

Worship Series: Thriving Through Transitions

February 2 "Changes"

February 9 "Endings"

February 16 "Neutral Zones"

February 23 "Beginnings"

"Beginnings"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 23, 2020

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Holy Scriptures: Jeremiah 29: 10-16 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Resource: Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes, by William Bridges, 1980.

Jeremiah 29: 10-16

¹⁰ For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view;^[a] even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view,^[b] we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,^[c] not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Footnotes:

- a. 2 Corinthians 5:16 Gk according to the flesh
- b. 2 Corinthians 5:16 Gk according to the flesh
- c. 2 Corinthians 5:19 Or God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself

Sermon

Today, it seems as if everything we value starts with a click, a button, a voice command.
When we are ready for things to get cranked up, we are ready.
Siri, Alexa, let's go!
Get started, already.
Whenever something doesn't start up right away, doesn't begin as expected,
there are procedures to follow to fix the problem.

Reminds us of the classic story of the preacher who stepped into the pulpit
and tapped the microphone.
Thinking it was broken, the preacher said, *"Something's not quite right here."*
And the congregation responded in unison, *"And also with you!"*

How many of us carry with us a mental criteria or a spiritual checklist
for how to experience a new beginning, a fresh start, a dream fulfilled.
How many of us long for a simple path, a simple way out, a simple solution.
Sounds reasonable.
We long for a procedure to follow
rather than a process to understand, a Spirit to listen to, a God to follow.
"The beginnings...", said novelist John Galsworthy,
"of all human undertakings are untidy."

"The beginnings of all human undertakings are untidy."
They – we—can be messy, mucky, mystical, magical, for such is the human condition.
Endings and beginnings,
with germination in between:
such is the way of life, and love, and life after life.

Endings signal the conclusions of aspects or times or seasons of our lives.
Some endings are anticipated, looked forward to, welcomed;
some are surprises, shocks to the system, tough.
My friends, take heart: God is present in each of the endings of the seasons of our lives.

Neutral zones are periods of seemingly emptiness,
of nothingness, of being in-between,
yet may have such profound, deep impact on our psyche and souls,
as we find ourselves being reshaped and reformed by the Potter,
even experiencing pangs of the pain of rebirth as God's own.

For a new beginning to come into being, to spring forth,
we move through a process of transition,
discovering that we come to beginnings only at the end.

Let's approach beginnings from three angles.
Prayerfully consider whether one or more approach

works—or plays!— for you along your journey.

1. **Dreams Are the Beginning of Beginnings**
2. **Become a New Creation in Christ**
3. **To Launch a New Beginning, Act**

1. **Dreams are the Beginning of Beginnings**

I wonder about the emphasis many people place on God as a maker of plans. Listen closely to Jeremiah's proclamation found in Chapter 29, verse 11.

*"For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord,
'plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.'"*

A God who makes never-changing plans is a never-changing God,
which some folks find comforting,
and is quite understandable in a chaotic world.

A fair, scholarly translation of the same text
reveals Jeremiah 29 may also be read this way:

*"For I know the dreams I have for you,' declares the Lord,
'dreams to prosper you and not to harm you,
dreams to give you hope and a future.'"*

How different that feels!

Do you feel brighter, released to be, to become?!

Can you sense within you the incredible lightness of being,
to know that you are a dream of God coming to fruition?!

Debie Thomas wrestles with the idea of a plan-making God
as opposed to a dream-making God.

*"If God had a plan," said Debie Thomas,
"then at every possible fork in the road
God was making intentional choices to act or not to act,
and those choices were pre-scripted.*

(Mack truck about to hit toddler—divert or not?

Cancer about to kill young woman—heal or not?

Mass shooter about to enter elementary school—intervene or not?)

*If God had a plan, then the divine capacity for empathy
—for genuine surprise, true horror, unyielding sorrow—
couldn't help but be blunted.*

Why would anyone grieve their own perfect plan?

Though the process of letting go was very hard,

I no longer cling to the plan.

I believe in something more tender, riskier, more fragile.

*I believe that human freedom isn't an illusion; it's the real deal.
God works with the free choices we make in the free universe we live in.
God dreams for us, hopes with us, and grieves with us in real time.
God works in subtle, mysterious ways, always and everywhere,
to redeem us without violating our freedom.^[1]*

I wonder whether Jeremiah compared and contrasted
God as planner and God as dreamer.
We do know that Jeremiah the Prophet, the Visionary, the Dreamer
saw a future for Israel when they were lost, far from home, trapped in exile.
This follower of a vision
communed with a God
who loved a people living in chaotic times.
It's almost like Jeremiah preached:
If we can dream it, we can make it happen, with the help of God.
The God whom Jeremiah loved is flexible,
working in real time, affirming free will,
slow to anger, sure to love,
capable of bringing an end as well as offering new beginnings.

For Jeremiah,
God's designs and dispositions are more akin to dreams.
God is a dreamer, with dreams for us to embody.
Walter Brueggemann said, *"We carry the dreams of God in our daring bodies."*

Divine dreams come to fruition in our daring bodies,
especially when we embody the character of God ourselves,
becoming goodness and mercy with some skin on it.

We speak here of new beginnings in you and me and all of us, together.
Envision, dream, hope for where or what or why you want to start.
If you can dream it, you can do it.
True, some dreams get deferred;
true, some dreams are denied;
some disappoint.

Keep dreaming, anyway.
You may be in a neutral zone, preparing for the pain of rebirth
You may be getting ready to make and remake a new self,
a new way forward, a new creation in Christ
You may be realigning your inner being for a renewal of energy
and a redirection of your direction.

