

The Circle of Life

Life is circular at least so the song in “The Lion King” says. Life isn’t really going anywhere; it just repeats itself over and over again. Wise King Solomon oppressed with the apparent emptiness of life falls into lethargy saying, “All things are wearisome, more than one can say.... What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecc. 1:8-9). Pretty bleak, huh?

Pagan religions teach that life is cyclical. The nature religions, fertility religions, and all witchcraft are cyclical faiths. For them the destination does not matter as much as the journey. Paganism sees life as an unending circle with no ultimate point. They don’t all teach reincarnation, but they have the thought that “death is a part of life.” We are meant to be born, live, and die. There’s comfort in this, isn’t there? The acorn becomes the oak, and the oak dies dropping acorns to start all over again. The aging, greying, and dying process which Scripture says is a result of sin and is the Last Enemy, doesn’t seem all that bad. It’s just the natural order of things. What Scripture portrays as the ruining of God’s perfect creation, paganism views as a natural order that keeps creation going. To consider Death your enemy, as Scripture says, is as foolish to them as an oak holding on to its acorns.

But life *isn't* a cycle. It’s *not* circular. At a point Creation was begun by God, and at a point in time He will end it. Our liturgical calendar confesses that ours is a linear not a cyclical faith by counting down to this Sunday, the Last Sunday in the Church Year. Each year we are reminded that this life doesn’t last; indeed it’s fleeting. It’s moving toward the Last Day when the heavens and the earth will melt. Yes, there doesn’t seem to be anything new under the sun that circles us daily. But we are, nevertheless, moving toward that day when the Sun of Righteousness will rise (Mal. 4:2) bringing an end to everything under the sun including the sun itself.

The fact that Christianity is linear gives Christians an intensity that circle-of-life people don’t have. The circle-of-life crowd can sing and dance carelessly about having no worries; they can be soft, easy-going and *que sera sera* about everything because they lack an ultimate goal or point. Like the Energizer Bunny the Circle of Life goes on and on. Christianity, by contrast, is urgent and decisive. It calls people to discipline and dedication, to work while the sun is shining before the night comes. Christianity has an ultimate goal and point of reference. There is only *one* thing needful. There is only *one* name under heaven given for salvation. There is only *one* mediator between God and Man. The door of salvation will be shut *once* and for all. How we make the journey happy-sad, healthy-sick, wealthy-poor isn’t the point. How it ends is.

Go home watch your TV shows, movies, and YouTube channels. Listen to your music, read your books, and see how often they present a circular view of life. Then remember the Christian view, from the Christ who said He was the First and Last, is not circular but linear. It’s an hourglass not a sundial. Wait a minute. Isn’t the Church Year a circle? You got me there. Today is the Last Sunday of it, but next Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent. For as long as you’ve been a liturgical Christian you’ve been repeating this calendar. After Advent comes Christmas, then Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and after Easter we’re back into the long season of Pentecost till we end again here. Aren’t we teaching a circular view of life?

Nope, the Church Year, while not identical to what we have now, started in the 4th century. It aims to pass on Gospel themes for your life. Everyone has reoccurring themes, repetitious patterns, and repeating rhythms for their life. Watch your neighbors. Some express their themes in banners they put outside: falling leaves, give way to pumpkins, to turkeys, to Santa, then hearts, spring flowers, firecrackers, and back to falling leaves. Others show their themes by the different wreaths they put on their doors. Others show it by what they do. Basketball jerseys give way to baseball caps give way to football jerseys. Other people build their lives around the political cycle. Depending on the year they will be talking about state, local, or national elections. But don’t Christians do these things too? Yes, but the rhymes, patterns, and themes in our hearts we seek to get from the Church Year. And that is centered on Christ.

In Advent we focus on the Christ who came to save us, comes to serve in Word and Sacrament, and will come to judge in the End. During Christmas and Epiphany our life circles around the miracle that is the Person of Jesus. God in Man made manifest. During Lent the rhythm is the passionate suffering and death of Christ for sins and sinners. During Easter the theme is the risen Christ announcing that His suffering and death swallowed up our sins, our death, and the power of the Devil. And during Pentecost, we focus on how Christ gives us everything we need to grow in grace right up till the world without end.

