

**Don't Ad Lib the Ending**  
**Homily for January 12<sup>th</sup> 2017**

In his farce, “God (A Play),” Woody Allen imagines a production of a classic Greek drama gone awry. The script calls for Zeus, Father of the Gods, to descend dramatically from “heaven,” thunderbolts in full array, arriving just in the nick of time to save a confused and distraught humanity from self-destruction. Unfortunately, as the actor playing the part of Zeus, trussed up in a harness, is being lowered to the stage, the wire attached to the apparatus gets wrapped around his neck, strangling the poor soul. Horrified by what has occurred, the cast falls into disarray. Finally one of the characters, attempting to pull things together, solemnly announces, “God is dead.... Ad-lib the ending”.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, attempting to “ad-lib the ending” to life’s drama, to make up a story that seems in the moment of crisis to be better than God’s script, is precisely the problem; it is what we do when we think that God is dead or absent or when we lose confidence in the trustworthiness of the promises of God. It is what we do in those inevitable seasons when the gospel seems too little to go on. As long as things go well, of course, remaining faithful is little challenge, but when trouble starts, when the storms of sorrow begin to rage, when the weeds of failure grow in the garden, when the valley of the shadow of death closes in, when the mouth goes dry in the spiritual desert, when all hell breaks loose, then we are tempted to ad-lib the ending, to trade God’s story for one that is happier, easier, more upbeat, safer, less demanding, or at least one we can touch and see and hold in our own hands.

So how do we guard our hearts against this tendency to want to ad lib the ending? This evening’s passage from Hebrews helps to answer this question.

He begins by writing: “The Holy Spirit says” and then he quotes directly Psalm 95. For this writer the Scriptures, which he is always quoting, are the living voice of the Holy Spirit. In order not to ad lib the ending we need to keep rooted in the story that was both inspired by the Holy Spirit and who continues to speak to us today through these same Scriptures.

The other thing he does is to highlight two words, “today” and “rest”.

These are words full of meaning in Hebrews. “Today” does not just refer to the current date on the calendar rather it refers to the opportunity every day provides for us to turn more fully to Jesus Christ. Throughout this chapter the word today is used so as to represent the opportunity we have in the present to grow in listening to God’s voice as he speaks to us through Scripture and through the Tradition of the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Long, T. G. (1997). Hebrews (p. 56). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

When we are able to do this, rather than our hearts becoming hardened and embittered towards God they become ever more trusting and able to confide in the Lord's goodness. We can then enter into the rest of God, which is impossible to experience if we are in constant doubt of God and embittered toward him.

We live in a time where there are many like Woody Allen would say "God is dead so let's ad lib the ending". Not so for the Christian. We would say that human beings are morally free, and we can improvise lines and scenes, but the overarching plot is shaped by the design of God. What it means to be faithful is to harmonize all of one's actions to God's essential plot. On the seventh day, God, the playwright, rested, and the basic outlines of the plot were finished, complete, and perfect. We actors are told the plot and know where the play is surely going in God's providence, but we have been given the freedom to work our way toward this denouement.

The problem, however, is that the play is so long, the plot so complicated, so full of twists and unexpected turns, so ironic, so rich in tragic and painful moments, that it is easy to get lost, to get so caught up in one of the scenes that the outcome of the whole play is forgotten. Some actors become so weighed down in a tragic episode that they can't go on. Some, losing track of the plot, become disheartened and abandon the play in the middle. Others, despairing of finding meaning in the play, begin to drift away from the plot. The cast is restless, sometimes in disarray, and the only way to keep us faithful, of course, is to keep reminding us of the basic plot. It is this that the writer to the Hebrews is doing in this passage and throughout the Letter.