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## Transitions: Every beginning starts with an ending

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### Every beginning starts with an ending Second sermon in series entitled: Transitions

Preached Sunday, April 13, 2008  
Rev. David Tinney

Text: 1 Kings 19:1-10

Theme: Every new thing we do begins with the ending of something we used to do.

Did you listen carefully to the story this morning and the description of a major change in Elijah's life? The old crotchety prophet just delivered a crushing blow to King Ahab and his army of prophets of Baal and he and God are victorious. One phase of the prophet's life has just been completed and he should have been celebrating under a huge banner reading "Mission Accomplished." Instead his moment of glory is cut short.

A messenger arrives from his archenemy Queen Jezebel. Upon receiving the news that her prophets have been consumed by a holy fire, the matriarch of meanness is consumed by an unholy rage and promises to hunt Elijah down and kill him. The man who stood against hundreds now tucks his tail and runs for the wilderness. One day into the journey he cries out to God, "It is enough now, Lord take my life." Can you relate to Elijah? Oh I am sure that none of you have participated in a celebrity cookoff involving 450 opposing prophets but there are days when it certainly feels like we have. Am I right?

There are days when we think all is going well and suddenly we are blindsided by the unexpected. We are crushed by change and we yell to God, "Enough, enough already. I just want this to end." Am I the only one in this room that has felt this way or am I joined by others? (*Slowly look around the room*) Just as I thought, I am in good company. To steal a phrase from a current advertisement "Life comes at us fast" and we are surrounded by change.

Last week's sermon caught me by surprise. When I preach a good sermon I can usually bank on one or two people meeting me at the door and saying, "When you wrote that sermon were you thinking about me?" Well after last week's sermon nearly every one of you said that. Then in every meeting or in every gathering throughout the week people talked about the changes happening in their lives and how the sermon opened their eyes to seeing change in a new way. Some talked to me about the extent of change and how describing those five areas of change made them aware of how pervasive it was in every part of their lives.

Others talked to me about the depth of change in their lives. Many of you talked about major changes in health, marital status, careers, and visions of the future. A couple of you talked about how change today seems to be more dangerous than in the past generations. In this age of instant communication many of us are expected to make changes and respond to changes without having the time to process it properly and so change is perceived as more dangerous.

I loved a couple of you who said, "I love change – as long as I am the one generating it." But let's face it that is not how most change comes. Most of us are like Elijah caught off guard by change and yelling "Enough, already!"

Today I am going to preach on the first step of the three-step process of transition developed by William Bridges many years ago. According to Bridges all transition begins with an ending. T.S. Eliot once wrote, "What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from."<sup>1</sup>

So this morning we are going to start from the end.

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Endings are confusing, messy, and often emotional. Most of us do not do well with endings and we want to skip right through them to the new beginnings because they seem to be devoid of meaning and look a lot like death. Think of some of our phrases, “What’s done is done,” “Let bygones be bygones,” or “Don’t cry over spilt milk.” All of them reflect our attitude towards endings.

There is an old story about two monks who were traveling through the countryside during the rainy season. Rounding the bend in the path, they found a muddy stream blocking their way. Beside it stood a lovely woman dressed in flowing robes. “Here,” one of the monks said to the woman, “let me carry you across the water.” And with that he picked her up and carried her across. Setting her down on the further bank, he went along in silence with his fellow monk to the abbey on the hill.

Later that evening the other monk suddenly said, “I think you made an error, picking up the woman back on our journey today. You know we are not supposed to have anything to do with women, and you held that one so close to you! You should not have done that.”

“How strange,” remarked the other. “I carried her only across the water. You are still carrying her still.”<sup>2</sup>

What are we still carrying from the past that we don’t recognize? If we want to move on, if we want new life to begin, if we want new growth to take root we need to clear the soil of what is old. We need to recognize our endings so we can begin what is new.

