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## **“Endings, and New Beginnings”**

**A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)**

**February 15, 2015**

**Joshua 24:14–18; Philippians 1:3–6**

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Beginnings and endings—beginnings: the way we anticipate what is to come; and endings: the way we reflect on our life experience and history. Beginnings and endings have a profound impact on the way we live out our lives, the choices we make, and the quality of our relationships with family, with our neighbors, and with our God.

The Old Testament Lesson is from the last chapter of the Book of Joshua. But in the first chapter of Joshua, a very specific and intentional word from God is addressed to the people as they move from their nomadic wandering in the wilderness to a more settled agrarian life in the land of promise. This word comes to the new leader of Israel. Moses, the one who defied Pharaoh and led the children of Israel through the wilderness, has died, and Joshua now steps up to lead in the new venture of creating a nation-state.

The word God speaks is one of promise: the promise is not for a carefree life or for material success, but rather for the sustaining and guiding presence of God. “Be strong and of good courage, be neither frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

At the beginning of any great endeavor, it is critical for people to hear the promise and hope of this effort, a word to remember when doubt and fear arise, when failure and setback come, when conflict and opposition stand in the way of this endeavor’s promise.

People may even need to be reminded of the purpose of the endeavor when success and prosperity is achieved. It is true: success can lead one away from the purpose of life. Our responses to the unwinding of the stock market in the past decade demonstrate how the financial success of the past fifty years has distorted our perspective of what or who is the foundation for life.

Whatever the temptations may be, God's people need to hear a word of promise. That word, that promise does not assure us that we are right over and against others, and that therefore, they must be in the wrong. It promises no human power or wealth or even respect. It does, however, assure us of God's presence, a presence that is the source of all truth and love and grace. And if you and I want to continue in a direction that gives meaning and purpose and ultimate fulfillment to life, a word of promise from our Lord is essential.

Today's text comes at the end, the conclusion of the book of Joshua. The effort to become a nation has been accomplished. Battles have been fought; failures have been suffered; successes have been achieved. These wilderness wanderers have received the Promised Land as a gift and have taken responsibility for it. Other challenges will be confronted by the Israelites in the future, for sure. But for now, the nation can stand back to assess where they have come, what has been accomplished, and where they are.

Joshua gathers the tribes of Israel together for a concluding word. It is a word of testimony, of rehearsing the mighty acts of God in the lives of God's people. Joshua reminds them of all that God has done: every promise God made to his people has been fulfilled. And as Joshua challenges them to choose the One whom they will serve, he makes this affirmation: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

The journey began with a promise. It now ends with an affirmation, a witness or testimony to God's providential care. In the book of Joshua, promise and testimony are the bookends that bracket and hold the story of God's work among his people. It is this ending upon which I wish to focus this morning, and its importance in reflecting upon one's life experience.

Often when I think of endings, I think of finality. What was once there is now gone. The ending that comes to mind for most of us is a big one, one that has dominated human thought from the first. That of course is death, the end of life. The reality that life comes to an end may be frightening, yet at the same time it provides perspective, it crystallizes the importance and value of living.

The developmental psychologist Eric Ericson spoke about the final stages of human development in the life cycle of an adult. He labeled the positive potential of this period in a person's life as "Ego-Integrity." By this he meant that a person could embrace life for all its richness and at the same time let go of it in surrender.

Dr. Ira Byock, a leader in the hospice and palliative care movement, builds on this understanding. In his book, *Dying Well*, Dr. Byock details his belief that even at the end of life, there are things that people can grow into, and gifts that they can give one another. He writes,

"I think it is realistic to hope for a future in which nobody has to die alone and no one has to die with their pain untreated. But comfort and companionship are not all there is. I have learned from my patients and my family surprising truths about dying. This stage of life holds remarkable possibilities, despite the arduous nature of the experience. When people are relatively comfortable and know that they are not going to be abandoned, then they frequently find ways to strengthen bonds with people they love and to create moments of profound meaning in their final passage. Death, as an ending, has the possibility of offering to those who go through the dying process and those who accompany them, gifts."

An ending may bestow gifts to another. That is such an important insight. What kind of gifts might be given? One type of gift that might be given is suggested by the Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen: "When our time to die comes, will we die in such a way that those we leave behind will not be devastated by grief or left with feelings of shame or guilt?"

In other words, will we remove the hindrances, the impediments that may stand between others and their future by how we act in our last days? It is a healing gift to our closest family and friends when a dying person expresses gratitude, seeks forgiveness, offers forgiveness, and says, “I love you.”

