

Worship Series: Thriving Through Transitions

February 2 "Changes"

February 9 "Endings"

February 16 "Neutral Zone"

February 23 "Beginnings"

"Endings"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 9, 2020

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Holy Scriptures: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 Philippians 4: 1-9

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

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to dance;

a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together,

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

Philippians 4:1-9

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is

anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Sermon

*“What we call the beginning is often the end.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.” – T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”*

The End Is Where We Start From

I hear some folks read the obituary section every single day,
not so much to see who passed away as to make sure they aren't listed.

Did you hear that Kirk Douglas passed away this week, at age 103?
Kirk Douglas had countless experiences of endings
that he processed and parlayed into new starts.

*“Fifteen years ago,” said Kirk Douglas, “I suffered a stroke,
which caused me to lose my speech. Now, what does an actor who can't talk do? Wait
for silent pictures to come back? I work with a speech therapist twice a week.”*

*“When you have a stroke, you must talk slowly to be understood,
and I've discovered that when I talk slowly, people listen.
They think I'm going to say something important!”*

*“No matter how bad things are, they can always be worse. So what if my stroke left me with a
speech impediment? Moses had one, and he did all right.”*

The End Is Where We Start From

The Book of Ecclesiastes inspires and informs our endings.
In the Third Century BCE,
just over 200 years before Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem
because there was no room for Him in the inn,
one or more souls set down the proverbs and sayings
we know as Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is a blend, a collection, a hodgepodge
of prudential wisdom sayings,
gentle cynicism, and
traditional piety.

Ecclesiastes' author—or authors—recognized, affirmed and articulated
that we are “both secular and pious, you and I.”^[1]

“Secularism and piety do battle in our century, [in times such as this,]
not so much between different men [and women],
as within all men [and women].”

“We live in the church – we also live in the world;
we take a little from both.”

“For these reasons,
we are not far from the mind and mood of Ecclesiastes,
one of the most secular writings in the Bible.”

Yet this blend of secular and pious writings
has much to say to contemporary love and life...
our endings, our beginnings,
our changes, transitions, and God-given resurrections.

Ecclesiastes affirms our need for balance and the seasons of our day-to-day lives.
One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is spiritual balance.
The poet who penned Ecclesiastes lifted up for us the Spirit’s gift of balance.

*For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to dance...*

“For everything there is a season,”
a time to hustle and bustle, and a time for retreat and prayer.
a time to “veg out” mindlessly in front of the TV,
and a time to be re-created and renewed;
a time to shop and, well, maybe, a time to refrain from shopping;
a time to charge into the fray,
and a time to worship, meditate, reflect and recharge.

A central aspect of living in balance is accepting
our seasons of endings, periods in neutral zones, and new beginnings.
For everything there is a season,
and every season has an ending.

The End Is Where We Start From

Endings can be glorious, long anticipated, fun.
Graduating, being liberated from whatever holds you back or apart,
completing a task, releasing an addiction, overcoming a fear.
Good times! Good moving on! Congratulations are in order.

Yet, so often we approach endings with fear and trembling.
Our language and catch phrases express common attitudes about endings.

"Don't cry over spilt milk."

"What's done is done."

"Let bygones be bygones."

We treat endings as if they are events or happenings or unforeseeable experiences
that are devoid of meaning--especially any positive meaning.

So, we act as if we need to forget or ignore or move beyond them
as quickly as possible. (Bridges, P. 91)

"Considering that we have to deal with endings all our lives,
most of us handle them very badly.

This is in part because we misunderstand them
and take them either too seriously or not seriously at enough.

We take them too seriously by confusing them
with finality—that's it, all over, never more, finished!

We see them as something without sequel,
forgetting that in fact that they are the first phase of the transition process
and a precondition of self-renewal.

At the same time we fail to take them seriously enough.
Because they scare is, we try to avoid them." (Bridges, P. 90)

"Endings must be dealt with
if we are to move on to whatever comes next in our lives.

...New growth cannot take root on ground still covered with the old,
and endings are the clearing process."

Endings are experiences of dying; there is a death, a loss, a conclusion.

