

The End is the Beginning

Joshua 5:9-12

A.A. Milne, the creator of Winnie the Pooh, wrote a simple, yet telling poem in his work, *Now We Are Six*:

When I was One, I had just begun.
When I was Two, I was nearly new.
When I was Three, I was hardly Me.
When I was Four, I was not much more.
When I was Five, I was just alive.
But now I am Six, I'm as clever as ever.
So I think I'll be six now forever and ever.

This is a cute poem, but beneath its adorable rhyme lies a very sensitive issue for all of us: resistance to change. The truth is that most of us are creatures of habit, and once we get comfortable we like things to remain the same. If you don't believe me, when was the last time you came to church and sat in a place other than where you're sitting right now? We like for things to remain the same.

Resistance to change is not always bad. In fact, there are times when resistance to change is important and some things should not change. Certain convictions should be kept, and certain principles need to be maintained.

However, when resisting change becomes a habit or a response from fear or laziness, it's tragic. It's tragic because we stop growing, stop maturing, and we deny our potential. We literally stop ourselves from becoming the person God desires us to become.

When resistance to change sneaks in to the realm of faith, it's doubly tragic. In fact, it's downright sinful. Our attitude is "I've been to Sunday school. I've read the Bible. I've learned all I need to know." And we foolishly believe that we have it all figured out.

The result is that we are no longer open to God's guidance and wisdom. We are no longer open to the various ways God moves in and through us. Instead, we dig our feet in as if to say, "I will not be moved, not even by God." And then we languish in spiritual stagnation.

This is a bad place to be, but it's so easy to get there. We've grown up, been educated, decided on a career. We've chosen the person we intend to spend the rest of our lives with, bought a home, joined a church we enjoy. Then life happens, and we sit back, let down our guard, get comfortable, and proudly say, "I've arrived. I'm as clever as ever. I'm going to stay here forever and ever."

And it's at these listless moments that we become the most vulnerable to temptation, sin, and failure. The exploits of King David are a testimony of this. When he was young and longing to please God, he was driven by God's dream for him. He went through all kinds of struggles in making himself ready to be king.

He agonized night and day, day and night to make sure he was prepared for the future God had for him. Then he felt he had finally arrived. His major battles were completed. Jerusalem was secured as the eternal capital and he was crowned king. He had fulfilled his dreams. He had conquered all foes except one: himself. And basking in

self-glory he failed to recognize his weakness. So he fell into sin, had an affair with Bathsheba and then to cover up the affair had her husband, Uriah, murdered.

It's easy to drift into spiritual stagnation and complacency. It's crucial to understand that the essence of Christianity is change. It's been said that "[Christianity] not only accepts change as part of God's purpose for life, it demands it. That's what [Christianity] is here to do, to change things, to change the world. And the Christian, because he believes in a living God, faces not toward yesterday but toward tomorrow."ⁱ

Our Christian history bears witness to this statement because our Christian history is filled with stories of remarkable change. And not just change for the sake of change, but change for the sake of God's Kingdom. So in the spirit of this text, while it may not be intuitively obvious, I want to look at the challenge of change and how we need to approach it.

The End Is the End

Have you ever gone to the home you grew up in after years of not being there? Or, on, say, your 25th wedding anniversary, visited the first place you lived in as newlyweds? The old and familiar world you knew and were comfortable in is gone. Old quaint roads are now 3 lane highways. Stores you once shopped in are gone. Life as you once knew it has disappeared, and you can't go home again. When you experience that, you find yourself without a familiar framework, and long for that which once was.

Pleasantdale Presbyterian Church - the church I grew up in, found Christ in, and was ordained to the ministry in - was recently torn down to make way for a Chase Bank branch. I could walk from my house to the church to sing in the choir under the direction of Phyliss Van Ness.

It was the place where I first learned to serve others. It was the place I shared my first testimony. It was the place where I preached my first sermon. It was home. It was familiar. It was where I had a relationship with my pastor ("Rev") and his wife ("Mrs. Rev") and our youth leader (Joe) and my friends. And now it is no more. An old, special place of my youth has died, and I grieved a loss that day.

All of us have difficulty accepting the end of something sacred. We want the old world to stay with us. We want old thinking, traditions, and customs to continue. We want to go back to the familiar and the comfortable.

And because we long for the old life to return so much we resist change altogether, refuse to accept it, and continue living a fantasy of yesterday. Some of us are happy eating the stale manna of the past and are not willing to try the new cakes and grains of tomorrow. We're convinced that we're not going to like the way it tastes.

If we're ever going to be the people God calls us to be, we must "put away childish things" and move forward into change. We need to accept the end of one chapter of our lives as we move into the next. We need to accept that our old life has died in order that our new life can begin.

Second, the End Is the Beginning

One of the magnificent promises of our faith is the promise of new beginnings. Scripture and life affirm the promise that whenever something ends, something new begins. And out of the negative comes the positive. So it doesn't matter how bad things have ended or how final circumstances appear, because God always has a new beginning waiting for us.

Natalie Sleeth, author of our second hymn, “In the Bulb There Is a Flower”, speaks to that in a powerful and meaningful way. This profound hymn vividly describes God’s promise of new beginnings.

Yet the hymn confirms something even more important: God grows us through seasons, stages, and changes. God uses change to stretch and strengthen our souls. God allows for change and expects change to be an inevitable part of our faith journey. Paul said it this way in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “All of us are being transformed into the same image [of Christ] from one degree of glory to another”.

God invites us to embrace this transformation and cooperate with God in these changes as they move us through different stages and seasons of glory. God encourages and empowers us to grow, but God will not do the growing for us. We must accept the end, move forward, and begin again with what God has in store for our lives.

I heard about a woman who desired the exhilaration of a new beginning so much that she sold everything she had, except for a few necessities, and gave it all away to the poor. Then she moved to the mountains and, as time passed, became an excellent painter. Reflecting on her transformation, she wrote, “When you have been caught, you have nothing to hide. And when you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear. And when you have nothing to fear, oh my, what you can become!”

When we claim our new beginning, the winter of yesterday ends and the spring of tomorrow begins. We realize there’s a whole new world of possibilities — a life pregnant with potential. That there’s so much more to life than the small circle we live in.

And we shake hands with a new purpose and destiny, no longer keeping God in a box. We understand God in new ways because we see the new and different ways God is working in, around, and through us. We see ungodly things in the world we never saw before and are motivated to stand against them.

And we see Godlike things in the world and are motivated to stand up for them. We grow in ways that we never thought we could grow. We live in ways that we never thought we would live and arrive at a level of faith we never thought we could attain. We sense God’s sanctifying and glorifying grace at work within us, all because we said, “Yes,” to a new beginning!

I challenge you to claim the new beginning that God has in store for you. Don’t stay in the wilderness of the end when a new beginning is beckons you forward.

Mark Twain once said, “Twenty years from now you’ll be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”ⁱⁱ

Because the Beginning Is the End

When we embrace a new beginning, we’re able to celebrate the end of an old, worn-out life; the end of a life stuck in the wilderness of the past; the end of a life once stopped by stagnation; the end of a life stunted by fear.

And as we look over the grave of our past and have the happiest funeral of our life, we will affirm with honorable pride, “The old has passed. The new has come. I am a new creation in Christ!”

Then God just might say with a lump in his throat, “Finally, my child sees but a glimpse of what I see.”

ⁱ J. Wallace Hamilton, *What About Tomorrow?* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1972), p. 42.

ⁱⁱ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/twenty_years_from_now_you_will_be_more/215220.html