In some cultures there are formal rituals marking the ending of one phase of life and the beginning of another. We call them rites of passage. I remember when I was a young boy watching a National Geographic film of a primitive tribe located somewhere in the islands off Indonesia. The young boys of the tribe had to go through a long and formal process to move from adolescence into manhood. First they needed to make their own bow and arrow and then kill their first animal without the assistance of an adult. Then they were put out in the jungle for an entire week with nothing but that same bow and arrow to fend for themselves. Many never returned.

Then came the hardest test and the one that made this video stick in my mind. The elders of the tribe found a hornets’ nest and smoked the bees so they were temporarily knocked out. Then they put the hornets in a crude screen so that they all faced the same way. Do you get the image? Can you imagine dozens upon dozens of hornets wedged in a screen, unable to fly, and mad as – well mad as a hornet. Then the boys had to stand still and have the screen placed against their chests. The hornets stung them on the one end and then they flipped it over and bit them on the other side. If the boys flinched they were not ready for manhood.

Barbaric you say and you would be right. Can you imagine how far that would get you today in our politically correct world? What we fail to grasp as we gasp in disbelief is that these ancient rituals contained a prerational magic<sup>3</sup> that actually helped the boys navigate the transition process into manhood. Believe me I am not advocating this kind of torture, especially with how I would swell up and not make it to breakfast, let alone manhood, but these ancient rites of passages contained wisdom that the most sophisticated counselors today say we need to use in order to properly navigate life’s phases.

These old rites of passage created clear points of separation between the past and the future, between the person and his/her community so they could unlearn what was necessary and learn a new relationship, and provided a point of re-entry and a new beginning.

We don’t have a lot of formalized rites of passage but as I was writing this sermon I was aware that Ginny Truscott was with her son Nicholas who was graduating from the Marine’s boot camp at Parris Island on Thursday. He had just gone through a 54-hour exercise of physical and mental endurance known as The Crucible and when it was done for the first time he could be called a Marine. It was

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indeed a rite of passage that disengaged him from his normal life, tested him, reoriented him, and sent him out a new person with a new identity.

It formalized an ending as a recruit so he could begin the next stage of his life as Marine. Most of us will never have to endure *The Crucible* – thank God. But we can learn from it especially when it comes to dealing with our endings in a more healthy way. William Bridges in his book “*Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes*” suggests there are four aspects of dealing with our endings that would help us all. He calls them his four D’s of ending – disengagement, disidentification, disenchantment, and disorientation.

What takes him an entire chapter to explain I am going to try to brush through in a few paragraphs and then try to relate it to the story of Elijah and to each of our stories of change. Disengagement simply stated is the process where we move away from the old situation to have time and space to properly reflect on what it is that is ending or changing. When change comes or loss catches us by surprise we all need time to let it register, to think and reflect, and to be alone. When my son was younger and was going through a crisis I would often find him sitting on the top of the tallest tree in our yard or on the roof of the church. When I would ask him what he was doing his simple answer would be, “Dad I need my space.”

Bridges writes, “Divorces, deaths, job changes, moves, illnesses, and many lesser events disengage us from the contexts in which we have always known ourselves. They break the old cue-system which served to reinforce our roles and to pattern our behavior.”<sup>4</sup> Loss disengages us from our old secure order. Change dislodges us from the old patterns and we start seeking a new place to anchor.

The second “D” is disidentification, which is a word that sent my spell checker into disengagement. Bridges writes that often times when we go through periods of loss or change we lose our ways of identifying ourselves. Disidentification is the inner side of the disengagement process where we struggle to find our identifying labels. I remember one of these times in my life when I went from being the graphics editor of the newspaper to being a student in seminary. When I introduced myself for the first time I felt lost. I was so used to identifying myself with a title that when I didn’t have one I struggled.

Many of us in this room know what that is like. When a mother sends her children off to college and there is no one left in the house she often struggles with her identity and role. When men and women who have worked all our lives in careers finally bring that career to an end we struggle with who am I now? When those of us who are married and are used to being defined by the other, lose their spouse we not only mourn the loss of our loved one but we also mourn the loss of who we once were.

