

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Reformation Sunday, October 27, 2019
Rev. Dr. David Thompson

Every End is a new beginning

Text: “So, when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe and took him and threw him into a pit.”

And years later in the story of Joseph, comes this recognition from the Pharaoh:

“And Pharaoh said to Joseph “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt. Removing his signet ring from his hand, he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in the chariot of his second in command and they cried out in front of him “Bow the knee!””

A pastor, who had always preached without glasses, decided that he needed to end that, because he was making mistakes. He felt that he needed to make a new beginning with new bifocal reading glasses. But on the first day he tried them on he was having great difficulty in delivering his usual sermon. His new glasses were making him feel extremely dizzy and sick. So, he kept on pausing to remove them, only to put them on again a few seconds later. After five minutes of doing this, he paused again, looked up from his notes, stared at the congregation, and said to them, "I really must apologise for the reading of my sermon this morning, and for my continual removal of my glasses. Some of you might have noticed that I'm wearing new glasses, and these do allow me to see my notes very clearly. But every time I look at you, I feel sick."

One of the very hardest things to do in life is to start all over again. I know. I've been through it and I have counselled lots of people who have come to an end. It might be the end of a job, the end of a marriage, the end of a relationship, the death of a loved one and suddenly you find yourself starting all over again. And it's hard!

I have learned however that it is always appropriate to be in touch with one's feelings. Its okay to be sad at the end of some thing that you loved to do. And when someone passes away, tears and hugs can help so much to deaden the pain.

But I also know that beginnings can be very hard too.

I watched a friend whose company folded. He had severance pay. He counted on that for awhile, bought himself a new sound system and a new car. But slowly the money began to run out and he still didn't have a job. He would interview time and time again and be rejected. They said, (behind his back), that he was too old. Finally, he got a job. Not what he wanted at all!

Ministers are privileged to counsel people at the hinge points of their lives. Suddenly a lifelong relationship comes to an end. The widow or widower is stunned by the loss of a life partner, going through deep grief, anger, depression, sometimes guilt and despair. The emotion of the loss passes over them in waves.

The weekends are hard, the holidays which were always wonderful times with the family, become very difficult. When Thanksgiving comes, we ask “Do I put in a Thanksgiving turkey or not?” Or at Christmas time “Do I put up the lights this year? Bill always did that. I don't think I could manage that. I won't try this year.” And the lights remain in the basement storage.

Or, have you ever been deeply in love with someone and then been rejected? You call them up on the phone- the voice has changed now- gone colder and soon your calls left on the answering machine are not answered. Then you see your lover walking down the street, arm in arm with someone new and then you know for sure that it is all over. Then along comes a well- meaning friend who says,

“Cheer up! There’s lots more fish in the sea,” and you say, “Oh Sure!”

Have you ever asked why ends are so painful for us?

If the end is painful, it is frequently because we’ve got a big investment in the relationship and a lot to lose. If we have worked for a company happily for fifteen years and then the job is terminated, you lose not only the salary, the security, the friendships, but also the whole routine of your life. It’s the same with the loss of a spouse: there is the loss of love and affection, loss of security, loss of the friends who you related too as a couple only, and there is often a loss of optimism and the loss of the feeling that all is right with the world.

And we don’t like to lose these things.

There is also the temptation to become bitter, negative and cynical, and if we are wounded, to nurse the wound.

If you have ever lost a pet you know just how hard it is. One woman said to me “I shall never have another cat again. I just can’t stand it when they die!” She was afraid to begin again.

One of the challenges with beginning again is the difficulty of breaking inertia so that we can get going again. I can remember at one point in my life having 53 job interviews and still coming up with nothing. I had just graduated from university. One day I sat myself down and said “David, what job can you get for sure?”

For years I had delivered fish for the summer. So, I went back to driving a fish truck. It was the best thing I could have done because I discovered a principle that I wish to share with you today.

A lot of executives get fired or downsized out of a job when they are at the very top of their professions. The saying is: “The closer you are to the top, the closer you are to the door.” I discover that there are a couple of things that frequently happen. Some execs get an even better job. About a third however remain unemployed. Why? They refuse to take lesser jobs with smaller pay. The jobs are beneath them. These people never discover the principle I am going to share with you.

On the US border with Canada there is the Niagara river. It flows through a huge deep gorge.