Have you noticed that I seldom have sermons or Bible classes “ripped from the headlines”? Over these 23 years shootings, tsunamis, hurricanes, election upheavals or more have been headline news. All of these, at least 70% of them, could have been themes for sermons and classes. Only once, after 9/11 do I remember basing a sermon on the news of the day. That’s because our themes, patterns, and rhythms are not from this world but from out of this world. We get to do in church what the Church Triumphant does in heaven. Heaven is not at all focused on presidential politics, Ukraine, El Nino, or the economy.

Hear me out. There are 4 living Beings around the Lord’s throne. This is what the Scriptures says they’re doing: “Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come’” (Rev. 4:8). When the economy fell in 2008 their jaws didn’t drop. When LGBTQ marriage was legalized in 2015, they didn’t stop speaking. All of heaven is focused on Christ. All eyes are on Him; all hearts are His. The troubles, the turmoils, the

upheavals that are the regular pattern, theme, and rhyme of fallen life, don't even cause a ripple in heaven. A Church Year that has Christ at the center guards against the turmoils of earth causing ripples in your life.

Rather than be in a constant state of turmoil, worry, fear, or despair by the themes pushed in media and super charged by social media, we are centered on the themes from the life of Christ. The Church in heaven doesn't listen to the fearmongering, the chicken-littleing, the despairing that people do down here. She is centered on Jesus. And so are liturgical churches and people on earth. Although we celebrate holidays, are active in elections, follow sports, participate in our community, our life isn't tied to the ups and down of this life in weather, politics, or the economy. The Church Year is a circle because it's built around the life of Christ, but this circle moves forward every year. Jesus our Savior is coming ever sooner:

"Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed," says Paul (Rom 13:11). Jesus is the circle we move forward in towards our Last Day.

Whether we're talking about beginnings or endings, we're talking about Christ. Are you faced with beginning something new? Beginning a new challenge, or beginning all over again? No matter. You're not outside of the Christ who declares He's the Beginning, the Alpha, the First. He's at every Christian's beginning till the end. You don't have to get started by yourself. You don't have to get things going. He is there from the get-go. It's the same with endings. We pray in the Maundy Thursday liturgy for the Lord to "Abide with us in the end of the day, in the end of our life, in the end of the world." And He does. There's no ending that you will come to in life whether of life, job, or school that Jesus isn't there already. Whether it be a dead end, the end, or the end of your rope, He's there ahead of you because He is the End, the Omega, the Last.

Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. Jesus declaring that He is the Alpha and Omega is the equivalent of saying He's the A to Z. Everything from A to Z comes through His hands that were pierced for you and your salvation. Not only is everything from A-Z coming through Him, everyone from A-Z is going toward a meeting with Him where they will either be saved by Him or damned by Him. Each Sunday of the Church Year we're preparing for this fateful meeting by having a "confrontation" with Him through the Liturgy. We start at Creation which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost did. We move on to the Fall where we became poor, miserable sinners. And we experience Redemption when we are forgiven for the sake of Christ. Then His Word speaks to us bringing out a confession of faith from us. Then after having the Gospel preached into our ears, we are moved to go to Him in prayer. Finally, each week we can partake of the Divine Nature by means of the Sacrament of Jesus' Body and Blood. These are our connecting points on earth with the Alpha and Omega, the A-Z of everything.

Life is not a circle, but there is a circle in which is real life. The one around the Person and Work of Jesus. Our Sunday liturgy keeps us in that circle and centered on Him. Notice how the Liturgy ends each Sunday with the pastor after pronouncing the Benediction completing for the first time a circle. During the service the pastor turns to his right to face you and to his left to face the altar never completing a circle. After the Benediction though he turns to his right and faces the altar, thus completing the circle that is centered on Christ. This is not by accident but design.

Also note how the Collects in the hymnal all end with "world without end". Isn't an unending world a circle? That's what the editors of LW and LSB thought people might think, so the Collects now end with "now and forever." In doing this, an ancient truth was lost. The phrase "world without end" comes from ancient Jewish liturgy. It is a confession of faith that since this world *does* end, we look to the world that never does. The world centered on Christ. Amen.

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Last Sunday in the Church Year (20221120); Revelation 22:13