This is a tough time for some but when we find our way through we discover that there is a new identity awaiting us that can be exciting, joyful, and fulfilling.

The third “D” stands for disenchantment which can be a dangerous phase if it is not handled properly. It is where loss or change tears us out of our old reality that we once accepted unthinkingly.<sup>5</sup> This is where we are separated from our old identity and our old reality and we are suspended in an uncomfortable limbo between what was and what will be. This is where we question the truth about the “way things were” to see how much was fictionalized and how much was really true.<sup>6</sup>

It sounds more complicated than it really is so let me give you an example. When the perfect marriage comes to an unexpected end often the survivor goes into a time of discernment and really examines the “perfect moments” and starts to see the flaws and the warning signs. When a person is fired from a job that they really loved, they often enter a time of limbo where they reflect back to conversations that were loaded with hints about impending doom. Nearly every situation of major

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change or loss pushes us into this time of disenchantment where **if** we are surrounded by people who can help us discern then we see the past for what it really was – flaws and all.

As I said before this can be a dangerous stage because if we are not surrounded by wise and caring friends then we can end up like Elijah shouting in despair, “Enough already, take my life right now.” In times of change we need to share our stories, we need to find wise and caring people to give us direction, and we need to be honest.

Disenchantment is part of life. It is woven into the process of change and loss. But it provides us a platform where we can see the world as it really is. “Reality has many layers, each appropriate to the phase of intellectual and spiritual development”<sup>7</sup> we are capable of handling at that moment. As we mature our understanding of things like the Tooth Fairy, Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus change. A person moving through disenchantment recognizes the old view was sufficient at that moment but is no longer so. The person who doesn’t recognize gets stuck in disillusionment, depression, and sometimes despair.

Finally we move to disorientation or more correctly “reorientation” where we are open to a new vision, a new reality, or a new direction in life. This is where we discover the new direction that God wants to take us. Let me illustrate how this all works as quickly as possible in the remaining minutes of this sermon by going back to the story of Elijah. Our crotchety old prophet almost got stuck in the disenchantment. His idea of reality was that once he got rid of the prophets and scored a victory over Ahab he would be leading a carefree life. But Jezebel spoiled that view and just as he was about to be stuck in a disenchantment and angel commands him to eat, drink, and get moving. So off he travels for forty days in the wilderness and when he finally arrives at a cave in the side of Mount Horeb he waits for God to speak.

When God speaks Elijah is still angry. He complains to God about his disenchantment with the way things are being handled. Then he sits and waits for a response. Have you ever done that with God? Have you ever complained about life and been bold enough to say “God now do something about this! Make it right!”

So the story goes that he waited and there was a terrible wind storm, followed by an earthquake, followed by a fire. Surely the Almighty, all-correcting God would speak through one of these mighty forces of nature and make things right. But God was not there. Then there was silence – unexpected, surprising disorienting silence – and Elijah knew God was there. So he says the same words as before but without the attitude and God responds not by making things right, but by providing a new direction. He decommissions his greatest prophet and tells him what his new future will entail.

Often this is our story. Change or loss rocks our world and we don’t know what to do. We run away to hide and in the process run into God who reminds us if you that your reality might be too limited, your range of possibilities too narrow, your ideas about the future too small. As we run, or busy ourselves, or numb ourselves with self pity, God waits for us to be quiet enough to hear and willing enough to listen. Then God speaks about a new world, a new vision, a new possibility.

Let us be in prayer...

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” found as a quote in William Bridges’ book “Transitions”

<sup>2</sup> From a Zen story adapted by Paul Reps in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (New York: Anchor Books, n.d.) p18.

<sup>3</sup> Bridges, William “*The Way of Transition*,” Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001. P8

<sup>4</sup> Bridges, William, “*Transitions: Making sense of Life’s Changes*” Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, MA 1980. p95

<sup>5</sup> Bridges, “*The Way of Transition*” p63

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<sup>6</sup> Bridges, "*Transitions*" p98

<sup>7</sup> Bridges, "*Transitions*" p101