

“Welcoming New Beginnings”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
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Reading

“Aristotle” by Billy Collins from *Picnic, Lightning*

Sermon

It might seem paradoxical that autumn is a season of new beginnings. In nature’s seasons up here in the north, the harvest is coming to an end, the leaves are turning and some even already making their descent from the treetops to the ground, fields are starting to turn brown and crisp losing summer’s verdant green fullness.

There is a sense of ending in nature’s rhythms and cues this time of year.

Yet, this is also a time when we begin again to reorder our lives around academic schedules and even our own church year begins again in this fall season.

This season is a time of transition and so it is time of year when we can reflect on endings and beginnings.

In both the Jewish and Muslim traditions, we are approaching the time of the new year. Muharram is the first month of the Islamic lunar-based year. The first ten days of this month are considered sacred days. The tenth day of this month, the Day of Ashura, is a day of fasting for some Muslims.

In the Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah marks the new year. And, like with Islam, Jewish New Year begins a period of ten holy days of observance, the Ten Days of Awe, concluding with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

In Judaism, it is said that on Rosh Hashanah the Book of Life is opened and the Angel of Life writes each person's destiny for the coming year. Over the ten days of *teshuvah*, Jews are called upon to return to themselves and examine their lives and to make amends with those they have wronged or who have wronged them. The Book of Life is kept open until the last sound of the shofar on Yom Kippur when it is then sealed for another year.

This ten day period is a holy time - a time of remembrance, a time to be in community, and a time for individual reflection and deepening of religious practice.

It reminds me that a time of beginning is often a time not to plunge headlong into the next thing, the next chapter, the next season or phase of life, but a time to pause. A time in which we can reflect and review our lives.

The observance of the High Holy Days in Judaism and Muharram in Islam remind us that there is a space between the ending and the beginning. A space in which time can seem to slow down as we stand back from our lives a bit.

This could be called a liminal space. The not-yet or perhaps both-and space. A time in which sunflowers are in full bloom and leaves are also falling to the ground.

Sometimes this space can feel welcome. It can be a space with freedom and levity. Sometimes we can embrace this time between an ending and beginning for the sense of possibility it offers.

I entered such a welcoming in-between space during my last year of seminary. I had technically finished up all of my degree requirements in the fall semester of my final year and so didn't need to do any coursework in my final semester. Jared and I had just gotten married, and he was headed to Cambridge, England for a yearlong program. Since I didn't have to be taking classes in the spring, we figured out a way for me to also go to England for a few months before returning for my graduation. So, I had a sort of mini-sabbatical. It was a glorious time. And, although we didn't have much money then - we were living off of student loans, I had a lot of freedom and time to pursue my own interests. It was a chance to step back from routine responsibilities and to embrace the "not-yet" nature of that chapter of life.

Perhaps you have been in this welcoming space between an ending and a beginning in your own life. Those first few days or weeks of retirement. The time between ending one job and beginning another when you know what is coming but have time to really enjoy the transition.

Sometimes, though, the time after something has ended - some phase of life or relationship - and before the beginning of that next thing - is uncomfortable. It can be a space of messy uncertainty in which there is nothing for us to hold onto for security.

This is often true when we lose someone we love whose existence has shaped our own for so long in such stable and routine ways. Their death can bring an end to a way of being you have grown familiar with and, though you know a new phase of life will begin, you're not there yet. Everything still feels uncertain and complex.

In our reading, Billy Collins describes it this way: "This is the middle. Things have had time to get complicated, messy, really. Nothing is simple anymore... This is the bridge, the painful modulation. This is the thick of things."

On a societal level, I think we're very much in this place of uncertain transition. We are in a place in between order and re-order. Old systems we once knew are ending but we haven't quite made our way to that next phase of being.

We feel this in traditional societal institutions like churches and other faith communities. We grapple with the question of how to stay relevant given the significant shifts in religious identity in our country and globally and the general shift away from traditional institutions by younger generations.

We also feel this in our economic systems. The climate crisis and more frequent natural disasters spurred by global warming have made clear that our fossil-fuel dependent economy no longer serves us or the planet yet we are not yet in that place of embracing a new, more sustainable way of meeting our needs.

So, both on the macro, societal level and also on the micro, personal level, we can feel the discomfort and uncertainty of transitional time, liminal space.

Though this space between the ending and the beginning can feel uncomfortable, it is a space we inhabit so frequently in our lives at so many junctures in the many paths we take through life.

Whether this in-between space feels welcoming or feels uncomfortable, I would like to think that this is a space of invitation. A space that invites us to take a pause and to take stock of the direction we are headed.

During the month of August, I spent a day of study leave up in the Northeast Kingdom with a few friends who had rented a house in Burke, Vermont. I decided to go out for a short run in the area. I had a map, so I traced out a short route for myself. I had gone less than a quarter mile down the road when the road appeared to end. According to the map, the road should have continued down a bit farther and connected with another road which I had planned to use to loop back around to the house. When I got to what seemed to be the end of the road, I stopped. I peered around. I noticed a sign going in the other direction that said, "Private property. Do not enter." And, then, looking more closely, I noticed that there was a steep path carefully lined with large rocks that descended towards the road below. I tentatively approached the path and realized that someone had very carefully and quite intentionally created this path to join these two roads together. It felt very welcoming, and I happily approached the road below and continued on my planned route.

For me, what appeared to be an ending, wasn't that at all. It wasn't the middle of the journey that I had anticipated. It was an unexpected beginning.

And, it was a chance for me to pause. To ask myself, where am I headed and how am I going to get there?

At the beginning of this church year, I am offering all of us an invitation to take a similar kind of pause. As a community, I believe we are on the brink of something new. A little more than a year ago, the congregation adopted a five year vision statement that described with bold and clear language the type of community we aspire to be.

We are now a year into moving towards that vision, and in this middle space, I invite us to reflect even more purposefully on where we are headed and why we are here. So, there is a question that I am posing to all of us this year that we can come back to as we move more deeply into living into our vision. The question is, "What difference are we called to make?"

As we try out having two services on Sundays during the month of January and contemplate moving in that direction into the future, we can ask ourselves, "what

difference are we called to make?” As we share with one another our hopes and needs for nurturing our spiritual journeys through our religious education ministry, we can ask ourselves, “what difference are we called to make?” And, as we choose what issues of justice to respond to in our community, we can ask, “what difference are we called to make?”

Through this kind of reflection, I hope that we will be able to more fully welcome whatever new beginning is in store for us in the days to come.

And, I invite you as you welcome your own new beginnings in your personal life to also rest in the pause. To recognize, and perhaps, appreciate, what is coming to a close for you in this time and what is on the cusp of beginning.

I know that this isn't always easy, especially when an ending has taken us by surprise. When endings aren't anticipated or aren't in our control, the liminal space created can be painful. This is often when it is hardest to offer a sense of welcome to new beginnings.

In these cases, you might ask yourself how you can offer yourself a sense of welcome. How might you leave room to recognize where there might be an unexpected way forward?

Billy Collins writes: “This is the beginning. Almost anything can happen.”

“This is the first part/where the wheels begin to turn/where the elevator begins its ascent/before the doors lurch apart.”

May we embrace the freedom and the possibility in the time of ending and beginning. May we know that “nothing is ever lost in the many changes time brings. Always there is a beginning.”

So may it be.