

“Endings and Beginnings”  
Jeremiah 1:4-10  
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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A week and a half ago, I was standing on the track at Greenville High School watching about 20 kids, roughly between the ages of 8-12, run around the track.

I was there to sign our younger son up for the youth running program that the Greenville Track Club is sponsoring.

It was freezing cold that day, grey skies, wind was kicking in...but the kids were having a great time. And as I was watching them circle the track, I had a feeling that I was not expecting to feel.

I was jealous.  
A little jealous of those kids.  
Now I know...envious of a bunch of kids running around a track in 30 degree weather?

Well, yes.  
You see, I used to run—I ran track back in high school.  
I wasn't great, but I really enjoyed it.

So I ran road races in my 20s.  
I ran a marathon once, the Marine Corps Marathon, in Washington D.C.

But the time for serious running in my life is over.  
In fact, it's been over for almost 20 years.

I have a very vivid memory of sitting on a doctor's table in the fall of 2000, with a mysterious hip and back injury that I had sustained from all that running, and while the doctor could not pinpoint the exact source of the pain, he told me in no uncertain terms that I really needed to stop running and get my exercise another way.

I didn't want to hear THAT—I wasn't even 30 years old at the time.

So I saw a couple other doctors.

And then finally I went to a physical therapist who worked with Olympic athletes...and lo and behold, he not only correctly diagnosed the problem, he fixed it, and he said I could try running again!

I was overjoyed!

So I tried, and I tried...and I was never able to get back to running without reinjuring my hip.

It took a good year or so for me to come to terms with what that FIRST doctor told me in exam room—I was done with serious running.

Now I can see the puzzled look on some of your faces.

Some of you are thinking, “Why would you be UPSET about that??? I’d LOVE IT if a doctor told me not to run!”

But my point is not –oh, woe is me, I cannot run road races anymore.

My point is about coming to terms with  
the END of something I loved.

I suspect you know about this.

You do not have to be a former runner to know about coming to terms with the END, **how hard an ending can be.**

Whether it’s the end of a relationship,  
or the end of one’s career,  
or even **anticipating** the end of something, as you watch your child fill out college applications and you realize that the house will really be different without that child there.

It’s not easy, is it?

**Endings are not easy.**

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I don’t say all this to bring everyone down in the dumps this morning.

I say it because our text for today asks that it be said.

Our text is the call of the prophet Jeremiah.

Do you remember what Jeremiah is called by God to do?

*“See, today I appoint you over nations  
and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.”*

What a fascinating call!

6 verbs—4 negative, 2 positive...

Jeremiah is not called by God to lead a people out of bondage like Moses.  
Jeremiah is not called by God to become the father of a new nation like  
Abraham.

Jeremiah’s first responsibility is...those 4 negative verbs:

**“to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow...”**

Not that Jeremiah will be doing the plucking and the pulling.  
He will be God’s mouthpiece, talking about what GOD is doing.

In other words, God is plucking up and pulling down, bringing about the end  
of something, and Jeremiah is called to preach and proclaim that END...

The end of what??

A little history might help.

Jeremiah was at work in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE...which  
is when the Babylonians came and conquered and took the Hebrew people into  
exile. What did exile mean?

Exile meant THE END:

The end of living on the land that was promised to Abraham.

The end of the Temple in Jerusalem that Solomon built years

before.

And so many Israelites are wondering: does this mean the end  
of God’s covenant with us?

Imagine that.  
 Imagine losing your country,  
     losing your home,  
         losing your bearings,  
         losing your church,  
         maybe losing your family—  
             and being taken to a foreign land.

No one wanted to hear those words from Jeremiah.  
 No one wants the END of a life they've come to love.  
 Not then...and not now.

So let's pause here a moment.

Are there any endings in your life that you can see on the horizon?

Or perhaps something ended for you 6 months ago, or year ago, but you still find your mind wandering back, still find yourself stuck in a bit of nostalgia or unresolved ambivalence, because the emotions about that ending are not entirely sorted out for you right now...

Please don't misunderstand.

By talking about endings today, I don't mean to suggest that every ending is a bad thing or even a difficult thing.

Perhaps you've heard the story about the young man who wanted to be a Buddhist monk.

He went from America to Tibet, went to the Abbot.

"I want to become a monk."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Well," said the Abbot, "it means seven years of silence, after which you get two words."

So the young man spent seven years in total silence.

After those seven years, the Abbot called him in and said, “You now can say two words.”

He said, “Cold breakfast.”

“Are you going to stay?” asked the Abbot.

“Yes.”

“Well, it means seven more years of silence, and then you get two more words.”

So another seven years of silence pass.

After which, the Abbot calls him in.

“You can now say two words.”

“Hard bed.”

“Are you going to stay?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it means seven more years...”

And after seven more years, total silence, the Abbot calls him in.

“You now have two words.”

And the young man, who was now not so young anymore...he said, “I quit.”

And the Abbot said, “It’s just as well...you’ve done nothing but complain ever since you got here.”<sup>1</sup>

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Look, I’m not suggesting that every ending is a bad thing.

Nor do I mean to suggest that every ending is a DIVINELY ORDAINED thing.

When a parent dies before their children get a chance to grow up...

When your elderly parent develops dementia, and the person they used to be is gone, but their body just won’t give up, won’t quit...

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<sup>1</sup> As told in a sermon by Fred Craddock, “But If the Answer Is No,” in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

Sometimes endings come too soon. Sometimes endings last too long.

And not for one second do I believe that God is the CAUSE of endings that cause that kind of suffering.

But it does beg the question...where is God in the midst of it all?

Have you asked yourself that question recently?

Whatever ending you are dealing with in your life right now, have you asked or wondered what God might be up to?