Keep dreaming.
*"For I know the dreams I have for you,' declares the Lord,
'dreams to prosper you...dreams to give you hope and a future.'"*

2. Become a New Creation in Christ

The Apostle Paul said:

*"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!
All this is from God, who reconciled us to [God] through Christ,
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation..."*

The Apostle Paul understood that endings are really a new beginning.

When endings and the time of fallow neutrality are finished, completed, played out,
then we can launch out anew, renewed, reformed by God's grace.

When the endings are behind us, when everything old has passed away,
see everything has become new!

We're finding our true self on the other side, reborn,

transformed by the destruction and releasing of the old life-phase,
reshaped because we've survived and thrived

with God and God's people

along the journey through the nowhere, the nothingness,

the emptiness in which we discovered afresh

purpose, meaning, hope.

(Bridges. Pp. 134-135, adapted)

Mike Yaconelli said in his book, The Door:

"The spiritual life is not so much progress as it is process.

It is not a continuous climb upward

as much as it is a continuous climb.

It is not the victories that matter

so much as the going on after the defeats.

The longer the erratic dance of faith goes on,

the less you care about what God is doing

and the more you want to know about God."

A gentleman approached a friend and confided he was drinking more than usual.

He confessed that when he got drunk,

he had a tendency to go home from the pub

and take his frustrations out on his family and break up the furniture.

What should he do?

The friend suggested that whenever he was tempted to pick up a bottle,

he consider picking up his Bible instead.

Seemed like odd advice to him.

Being desperate for a new beginning, he gave it a go.

A few weeks later he was in the pub,

thumbing through the Psalms,

when a former drinking pal loudly called him out.
*"Hey, do you actually believe what you're reading there?
Do you believe that Jesus turned water into wine?"*
"Oh, I don't know, I don't know. I wasn't there," he said.
"But I do know that in my home Jesus has turned wine into furniture."

When we are a new creation
we know that we have been brought into the relationship with God
that God has sought after
and is seeking after from the very beginning, for a new beginning.

At age 87, the philosopher George Herbert Planner
concluded a brief autobiographical statement with:
*"As I see these things rising behind me
they do not seem of my doing.
Some greater power than I
has been using me as its glad instrument."*

Some greater power than us is using you and me as its glad instrument,
willing, calling, blessing us into new creations.

We give thanks that our past does not determine our future.
Praise God!
Our past does not determine our future!

A poor decision or words spoken harshly and with haste
or something we have done or said
which we later look back with embarrassment or regret
does not eternally set you outside God's good graces.

A call refused can be reconsidered.
A wrong word or bad decision or a sin committed can be forgiven.
A broken relationship may be healed.
A broken nation can be made whole and transformed with redeeming grace.
Prodigal sons and daughters find a welcoming home,
lost sheep are found, sinners and saints are received at the Table,
and broken hearts discover life after loss.

Being a new creation
connects us with our being,
which then informs and inspires our doing and sharing.

Occasionally I get to drive our church youth to an event or a retreat.
Whenever we stop for gas or a meal or arrive at our destination,
I say to the whole company before they exit the van,
"Remember who you are and whose you are!"

Recently a 16-year-old in the back row responded,
"Mr. James, don't you think we know that? You tell us that every time!"

When we are a new creation
we're in touch with who we are and whose we are
as we live into new beginnings.

3. To Launch a New Beginning, Act

After several years of buying reading glasses from a rack at CVS,
for my 60th birthday I got new glasses.

These are great.

Not only can I read the fine print of the crossword puzzle,
now when I drive around Atlanta,
potholes in the street are remarkably clearer.

Potholes are so much easier to recognize just before I sink a tire into them.

Pay attention to the signs that you're ready to move into a new beginning.

Inner signals that point to new beginnings

may be subtle at first, gradual,

not so obvious to others, or maybe even yourself,

as God reshapes and redirects you into a new creation in Christ.

Outside noise and stimuli may be dominant, overwhelming,
distracting from what is truly happening within.

You may need to move your body or your mind into some quiet space,
to find some peace,

to smell the fragrance of change,

to hear the still small voice in the eye of the storm,

to dream a new dream, to catch the vision in front of you.

You may need to tap into the courage and gumption,

the chutzpa and calmness God offers and provides.

"We Bought a Zoo" is a remarkable true story

of a family that moved from the big city to live in a rural area.

Although they know relatively nothing about zookeeping,

the Mee family takes ownership of a small zoo of animals that had been rescued.

The transition is anything but smooth.

The father, Benjamin Mee, and his 14-year-old son, Dylan, are at odds.

One night the tension in their troubled relationship comes to a head.

In the midst of an argument,

Benjamin changes gears, suddenly asking his son Dylan about his girlfriend.

Benjamin Mee: *What happened with you and Lily?*

Dylan Mee: *I don't know. I guess I didn't listen to something she told me or something? I mean, I liked her. It's like you embarrass yourself if you say something, and you embarrass yourself if you don't.*

Benjamin: *I like it when you talk. You know, sometimes all you need is 20 seconds of insane courage. Just, literally, 20 seconds of just embarrassing bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it.*

Dylan: *I never know what to say to you.*

Benjamin: *I'm the same way. Why don't we just tell each other what we wish the other guy would say?*

Dylan: *"I'm sorry I brought you out to the sticks."*

Benjamin: *"You're a great dad."*

And so a new beginning comes to fruition.

And so we learn a way into a new beginning:

20 seconds of insane courage, 20 seconds of just embarrassing bravery.

And I promise you, something great will come of it.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

^[1] "Faith Matters: The Plan and the Dream" by Debie Thomas, Christian Century Magazine, July 3, 2019.