Engineer Theodore Elliot wanted to span the Niagara Gorge with a suspension bridge. The challenge was how to get the first cable across the gorge. There were many ways to do this, but Elliot was a creative man. The cliffs were sheer and the river boiled below, providing no secure anchorage. So, Elliot decided to have a kite flying contest. What, you say, did that contest have to do with getting a heavy cable across the gorge to the other side?

Homer Walsh, an eleven-year-old boy, with the help of a good strong south wind, managed to get his kite across the gorge. He needed the 'right man for the job' on the other side and so he hired his best friend who then tied the string down when the kite landed.

The next day Elliot tied the kite string to a slightly heavier rope. He then pulled the rope across the gorge so that it spanned the gap. Then he tied the rope to a heavier rope to which he attached a cable and pulled that across. The kite string eventually became a bridge strong enough to drive a freight train across!

Are you discouraged today? Perhaps you are a widower, divorced, unemployed, unhappy, feeling unloved? Perhaps you are addicted to drugs or alcohol? Perhaps you are a teen who is discouraged at school where you are bullied and have no friends? Perhaps you have no love in your life and you are lonely?

Starting today, why not pick up your kite of hope and look for a strong wind that blows over in the direction of the other side of the difficulty?

Pick up the phone and make that call you are afraid to make. Get the information you need. Decide to begin again. Revise your resume. Get your name out there! Ask for help from your friends with your particular challenge.

It is absolutely true that this Sunday is the first day of the rest of your life. You simply have no idea what surprises await you around the corner, behind which you cannot see, or what lies beyond that seemingly impassable gorge.

The Bible is chock full of stories of people who, when faced with an end, began again.

Look at Moses. He was supposed to die under an Egyptian edict, because he was a Hebrew child. But his mother was creative and her kite string over the difficulty was an ark of bull rushes into which she laid her precious little boy. She was at the far end, but this was worth trying. She decided that she would place the child in the bull rushes where Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe, and suddenly young Moses was adopted into royalty.

But it doesn't stop there. Much later as a young man Moses killed an Egyptian who was taking it out on a Hebrew slave and in a passionate moment of anger Moses killed the Egyptian. Then Moses fled for his life and left for the desert to mind sheep. Surely this was the end with no possibility for a new beginning?

But no, a burning bush stopped him in his tracks and God called him to reconsider his life. And Moses eventually delivered his people out of slavery in Egypt. Moses last view of life was again of a new beginning. He saw the promised land just as centuries later did Martin Luther King Jr., when he said just before he died "I have seen the promised land." Neither went into that new beginning.

In the New Testament Jesus' father Joseph had enormous expectations. He was going to get married. Then came the news. He discovered that his bride to be was pregnant and not with his child. Imagine, the wedding invitations are all out and you discover that your bride, whom you love more than anyone else in the world, has been unfaithful to you.

For it wasn't then, like it is today, for Joseph. Sleeping around today is quite common. In Joseph's day, sleeping around was punishable with death. In Joseph's mind someone had beaten him to the marriage bed, and he was heartbroken. In fact, Joseph had come to the end.

Being a just man, he knew the relationship was over. So, he decided to do the kind thing and put Mary away privately. If he didn't do that people would get at him and at Mary and say:

"Why Joseph, what kind of fool are you raising another man's child?"

So, Joseph thought... this is the end.

But overnight out of the blue a new beginning came. He had a dream where an angel said 'Don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child. She will bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.'

Now Joseph had a real problem! Was he was supposed to believe, against everything that is natural, that his wife to be was faithful, a virgin and pregnant? How do you do that?

Joseph woke up the next morning after the dream to think about it all. There was this very real dream... this thin bit of kite string to fly across the gorge of his fears... He decided, against the odds of probability, to go on with the marriage, invest in the pregnancy and start all over again!

So, Joseph had to discover our sermon theme of the day: Every end is a new beginning.

He became the adopting father of the One who more than anyone has changed the history of the world. He became, with this new beginning, the right man at the right time to be the adoptive father of the One whose parables still shine down to us from the future, for as yet we do not love our enemies.

Joseph nurtured the One who instead of religion brought good news- that God is, that God loves, that there is life after this life, that there is forgiveness no matter what we have done; that one day there will be a joyful coming together of the Creator and all things bright and beautiful and all creatures great and small; that there is a heaven full of infinite, irrepressible hope, and everlasting, ever renewing possibilities.

Joseph would have known none of this, if he had not begun all over again.

That every end is a new beginning, is a law as fundamental as gravity.

It is the law behind the Easter faith known as Christianity. Death is not an end but a new beginning for our loved ones.

Every end is a new beginning, this truth spans the whole of life and death.

