



Beginnings and Endings

(and what happens in between)

Maggi Dawn

Daily Bible readings from Advent to Epiphany

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(and what happens in between)



Ministries

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Preface to the second edition

This book began life as a blog, way back in the early 2000s, when I decided one year to write a blog post every day in Advent. I wrote a second set the following year, after which BRF Ministries asked me to develop the whole project into this book. In the two decades that have elapsed since then, my life has mirrored the themes of the book, taking me through a host of endings and new beginnings of my own. A career move transported us to life in another country, with a new climate and a new culture. My son who appears in the pages of this book is now grown up, and I have entered the generation of grandparents, great-aunts and godparents. And some of those who read early drafts of the book – my father, my stepmother, and one of my closest and dearest friends – are no longer here to see this second edition, but alongside those sorrows I have found unexpected joys in some wonderful new friendships.

So it is that, revising the readings for this new edition after living through nearly two decades of beginnings and endings of my own, I have found that while many details of language and cultural context needed updating, the overall truths of Advent remain the same. Every year we await the celebration of Christ's first coming, an event in the past that marked the beginning of a new era of faith. Every year we look for his coming again – a future hope, the details of which are a mystery, but which nonetheless assures us that somehow, at the end of it all, there will again be a new beginning. But every year we ponder those great truths as we live in the in-between times, in circumstances that have changed since previous years, either because a new beginning has required the ending of something else or because an unforeseen ending has opened the way for another – perhaps yet unknown – new beginning.

The world now feels more violently polarised in political opinion than it was when I first wrote the book; we seem to be living increasingly on a knife-edge over environmental concerns, and the future seems more uncertain than ever. But those timeless truths remain: the story of salvation had a beginning, and we still place our faith in an ending of future hope. This year, next year, and for years to come, we continue to live between beginnings and endings as the stories of our own lives unfold. The great Advent promise is that Christ will come, as surely as day follows night, and therefore the future beckons us with hope, not despair.

Maggi Dawn

Introduction

Advent is about beginnings. It marks the beginning of the church year and a time of preparation for the celebration of the coming of Christ into the world. It celebrates the beginning of the Christian era in the birth of Christ and also looks further back to our ancient roots in the lives of the patriarchs, 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, because it anticipates the second coming of Christ. In Christian belief, this idea symbolises the end of the present era and the fulfilment of the kingdom of God. This is 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 it means in reality is as yet hidden from us. Here, too, the Bible tantalises 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 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.

Biblical accounts of beginnings and endings tell us that the Christian faith is a linear journey. It starts somewhere and goes somewhere; it

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 better to understand faith not as a guarantee of some future outcome, but as an anchor to the present, a way of discovering freedom and depth, and enjoying abundance in our life now. We do not live in the past, but we can learn from it; neither do we want to hasten our own end or to live our lives in fear of what the future will bring. Jesus said that he came that we might have life here and now – not a nebulous promise of some ever-distant future.

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. Subsequent sections touch on each of the themes symbolised 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 new beginning in the story of salvation, and at the same time each one looks towards 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 will 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, 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 creep 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;
this I seek:
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 1 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 1 December and those that arrive with a slightly panicked message of lateness on Christmas Eve, to those that come with a sheepish apology around 3 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 mixed feelings about Christmas beginning way ahead of schedule. On the one hand, especially since I emigrated to the USA, I have grown happily accustomed to buying a new bauble in July – every year our tree has a lovely reminder of where we went on holiday. On the other hand, if Christmas starts in earnest in November, it can get in the way of appreciating what Advent is all about, and I have sometimes caught

myself getting a bit self-righteous about not getting to Christmas too soon. But when the last posting day is upon us and I realise I'm behind schedule, then I envy the foresight of my early-bird friends and vow to be more like them next year. 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.

One year, 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, but at the time, 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.

Psalm 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: 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 an 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 – 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 joy 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).

2 December

John: let's start at the very beginning

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

GENESIS 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

JOHN 1:1-5

Where does a story begin? A storyteller can start from any one of a number of different points, and choosing the starting point is an important decision, because the way a story begins dramatically affects the way the reader understands and interprets it. The beginning needs to be intriguing enough to make us want to read on, it has to give the initial threads that draw the reader into the plot, and it sets up clues as to how to interpret all the information that follows.

Where would you begin if you were telling the story of salvation? You might decide to start where the ‘action’ of the story begins, with the life and ministry of Jesus, his teaching and miracles and conversations with disciples and friends. Of course, Jesus didn’t just come from nowhere, so you might start the story with his birth and add a bit of his childhood and some family history. There again, it would give a bit of context if you told something of the history of Jesus’ people, and how they were expecting a Messiah – so perhaps you’d start with the prophets or even all the way back at Abraham. Come to that, you could go right back to the story of Adam and Eve: that would give you a way of showing why the human race needs salvation in the first place. Where you choose to begin the story affects the way the rest of it is understood. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John begin their gospels very differently, and through their choice of starting place each one gives the story a different slant, a different angle on Jesus, a different focus of theological truth.

A lot of the time when we read the gospels, we try to make a complete story out of four different accounts, filling in the gaps in one with material from the others. But to achieve this completeness, we sacrifice something of the vitality of each individual account. It’s worth separating them out, and noticing their differences, as if we were focusing on different facets of a diamond.