Even a well-earned graduation,
replete with joy and satisfaction,
includes the death of a season of life you dedicated
for studying, hanging out with classmates,
sitting in the student section at the stadium.

Endings may involve death, or be like a death, of reminiscent of death.
Sometimes endings begin with something goes wrong, or awry, or off kilter.

Sometimes endings are so close to our sense of self
we think, feel, believe they will be the end of us.

This is why focused rituals, worship, community engagement and support
are critical and oh so helpful
guiding us through a process of transition.

This is why it is imperative
we hold fast and deeply to the Faith,
Follow closely the God of Resurrection Power.

Resurrection Power is given to us daily,
renewing and saving us daily,
blessing us daily with gifts of closure,
turning our endings into fresh starts.

The End Is Where We Start From

“My father was diagnosed with colon cancer at age 74.
After surgery, he was informed he had two years to live.
He died 20 months later,
having graciously said “thank you” and “good-bye” to everyone he could.

The Rev. George E. Calvert had ministered for 43 years in East Harlem, N.Y.,
and after retirement tended to his neighbors upstate.
Even though Dad’s middle name was Edward,
he liked to say his middle initial “E” stood for Energy.
His enthusiasm was boundless, contagious.
After his diagnosis he did not retreat;
he embraced anyone who chose to walk with him along his journey.
He celebrated the knowledge
that the Holy Spirit brings people together in times of need.

Dad had been deceased a decade when,
during a colonoscopy, a malignant tumor was discovered in my colon.
Afterward Dr. Ian Katz sat next to Betty and me in the recovery area.
Typically a half-hour session in Katz’s examination room
involved three minutes of poking my insides
and 27 minutes of swapping temple and church tales.
No funny stories today.

Katz soberly showed us the high-definition color image
of the inch-long tumor bleeding inside my colon,
a photo he had just taken with a tiny camera
affixed on the end of a flexible probe.
Betty sat teary-eyed, struggling to take it all in.
Katz explained the next steps,
but his voice sounded like he was in a vacuum.
I choked up and felt the impending onslaught of shock.
I was destined to follow in Dad’s footsteps in more ways than one.
In the two weeks between discovery of the cancerous tumor
and surgery to remove it along with a section of my colon,
I updated my will, had a living will notarized
and said “I love you” to anything that moved.
I spoke with my family, church members, friends,

next-door neighbors and medical personnel,
inviting them to enter into the unknown,
the challenges and even the joy with me.

Like Dad,

I made a choice to do more than survive,
whether I lived for another two weeks or two years.

I would thrive with humor, honesty and hope,
defined by God

rather than by a life-threatening malignancy in my colon.

One way or another,

I would be healed and made whole, even if there was no cure.”

[Story quoted from “Hard-earned scars” by James Brewer-Calvert in the
Atlanta Journal Constitution, Jan 2017 [http://specials.myajc.com/hard-earned-
scars/](http://specials.myajc.com/hard-earned-scars/)]

Together, as a blessed congregation,

we’ve moved through the processes

of suffering and healing, seasons of letting go and going on,
as endings from where we start anew.

And we continue to say, “thank you,” “good-bye” and “hello” to everything that moves.

The End Is Where We Start From

Disengagement is part and parcel of the process of transitioning through endings.

Disengagement, approached with a healthy dose of faith, hope and love,
can be invigorating and life-changing for the better.

How many of us have disengaged ourselves

as we begin the process of coping with an ending?

We willingly--or unwillingly--find ourselves disengaged
from once normal activities.

There is a natural tendency to separate,

to break from our norm, from the familiar,

from the roles and responsibilities that have been important to us.

Divorces, deaths, job changes, moves, illnesses, and so forth

disengage us from the contexts in which we have known ourselves.

After Jesus was baptized, He disengaged Himself,

walking in the wilderness for 40 days, before returning to His community.

Jonah, shocked by God’s call to proclaim repentance,

fled his vocation and moved toward Tarshish,

only to have a great fish bring him back to his senses and calling.

Oedipus leaves home to avoid a fate that it turns out he meets along the way.

