

**The Reverend T. Stewart Lucas
St. Margaret's Church
Christ the King B
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In the name of God, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Amen.

Well it is that time of year again when we pull out our very best stuff to set the finest table possible for an elegant Thanksgiving feast. The China and the silver, the crystal candlesticks. My family even has some ancient turkey salt and pepper shakers. We've got to use those on Thursday, because when else can you put them to use? And all of it must be set off by a beautiful tablecloth. We've got a closet full at my parents' house. The question was always which one do we use? The Battenberg lace one that we used when my cousin was baptized? The Irish linen one we used to display wedding presents in the dining room when my brother got married? Or the fall themed one with leaves and acorns. We'd really love to use the one from my great-grandmother's collection but it's not long enough any more and it's got a few stains. Maybe we'll just choose the one that's the easiest to iron.

Martha Stewart says you don't have to use a tablecloth any more. You can use festive colored dish towels or huge banana leaves under the plates. Or get some bamboo mats and stencil turkeys on them. Whatever Martha. I don't guess it really matters, but there's just something about a beautiful table cloth that changes the mood of the meal. Even with a few stains, they just add character and stories that no doubt will be told around the table once again as we give thanks for our many blessings.

Turns out we have a pretty special table cloth here at St. Margaret's. We call it the *fair linen*. They're very expensive because they are made with the finest linen and involve a great deal of handwork to make them. Plus they're a pain in the you-know-what to iron. Just ask one of our altar guild angels. Hence the pressure is really on not to spill anything on the fair linen. If you do, you know you better make a bee line to the altar guild queen and make a quick apology. A hand-written note on Monday morning is not out of order if the spill is really bad.

The fair linen has five crosses embroidered on it. One on each corner and one in the middle to remind us of the five wounds of Jesus. The fair linen should be left on the altar at all times. When it is removed for replacement it should be rolled and not folded. It symbolizes the shroud in which Jesus was wrapped for burial.

Now just hold that thought. I'll be back to it I promise.

But I was at the mall this week, taking advantage of the Macy's One Day Sale. The lowest prices of the season. I won't tell you who I was shopping with, because I lost her in the shoe department. I'm glad she found her way back to the altar today. Don't worry, we had already worked an 8 hour day, almost.

Anyway, there I am in the men's' department looking at a great pair of grey wool dress pants that were a steal. And all of the sudden my ears began to ring. I thought it was a fire alarm, but then I remembered the tune.

"It's the most wonderful time of the year." NO! It can't be. I'm not ready. It's too early for Christmas music. I quickly bought the pants and ran out of the store. I'm not there yet. We're not even at the Thanksgiving table yet. Just give me a few more days. Please. For God's sake! So

I vowed to myself to refuse to give in to the over-commercialization of the holiday season, at least for another week until the First Sunday of Advent.

Actually there is no better gospel to shock you back to reality than the one we just heard. We're no where near Bethlehem. In fact, we're stuck in Pilate's headquarters and Jesus is facing his final days. Seems a little odd doesn't it as we know that this is the last Sunday of the church year, right before we begin the season of advent, of waiting and watching and preparing for Jesus' birth, not his crucifixion.

We actually call this day Christ the King Sunday. Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king. Jesus replies, "Whatever you say Pilate. I was born for this, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." And in Revelation we hear "I am the the Alpha and the Omega." The beginning and the end. The Alpha and the Omega.

So to keep those Christmas carols out of my head, I've been singing that song I had to learn in my fraternity in college.

*Alpha, beta, gamma, delta, epsilon, zeta, eta
Theta, iota, kappa, lambda, mu, nu, xi, omicron, pi
Rho, sigma, tau, upsilon
Phi, chi, psi, omega*

Alpha, the first letter of the Greek alphabet to Omega, the last letter. Jesus is A to Z, from the beginning to the end. He existed from eternity as the second person of the Holy Trinity and will exist eternally.

Jesus is our King, the Alpha and the Omega and everything in between. In fact, our Jewish brothers and sisters use that very name for God. *Emet* (אמת), literally "truth", one of the because it consists of the first, middle and final letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

I suppose the reason I'm not ready to enter into the Advent and Christmas season quite yet is that I never want us to forget the end. Let's not be too quick to jump to the anxiety of the impossible expectations of the holiday season quite yet because we've got too much resurrection left to experience.

Perhaps that's the reason that I love the fair linen, that beautiful tablecloth so much. Because over it we remember Christ's Resurrection every week. Without that remembrance, new beginnings are for naught. That very fair linen reminds us of the cloth that lowered Jesus from the cross and wrapped him in the tomb. That very fair linen reminds us of those wrappings that were left in the tomb when the women and the soldiers found it empty. That very fair linen is on the altar when we bury beloved members from this church and it is there when we baptize and welcome new members into the household of God. The fair linen reminds us of the death of Jesus and his resurrection and it reminds us of the swaddling cloths that wrapped him in the manger after his very entrance into this world. Jesus is our King, the Alpha and the Omega and everything in between.

Once upon a time, there was a grandmother named Anna who lived on an island off of the coast of Maine. In the summer it was a wonderful place to hang out the wash and let the fresh ocean breezes dry the clothes in a wink of an eye. The sheets and towels would wave in the breeze like soft puffy clouds against the deep blue of the ocean and the clear, bright sky.

Shortly before her daughter's wedding, on just such a day, Anna decided to wash her best tablecloth. So she got out the washtub and went to work. When she was done, she took it outside and started to hang it. Before she could stick a single clothespin on it, one of those breezes raced along and snatched the tablecloth right off the line, and swept it into the sea. They say she was beside herself, she was so upset. But there you are. The tablecloth was gone.

A couple of years later while the woman was having her morning coffee, a local fisherman happened along. Old Captain Newell knocked on the door, calling out, “Anna, I have something that I believe is yours.” And he held up a soggy, seaweed-covered, dripping mess. “I caught this on my line this mornin’.” Sure enough, Anna got her tablecloth back.

The good fortune of the returned tablecloth captured the imagination of the island people. The story has been told and retold for several generations now. It is part of who those people are, tattered and torn, no longer fresh and pristine, but very real.

Anna looked with amazement at the sodden material they say she first thought she would just put that mess straight onto the dump. After some thought, she again got out the washtub and went to work. She washed it, and she washed it, and then laid the tablecloth on the grass to dry; for it is said, at least in the family’s folklore, that grass bleaches stains out of white cloth.

Later that day, after it dried, Anna discovered a new tablecloth. It was not like anything she had known before, but it was still her best tablecloth. Its color was – interesting. Its story became part of its aura, but it had a new life. That new life has been passed down ever since.ⁱ

So this Thanksgiving, as you sit down at your banquet table and tell those great family stories and as you make new ones, remember the stories of the household of God. Remember the babies we have welcomed into this place and the saints we have sent home to be with God. Remember our great joys and the burdensome sorrows we have experienced here. Remember not to jump too quickly to the allure of new beginnings as great as the temptation may be to wash away all of the stains of this life, because first we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Then and only then are we reborn by the Holy Spirit. And finally we shall truly know and proclaim that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, and everything in between.

ⁱ The Rev. Margaret A. Gat in her sermon for Thanksgiving Day published in *Preaching through the Year of Mark*. 1999.