

Is this the beginning,
the middle,
or the end?

Beginning?
Middle?
Or end?

For Sarah, it surely seems to be the end.
Says so right there in this story about her in Genesis:
“Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age;
[and] it had *ceased* to be with Sarah
after the manner of women.”

That is to say,
Sarah’s childbearing years
had ended.
In her mind, she was well at--and even past--the end
of her chance
to become a mother.

But then three men who are the appearance of The Lord
say to her husband Abraham about her,
“your wife Sarah shall have a son.”
And suddenly,
it seems we’re at the beginning of something.
Sarah laughs in response,
so The Lord repeats,
“At the set time I will return to you . . .
and Sarah shall have a son.”

And sure enough, The Lord does for Sarah as promised.
In old age she conceived and bore a son.

For Sarah,
this is no end,
but the beginning.

Or is it the middle?
Because those who’ve read the previous 18 chapters of Genesis
will recall
that long ago God promised Abraham two things:
a new land to live in,

and lots of children to fill it.

By the time of this feast-with-three-divine-visitors,
Abraham and Sarah are living in that new land,
but there's no lots-of-children yet.
So maybe we're in the middle.
No longer at the beginning,
not yet at the end.

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Beginning?
Middle?
Or end?

The same question can be asked about Jesus' sending and mission
to the disciples in Matthew chapters 9 and 10.

Jesus has long ago called these twelve disciples,
who by now have heard his Sermon on the Mount
and witnessed multiple healings and exorcisms and confrontations
in his ministry.

They're in the middle of it all:
in the middle of Christ's going about all the cities and villages,
teaching in their synagogues,
proclaiming the good news of the kingdom,
and curing every disease and sickness.

And now, it's their turn.
Jesus is giving his ministry
to them.

"Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,"
he says,
"and as you go, [you] proclaim the good news,
'The Kingdom of heaven has come near.'

[You] cure the sick,
raise the dead,
cleanse the lepers,
[and] cast out demons."

Seems to be a new beginning for the twelve,
the beginning of their own discipleship,
because now they're going to go off
and start out on their own.

Which means that this moment could also be an ending:
the end of the disciples being physically around Jesus
while he performs his ministry.
The end of being under the boss's supervision,
the end of being in the teacher's presence.

So there it is,
that question again:
Is this the
beginning,
middle,
or end?

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I think the desire to locate or mark the beginning, middle, or end
is a common human tendency.
It's what we do when we tell stories,
when we watch or write a performance,
and when we celebrate milestones:
is graduation a beginning, a middle, or an end?
We also long to identify the start, process, and finish
when entering the realm of the seemingly impossible.

Take Sarah, again:
The Lord comes in the form of three *men* to tell her,
an old *woman* for whom the manner of women has ceased,
that she's going to have a baby.
Sarah has clearly entered the realm of the seemingly impossible.
No wonder she laughs,
like many of us do when confronted with bizarre circumstances
from seemingly uninformed sources
with multiple questions of feasibility.

Similarly for the disciples.
Jesus tells them to do nothing less than the impossible:
cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, [and] cast out demons.
Go forth and do the impossible,

he charges them,
and also do it with nothing,
 taking no coins or bag.
Make your best guesses about who can help,
 leaving the houses or towns that do not welcome you.
And also expect to be reviled, criticized, and condemned
 including by your own family
as you go about doing the impossible with nothing but two tunics and your best guess.

No wonder we're left wondering if this moment for the disciples
and this moment for Sarah
is the beginning, the middle, or the end.

Because when a shift is taking place,
and we long for the bigger picture.
We like to mark even the smallest of transitions with rituals--
 graduations with ceremonies, birthdays with parties,
 moves with housewarmings, deaths with funerals--
in order to recognize the beginnings, middles, and ends.
So of course we have a need to identify where we are
when a MAJOR shift happens.