Disengagement is a natural state of being, especially after a shock or sadness or
Disengagement may bring us closer -- or feeling distant --
from the One who Created & Creates.

When we go through endings,
discern positive means to disengage from the past
without disengaging from God, or God's people,
or your blessed soul that lives within.

Seeking alternative ways of being and exploring a new self,
a new way of being engaged,
is healthy and a part of the process of growth.

Yet how often have we witnessed someone experience a dramatic ending,
and the way they choose to cope is to leave the Church,
to cut themselves off from the community of faith
in which they otherwise find spiritual support,
rituals of grace, and unconditional love.

And on the flip side, I've seen churches choose a side when a couple divorces.
Shame.

Disengagement need not require the loss of faith or faithful fellowship.
Decide now that when you go through an ending,
you won't go alone.

We fear the emptiness, so we resist going into a period of transition,
of going through change with God and God's people.

Before we can find a new something,
we must deal with a time of nothingness.

Allow God's people to be with you in periods of disengagement
from what is now past as well as moving into resurrection.

And Church, be awake!

Be aware of your neighbors.

Who needs a hand, an ear, a friend?

Who needs to reconnect, given the grace of a fresh start after a rocky ending?

They say that a local newspaper ran an obituary for a gentleman
who, first thing in the morning,
promptly walked into the newspaper editor's office to lodge a complaint.

"How dare you print my obituary!" he shouted. "I'm alive. See, here I am!"

The editor admitted her error, saying, *"Yes, I see that you are alive and kicking.*

I'm sorry to say that there is nothing to be done about yesterday's news.

*The best we can do is to list you tomorrow in the Birth Column
and give you a fresh start."*

God is so good at re-starting our lives.

Disengaging by cutting ourselves off from the Holy is problematic at best.

Seeing the Holy as the cause or source
of our traumas or trials or tragedies
defines God as cruel, unjust, a puppeteer or manipulator or meanie.
I'm sorry, I can't follow or revere such a God.
The God I know is loving and kind, slow to anger, quick to forgive.
Receiving the Holy Spirit as One who strengthens your back,
who, when the night is darkest, blesses you with light,
who weeps when you cry and rejoices in your joys,
this is a God who is with you in the ups and downs,
starts and endings,
births and deaths and resurrections of your life.

The End Is Where We Start From

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.
Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."*

Paul noticed that when we rejoice in the Lord always,
we don't have time or energy to spend on fears,
fears that stymie or stagnate or stump or stall our lives.

When in doubt, when transitioning through an ending, focus on joy.
When you focus on joy, when you rejoice in the Lord always,
you discover that you can put aside and overcome your fears.
And if you find that you are still afraid,
that your faith is shaky,
rejoice anyway because the faith of your friends can save you.

Paul has confidence that the faith
of church members and friends will lift you up,
just as the church lifted him up.

When Paul was broke and broken,
in prison or shipwrecked or bravely coping with a thorn in his side,
the prayers and gifts of love and kindness from his faith community
made the difference between life and death.

The faith of your church members and friends can save you;
let our rejoicing and joy fill you and lift you up;
let our joy ease your burdens and carry the day.
And one day sooner than you think your joy-filled faith may save someone else.

The End Is Where We Start From

Margaret Gilkey Richards shares this memory of her father, James Gordon Gilkey.
While living in Portland, Oregon,
James Gilkey was informed by his physician that he had an incurable disease.

Death could not be averted, nor long delayed.
Here is his final earthly story,
including some of his own last words
spoken to God's creation that he loved:

*"I walked out to my home five miles from the center of the city.
There I looked at the river and the mountain which I love,
and then, as the twilight deepened – at the stars glimmering in the sky.
Then I said to them,
'I may not see you many times more.
But River, I shall be alive
when you have ceased running down to the sea.
Mountain, I shall be alive
when you have sunk down into the plain.
Stars, I shall be alive
when you have fallen in the ultimate disintegration of the universe."*

We shall be alive.
Fear not endings, my friends.
Endings are the clearing process.
Endings may deepen the meaning of your life.
Dig deep into the fertile soil of your endings.
See how we grow in grace, together.

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