

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea,
Gibson Island, Maryland, November 27, 2022.**

Here we are at the beginning of a new year. The First Sunday of Advent.

The “beginning.” Is this what Jesus describes in today’s lesson from Matthew as “the coming of the Son of Man”? That sounds more like the future than the past. Or, is it both?

Well, for you and me in this setting, it is both. God was there at the beginning of time, and God will be there at the end of time, and God is present at every point in this time-line. God is more than bookends. God is engaged.

Having said that however, there had to be a beginning. And that’s what we want to address today on this First Sunday of Advent. The Beginning. The Advent. Without it, there is nothing. With it, there is everything.

So, how do we do justice to this essential Season? Well, I’ve been thinking about this question a lot, and the approach I’ve decided upon is to describe what two of Suzanne’s grandsons are up to. The twins: Michael and Christopher.

Earlier this year, we visited with Michael, who recently earned his doctorate in applied physics from the University of Colorado. His twin brother, Christopher, will receive his doctorate this coming year, also in physics, from the University of Arizona.

Staying in touch with these two young men is a privilege. In addition to the joy and pride they bring to family and friends and each other, there is another factor at play, namely obligation.

I had the privilege of baptizing them as infants at the Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley Forge. And, given this relationship, Suzanne and I have a responsibility to stay in touch and recognize their achievements. You all, as parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, Godfathers and Godmothers, understand this responsibility.

Now, you might ask, what is the link between a baptism at age one and an advanced degree in physics in one's early twenties. Well, let's try **"In the beginning."**

Of course, these young men might view this as a stretch. At this point, they're probably not thinking of "in the beginning" as a description both of baptism and the origin of the universe. But the link makes sense to me and I suspect to you and I hope to them at some point, if not now.

Whatever our training, whatever our understanding, we take for granted that all things have a beginning. After all, you and I had a beginning. We came from somewhere, or more accurately, someone. And, as we age, we reach some conclusions about all sorts of things, including how and why the universe began.

And, in this place, this environment, these considerations and conclusions attribute our beginnings – our individual lives and the universe itself – to Someone or Something. Capital S.

In the case of our individual lives, we attribute our beginning to mom and dad. But to whom or to what do we attribute the beginning of the Universe? Well, in the case of religion, we attribute the beginning of things and the setting in motion of things and the rules that govern things to The Creator.

God has certainly earned the title of Creator. He/she/it – pick your pronoun – created the universe. He/she/it set things in motion. And, as it turns out, you and I are really curious about just who did this. And, is the One responsible still a player in the Universe?

Think of the fascination we have in tracing our roots. It's a growing industry. We don't have to rely on just an aunt or uncle to tell us about our roots. We can be more precise than that. There are professionals who can help us in this search. My guess is that some of you have pursued your roots with the help of one of these agencies.

What religion does is to trace our roots to the very beginning of the Creation, the starting point, or at least as near as we can get to the starting point. What we

soon realize, however, is that we can explore only so far. At some point, we need a “leap of faith.”

And right here is the common ground. It is so for both religious seekers and non-religious seekers. The common ground is curiosity. How did things begin, and how do we fit into the unfolding of the Creation? Yes, baptism and applied physics have something in common. They explore The Beginning: capital T and capital B.

And it's not just exploration that physics and theology have in common. They both reach conclusions. Not the same conclusion necessarily, but a similar investigation, a similar search for the Truth, capital T.

And there is another common ingredient. Not just curiosity and reaching a conclusion. No, we don't stop there. Neither the scientist nor the priest. We share our findings. We believe so strongly in our respective journeys that we share our journeys. We offer our journeys to the world. Sometimes our journeys are in tandem. And other times they appear in conflict.

For you and me in this setting, for example, we are confident in our faith, but not cocky. We don't have all the answers, any more than the physicist has all the answers. But, we are proud of our faith, and eager to share that faith, not in lieu of another person's search and conclusion, but perhaps as a complement to the faith of another.

Emotional comfort and intellectual comfort sometimes are at odds. But not all the time. Capital T Truth is bigger and deeper than any single understanding of the Universe. We might not agree on how things began, but, that they began and continue to unfold, is a shared view.

Which leads to another shared view, and that is a responsibility for the welfare of the Creation. All of us, no matter our background, training and work experience, have a responsibility to take care of, not only one another, but the environment into which we all are born, live, and pass on to a next step, whatever that next step might be.

And, as we seek better ways of caring for our little corner of the Creation, we are driven by thanksgiving for what we are blessed with and mindful of our responsibility and privilege of caring for the creation and passing it on to a new generation.

In short, all of us are students with homework. That's at the heart of our religious faith. "In the beginning" is not just an observation, but a joy and a responsibility. Applied physics might not be our cup of tea, but applied thanksgiving certainly should be.

At the baptism of these two young men at the chapel in Valley Forge, we prayed to God "Open their hearts to your grace and truth." In their own way, they are seeking Truth and they are suggesting ways of applying that Truth. You and I, in this place, are also seeking Truth and finding ways of applying that Truth.

And, when we stumble along our respective paths, the Creator, we believe, is always present to lift us up and strengthen us for our individual and collective journeys. As you and I, in this setting, have pondered the beginning of things and the end of things, so have others in their settings. It is the **pondering** that unites us.

And that, I suspect, is not an accident. St. Paul speaks of "putting on the armor of light." Isaiah uses the phrase "walking a path in the light of the Lord." Yes, the One who was there at the Beginning, the One who lit the whole Creation, is still here and still engaged and still imploring little old you and me to study hard and apply generously. Our homework, if you will.

Amen.