Mk 13:10) Apparently God wants His word to get out to everyone so that we all can read the times properly. Perhaps we all need to simultaneously have a God moment together in order for the end to truly come. What might that moment look like? Only God the Father knows. Our job is to help prepare the world for that eventuality.

How? Point out the blooming fig trees. See the Salvation Army trucks dropping off food, clothing and shelter to the fire victims up north. See the prison inmate getting out on parole in two weeks after ten years behind bars. He's so excited and nervous he can't sleep. Please pray for him. See our Church Hall being opened up to the homeless for two weeks in January. Can you capture some of that in your life this week? Try to grab one God moment a day – just one. To have one, you must stop what you're doing, stop your planning, stop your worrying, and give yourself over to the present. Allow God to get to you.

Then say thank you, because you just got a taste of the end times.