When we feel in the middle of a series of seismic changes,
we want a sense of continuity.
When in the realm of the seemingly impossible,
knowing the arc of a story helps it all make sense
and helps us find ourselves within it.
As Sarah's and the disciples' stories show,
this is often part of the experience of an encounter with God.

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Friends, the last few weeks
we have found ourselves in the realm of the seemingly impossible,
with overlapping crises and seismic changes all around.

The coronavirus pandemic continues to increasingly wreak havoc and claim lives
even as states "open back up,"
and end-phase trials start on vaccines.

The economy continues to reel with increased unemployment
and turbulent markets
about which it's anyone's best guess.

And the civil rights movement for racial equality and justice known to my generation as Black Lives Matter has moved from a hashtag on the periphery to a series of reforms being taken up by both parties of our United States Congress.

Yes, we are certainly entering realities that once seemed impossible, and so of course we look to locate ourselves within the shift and figure out which moment we're within in the narrative.

About all these crises,
we can ask,

Beginning? Middle? Or End?

When the governor and city council promise to take down the Confederate statues on Richmond's Monument Avenue, is it the end of the glorification of the Lost Cause?
Or is it the beginning of a new vision for who we are--and who we have always been-- as a racially mixed Southern city?
Or is it one development in the middle of the road that tracks the ways people of color and white people continue to live segregated lives in our metropolis?

When the Church, a denomination, or any pastor affirms Black Lives Matter it is for some the beginning of their tradition's honest confrontation with the persistent sins of racism, segregation, and white supremacy. For others, affirming that Black Lives Matter could be the end of their road, as they think "the church is getting too 'political' now." And yet for those people of color and their allies who have been struggling for years to deal with issues of racial injustice, the church publicly affirming the suffering of people of African descent is just one step in the middle of a long, arduous journey.

Is this the
Beginning?
Middle?
Or End?

Perhaps you can see that the answer depends on who you are, from which perspective you look. For the people of God in Jesus Christ, when we ask if we are at the beginning, the middle, or the end,

the answer is always YES.

The answer
is YES
because we are ONE people of the ONE God
who was . . . at the beginning,
is now . . . in the middle,
and will be forever . . . at the end.

When we followers of Christ ask ourselves,
“Are we at the beginning, the middle, or the end?”
we are saying “Yes” to all three,
because we are a people who confess,
Christ *has* died,
Christ *is* risen,
and Christ *will* come again.

As people of God in Christ,
we believe finding ourselves swimming in the turbulent sea of
a mixed-up-beginning-middle-end
is part of the experience
of encountering God.

As Jesus says in our reading from Matthew,
“[T]he one who endures *to the end* will be saved.”
Which means that all those things Jesus mentioned happen to disciples--
going forth into ministry, being dragged before governors and kings,
family conflict and being hated because of following Jesus--
all of that
IS NOT
the end.

You may think it's the end,
or that you're in the middle of something,
or just beginning,
but that just means you're encountering God.

Because it's God in Christ who holds it all.
As Jesus concludes,
“[T]ruly I tell you,
you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel
before the Son of Man comes.”

Beginning, middle, or end?
Yes, God is there with you.

So if you're at the beginning and encountering God,
God's holding of it all
helps you keep things in perspective,
knowing that there is nothing new under this sun,
and others are able to guide your feet if you seek their wisdom.

If you find yourself with God in the middle,
God grants you strength for the journey,
and the trust that people have lived through this before by leaning on God,
and you can, too.

And if you're feeling distinctly at the end of something you love,
encountering God means receiving resurrection:
the resurrection assurance that there is no true ending
for anyone who is in Christ.

For we are all that kind of people:
People held together by God in Christ.
Wrapped up in God's work of resurrection.
Guided by God's saints--of all colors and identities.
Laboring in the vineyard where so many, including God,
have sweated before.

Beginning, Middle, or End?
With God in Christ,
Yes.

AMEN.

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Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7
Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8, 9-23