Today is my last Sunday as your Interim Minister. Two years ago, I signed a non-renewable contract for two years, never expecting that the Interim would last this long, but it has. And it has been so good! You are wonderful people as individuals and because of that New St. James remains a great congregation in the Presbyterian church in Canada.

But I want you to know that it is okay to feel sad. I do.

But I also know now both for me and for you, that we stand in the field of all possibilities. You have not chosen a permanent pastor yet. I don't know what I will do next either. So, all possibilities are still open and that is very exciting! I also know, that all it takes is a kite string of faith and hope to fly over the gorge of our anxieties.

Gordon B. Peterson has written a book called 12 rules for life. In the book he describes what his daughter endured after she got Juvenile Rheumatoid arthritis. Basically, she had 37 affected joints. Prognosis? Multiple early joint replacements.

Soon Mikhaila's life became hard. She had many interventions, but she still deteriorated. Side effects came. Suffering increased. But after a happy overdose mistake of a new drug, Mikhaila's body responded and she appeared to be fixed. Soon she was zipping around playing little league soccer. For a few years she became symptom free... but then symptoms came back in two joints. This meant that she hadn't grown out of it. The news demolished her. By grade eleven her hip started to deteriorate badly. It was ominous news. Then her hip locked up. The femur appeared dead. Was this to be the end of her active life? Her kite string faltered as her kite started to fall down short of all her dreams.

Mikhaila's nights were now full of pain. Soon Tylenol three was insufficient and opiates were employed. In May of the year her hip was replaced.

The bone hadn't died. Once again, the kite string lifted up. She progressed for awhile but then her ankle began to disintegrate. Her doctors wanted to fuse the bones into one piece. But that would have caused the smaller bones in her foot to deteriorate- not a solution for a teen!

The family insisted on an artificial replacement although the tech was new.

The pain was simply not manageable. Mikhaila had reached her breaking point. She was at the far end. Finally, the family found a surgeon in Vancouver and he replaced the ankle. Post surgery she was in absolute agony. Her foot was mispositioned.

One of her surgeons told her that her artificial ankle would now have to be removed and her ankle fused. Amputation lay down that road. She had been in pain now for eight years...Surely it was basically over, done.

But then something happened which gave her a new beginning.

She happened upon a physiotherapist. He was a large, powerful and attentive person. He had specialized in ankles in the UK in London.

After consulting with her, he asked her if she was willing to move her foot back and forth while he compressed the joint? Desperate she agreed.

He placed his large powerful hands around her ankle and compressed it for forty seconds while Mikhaila moved her foot back and forth.

Suddenly a mispositioned bone slipped back where it belonged. Her pain disappeared! She was not one for crying in front of medical personnel, but this time she did, and burst into grateful tears. Her knee straightened up.

Now she can walk long distances and traipse around in her bare feet. The calf muscle in her leg is growing back. She has more flexion in the artificial joint. She is now married and has a baby girl called Elizabeth after her father's departed mother.

All this came about when *the right man appeared at the right time* and put his arms around that ankle. With our metaphor the kite string was across the gorge and tied down ready for her dreams.

Today is Reformation Sunday. It is a Sunday when we remember that Martin Luther the reformer came to an end and stood on trial for his life before the courts of his day to declare: "Here I stand I can do no other!" He had nailed his 95 theses to a church door in Wittenberg and he had angered the established Church. He would not go back on them. But although he did not know it at the time it was a new beginning. Some one stole his theses from the church door and printed them on the brand-new invention- the printing press. With the advent of the printing press His theses spread across Europe and beyond and so, the Reformation began, and the possibility of New St. James Church in London, centuries later.

Finally, I think it all comes down to this. When we face an end and a new beginning, we can do one of two things: Either we can go it alone or we can ask for divine help.

I think if Martin Luther were before us today, he would say something to us: We don't have to go it alone. There is a great Someone who stands ready to help us.

His word to us, across the centuries, is found in his second verse of the hymn that he wrote for the Reformation: *Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;*

{But if we ask for help there is} the right man on our side the man of God's own choosing.

So, rather than you and I, attempting to do something in our own strength; instead we can fly our kites of hope and faith high over the gorge of our anxieties and fears. We can trust that the Right Man will tie our kite strings down on the other side, and then attach ropes and cables strong enough, for all our dreams to begin!

For: *Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing; Were not the right man on our side the man of God's own choosing.*

Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is he. Lord Sabaoth His name, from age to age the same, and he must win the battle. Amen.