Another gift that might be given is what Stephen Covey, the life management guru, called “Leaving A Legacy.” How we live our lives, even at the end of life, has the possibility of providing for others beyond one’s self. What values, what institutions, what environmental and social conditions, what inspiration, what faith, will be offered to and left for the next generation?

Endings are not always about death or dying. Sometimes endings are about choices, choices that may be difficult and may mean moving in a new direction. A TV news anchor by the name of Carol Marin worked at a Chicago station. She had won many awards for journalism in her career, including awards for ethics in the media. The station for which she worked hired Jerry Springer, the talk show host, to provide commentary during the newscast. Because of the values she held, Carol did not believe that Jerry Springer was an appropriate commentator for the newscast. The decision was not hers to make, even though she protested the plan. When the decision was announced, Carol Marin resigned on the air during her newscast, calling Springer “the poster child for the worst television has to offer.” She drew a line in the sand and walked away from a lucrative career.

Most of us don’t have the opportunity to make such a dramatic impact on people. Or at least we don’t believe we have such opportunities. But we do. A man took his two children to play miniature golf. At the entrance, the sign said that children under 6 were free. One of his kids was 7, and the other was 4. He paid for the 7 year old and himself. The man taking the money asked, “Why didn’t you just tell me both the kids were under 6 and it would have only cost you 3 bucks? It wouldn’t have made any difference to me.”

The father responded, “It may not have made any difference to you, but it would have made a difference to my children. They would have known.”

The way we live in the day-to-day encounters with others makes an impact.

Endings may have to do with dying; they may have to do with resolving relationships, tying up the loose ends. Endings may have to do with choices and the way one lives life. But one thing is certain: in our endings, we witness and give voice to what is most important to us. And in that moment, we have the opportunity to make a profound impact on others, for good or for ill.

That is what Joshua was doing with the nation of Israel: recalling their shared life experiences and reminding them who was the center, the foundation of their being. Joshua acknowledges that options exist in life and choices must be made.

He gives witness to the One who has chosen him in love and grace, and Joshua declares his allegiance to the God who has provided deliverance to the people of Israel. “Choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Whether our endings are related to the end of life or merely the close of a particular chapter, to what are we giving witness? What choices are you and I making, and what legacy are we leaving for the next generation?

One book that has influenced me significantly in my younger years is M. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled*. He begins the book with a simple but true statement: “Life is difficult.” I have found that to be true. And in the midst of those difficulties, we need to vent our frustrations about that reality.

The problem is that many of us spend most of our life complaining that life is difficult. Is that the primary message we are conveying to the next generation? Are we passing on to them a rehearsal of life’s unfairness? Or are we talking about the goodness and graciousness of God that has attended us through every difficulty we have encountered? We can choose the type and quality of witness we will offer to others.

A connection always exists between beginnings and endings. Before Joshua could begin a new chapter in the story of God’s people, another chapter had to end with the death of Moses. And in life, that dynamic plays itself over and over. An ending

leads to a beginning. Joshua has a promise that helps him begin the new chapter; then at the conclusion of his ministry and mission, he has a chance to witness about the remarkable goodness of God. That word of witness gives an opportunity for the next generation to hear God's promise. Joshua blesses the generation to come by giving them a gift. And for those who hear, Joshua's witness becomes their promise.

Perhaps this is what T.S. Eliot meant when he wrote,

“With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.”  
(“Little Gidding” from *Four Quartets*)

There was a master who for years had trained a group of disciples. The master was coming to the end of his life, and the disciples feared his leaving and what they would do once he was gone. Close to the end, they approached their master and asked, “What will we do?”

“Oh, you will see,” said the master.

“And what will we see when you are gone?”

With a twinkle in his eye, the master said, “All I ever did was to sit on the river bank handing out water to you. After I'm gone, I trust you will notice the river.”

Our witness can lead the next generation to the waters of life, to the promise that God's care is trustworthy. When we have placed our hand into the hand of God, and have traveled together the road before us, then we have a story to share, a gift to give, a promise to pass on to the next generation.

This congregation has gifts to give. You know that every person, whether they pass through these doors or not, is a child of God. You know that race and nationality and cultural heritage do not determine who belongs in God's family. You know that economic status does not put a value on a person's worth. You know that our calling to serve God has as much to do with what transpires outside this building as it does with what happens inside this building. You know that the differences of opinion that distinguish us pale into the background because of the love that unites us.

That is a radical, counter-cultural, God-glorifying, and transformational promise to live into, and a legacy to hand on to the next generation.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.