Perhaps the most famous and distinctive opening of all is that of the gospel of John, so often read at carol services, on Christmas Eve or on Christmas Day. And the most obvious thing about it is how closely it echoes the opening words of Genesis. Why did John borrow these ancient words to start his gospel?

I think his borrowing trick does two interesting things. The first is to show that from John’s point of view, the beginning of the salvation story is set firmly at the beginning of everything. John doesn’t think of this beginning as a point in time, though, but in a conceptual, philosophical sense. He is painting a picture of a pre-human Christ – long before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth – who is part of the God who is the source of

all meaning, all life and all being. So John begins the salvation story in the arena of mystical philosophy.

Some readers of John's gospel think that he was too mystical in his approach to Jesus: they find his picture of Jesus undeniably divine but not quite convincingly human. But I think his concern was more to draw attention to the way that Jesus embodies a paradoxical meeting of the mystical and the material – or, if you like, how he connects heaven and earth. 'The Word was with God, and the Word was God,' he tells us (v. 1), leaving us in no doubt about Jesus' divinity – but now he is here in time and space. For John, the salvation story begins right back in the unknowable mysteries of eternity, but he goes on to tell us that Jesus was the means of breaking through the inaccessibility of that mystical beyond: 'The Word became flesh and lived among us' (1:14).

When someone borrows a quotation and makes a new literary classic from it, it affects the original work as well as the new one. By borrowing the opening words of Genesis, John not only grabs hold of an old and well-known phrase to launch his own story, he also gives a new twist to the way the original words are read. Once you've read the words 'In the beginning...' in John's poetic-philosophical rendition, you realise that Genesis itself is open to the same philosophical reading – that this beginning too is not only a chronological beginning but a way of exploring the idea that the source and the purpose of our life reside in God. The human search for beginnings extends far beyond a desire for factual information and a religious account is not a soft option for those who can't cope with science. It's a different kind of search altogether.

It's not exactly true to say that Genesis is *unhistorical*. Writings from other ancient communities in the Mediterranean basin also contain accounts that follow the same big themes as the Genesis stories, of a creation, a garden and later a warning of a flood and a family that survived in a boat. It seems likely that these ancient accounts emerge from the collective memory of prehistorical events, and geological and archaeological finds endorse this view.¹ As archaeologist C. Leonard Woolley wrote in 1934: 'We need not try to make history out of legend,

but we ought to assume that beneath much that is artificial or incredible there lurks something of fact.¹²

The stories in Genesis 1–11 may contain something of what we understand as history, but they are also ‘mythical’ – not in the sense that they are like fairy tales with no serious consequence, but in the sense that they are trying to do more than just deliver facts. They are exploring truths about human life and existence that can’t be assessed by popping them in a test tube or through a computer program. To get the full picture of human life and meaning, we need more than science alone: we also need poetry and philosophy, story and history, art and music. Songs, poems and novels are all forms of writing that don’t necessarily claim to be factually true, yet have the capacity to communicate something about life that is true in a different and perhaps deeper sense.

The stories in the opening chapters of Genesis are *teleological* – told to demonstrate the meaning and purpose of human life, rather than to give a scientific, historical or chronological account of our origins. In that sense, Genesis is right up to date. It’s doing what human beings have always done: making sense of why we are here, why we are the way we are and where we are going.

It’s useful to remember, especially when popular media coverage gives the impression that science and religion are in opposition to each other, that treating Genesis as myth, philosophy or story is nothing new. To read it this way is not a thin, 21st-century apology for a religion that can’t defend itself against the march of science, but a different way of thinking altogether. Augustine, writing in the early fifth century, warned against reading Genesis as if it were nothing more than a historical or chronological account:

It is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics... the shame is not so much that

an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions.³

And, as John himself shows us, as early as the first or second century, Christian writers distinguished between the mystical and the rational, and between poetry and factual reportage.

John, then, borrows the poetic beginning of Genesis to show that the story of Jesus began right back at the beginning of everything. In so doing, he shifts the ground for the interpretation of Genesis, showing us that the scriptures have always had the poetic capacity for reinterpretation, not to change their meaning beyond recognition but to carry the threads of its meaning from one age to the next.

3 December

Luke: let me tell you a story

Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I, too, decided, as one having a grasp of everything from the start, to write a well-ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

LUKE 1:1–7

Luke's is the only one of the four gospels to have this kind of prologue, offering an introductory statement as to why and how the gospel was written. It is a matter of long debate whether Theophilus was the name of a real person or whether the name – which means 'lover of God' – was Luke's way of addressing his readers personally. Either way, the opening sentence has the effect of giving some sense of relationship between the storyteller and the reader. You get the sense that Luke is writing to you personally, not just addressing some nameless, faceless crowd.

Addressing his readers directly is one thing that makes Luke one of the best storytellers in the Bible; another is the way he makes the people inside the story seem real too. Luke gives us more than historical



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'Let me encourage you to get a copy of this book to go with your Advent calendar. In and among the busyness of those December days, these daily Bible readings will enable you to prepare for the coming of God once again.'

Methodist Recorder

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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