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The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston is the pastor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in NY City. In a sermon a few years ago, Scott shared about what happened when his mother died.

“When my Mom died, my Dad went into a tailspin...My brother and I couldn't seem to find the right words. Dad sunk deeper and deeper into depression.

“The local pastor, trying to toss my father a lifeline, recommended a grief group that met in the lobby of an old bank building in town. Soon my brother and I were joking that Dad had become a grief junkie. He never missed a meeting. We wondered if he was sweet on one of the women in the class.

Finally, I asked him about it.

“So, Dad, what's the grief group like?”

“Well,” he said, “I have been so confused, so mad at God, and I didn't feel like anyone had any good answers. When I went to grief group, I found people who were like me. They taught me,” he said, “the primal scream. Do you know about the primal scream?”

“Yes, Dad,” Scott said, “I know about the primal scream.”

“Well,” his dad said, somewhat sheepishly, “I have been doing it. I have been driving out past the Gunderson's farm to the crossroads there. I have been pulling over, and with the windows down, I have been doing the primal scream.”

“And you know what,” he said, “I’m pretty sure God heard me.”<sup>2</sup>

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That may be the hardest thing to remember in the midst of an ending.

That God hears us.  
That God is with us.

That God promises not only to walk by our side through whatever ending we’re going through right now, but that God **ALSO *promises something new.***

Sometimes the endings we face are natural and expected.  
Sometimes they are a surprise, and they turn our lives upside down.

But the bedrock of our faith is that God’s love is much **GREATER** than any endings you and I will face.

The Apostle Paul says as much in those well-known words we heard from 1 Corinthians 13.

You remember them.  
The last 6 verses are all about **ENDINGS**.

“But as for prophecies, they will come **to an end**;  
as for tongues, **they will cease**;  
as for knowledge, it will come **to an end**.

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;  
but when the complete comes, the partial will **come to an end.**”

And yet, according to Paul, “Love never ends.”

Paul is talking about agape—  
the kind of love that comes from God.

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<sup>2</sup> “Should This Sermon Make You Happy?”, by Scott Black Johnston, November 4, 2012, found at [http://day1.org/4263-should\\_this\\_sermon\\_make\\_you\\_happy](http://day1.org/4263-should_this_sermon_make_you_happy).

According to Paul, God’s love is greater than any ending you and I will ever walk through—which is right in line with the OTHER PART of Jeremiah’s call...those last TWO VERBS.

I hope you haven’t forgotten about the last two verbs.

“*I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.*”

According to Jeremiah, God will be at work in the midst of our endings to build and to plant...to CREATE SOMETHING NEW.

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A while back, Craig Barnes wrote an article for *The Christian Century*.

Barnes describes how, when he was growing up, his father—who was a preacher—believed it was important to memorize verses of the Bible.

“On Mondays he’d give my older brother and me a verse written out on a little white card. We were expected to recite it from memory by dinner at the end of the week when our father would point to one of us and say something like, ‘Romans 8.28’.”

“If we didn’t start chirping away with ‘For all things work together for good for those who love God,’ we’d have to leave the table.”

Barnes says that by the time he was a teenager, he had “memorized a lot of the Bible, not out of love for the sacred text but because I didn’t want to be dismissed from Saturday evening dinner.”

Barnes then goes on to tell about how, when he was 17,  
his parents’ marriage fell apart.

His father’s response was to leave not only his church but also his family and simply disappear.

His mother's response was to leave Long Island and move to Dallas to live with her sister.

Not move *with* her two sons. She left **without** them.

All of which meant that Craig and his older brother, at a far too early age, were left to fend for themselves.

The following Christmas, Barnes and his brother decided to go visit their mother. But they had no money and no transportation, so they concluded that the best way to make the trip would be to hitchhike from Long Island to Dallas.

“By the end of the first day we were somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia on Interstate 81. It was snowing hard, the sun was long gone, and we stood on the entrance ramp with our thumbs sticking out.

“As the snow got heavier, there were fewer and fewer cars. After two hours, we finally saw a pair of headlights pull over in front of us. It was a Virginia state trooper.

“We were expecting a lecture about how dangerous...it was to hitchhike. Instead, he told us that the highway had been closed for two hours and that after attending to an accident up the road he would come back for us...”

As they were waiting for the trooper to return,  
Barnes and his brother tried to figure out how to pass the time.

After a couple of false starts,  
Barnes' brother finally pointed to him and said, “Romans 8.28”.

“We spent much of that night asking each other to recite the verses of the Bible we had memorized but never truly heard. At one point I found myself saying the precious lines of Isaiah 43: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.”

Barnes writes, “By the time I finished reciting those words, I was crying.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “The night I learned to take chances,” by M. Craig Barnes, *The Christian Century*, April 26, 2017.

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Craig Barnes, as many of you know,  
 went on to become a Presbyterian minister  
 and is now serving as the President of Princeton Seminary.

So...when he was just a teenager, standing with his brother on a closed interstate trying to hitchhike in the middle of a snowstorm, do you think Craig Barnes—in the midst of all that was ending in his life—do you think he could picture the new beginnings that God would call him to?

No, no.  
 Craig Barnes could not imagine it.  
 But God could.

God was at work in his life, just like God is right now at work in your life.

The recently deceased poet Mary Oliver once said:  
 “Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable.”

I think she was talking about God!

Let me invite you to consider the ENDING  
 that you are **most scared of right now**.

Do you trust God to take that ending, and be at work in it...  
 so that God will do something new?

Even if your answer to that question is I DON'T KNOW...  
 the good news is that whatever FEAR or DOUBT you possess—  
 it will NOT stop God.

God is at work, even when we cannot see God at work,  
 PLANTING a seed—  
 BUILDING something—  
 something you and I will never see coming...

Amen.