

The End, Middle, and Beginning
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church, Colorado Springs
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Isaiah 43:19

For I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Matthew 25:31; 34-36

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

1 Corinthians 15:20-22

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

Revelation 21:6

It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, beginning and end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

I love stories. Every story has a beginning, middle, and end. That's what I've always been taught, anyway. Stories have paths that they take readers on. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, Let there be light. Skip a few verses. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in their vast array.

The end of that creation story. Then what? The beginning of another. Another story of the beginnings of man and woman, and then another story involving the fruit of a certain tree, then another story about the man and woman's offspring fighting, then another story about a great big flood. The end, then the beginning, then the middle, then the end, then the beginning. soon it all starts to flow together. And after all, it's all part of the same story, really. Where is the beginning, the middle, and the end? Does it truly begin with "in the beginning," and does the story end at Revelation 22:21: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen"

The answer is, it depends. What story are you interested in? Noah? Adam and Eve? Jesus? Judaism? Christianity? Where do these stories begin and where do they end? It all depends on perspective. Perspective changes stories. It changes how we tell them, what we focus on, where we begin them, where we end them. It changes how they make us feel.

This is a season when I think many of us could use a change of perspective, a new way to view our own stories.

It's Winter. The beautiful colored leaves are gone from the trees, it's getting colder, and all of those commercials are telling us to save money and shop now. We spend less time outside, less time with other people, and holiday seasons bring a feeling of loneliness. You might feel overwhelmed; you might even feel hopeless sometimes. "Depressed" might even be a word you could use to describe yourself right about now. We can get sucked in by these things and the energy we think we need to push them away just isn't there. When we find ourselves in this type of season, we need to change our perspective, or one way I like to look at it, we need to turn our kaleidoscopes.

Remember those things you used to play with as a kid, the things you give your kids and grandkids to play with now, and might look at *yourself* for 2 seconds and then get bored with? A kaleidoscope is a cylindrical toy with mirrors inside and containing little colored objects, like beads. When you look into one end, light entering the other creates a colorful pattern due to the reflection of the mirrors.

I like to imagine that when we view the world, it's similar to looking through a kaleidoscope. But instead of beads at one end, it contains the *entire world*. But just like any kaleidoscope, we don't see all the possibilities, all the patterns of the world, at once. We only see one pattern at a time, reflected over and over again so that what we see inside at any given moment looks huge, but we really only see a small part of the world at any given time. We have to turn the kaleidoscope to see different reflections and different patterns. Otherwise, if we only look at one pattern and don't change our perspective, we can start to believe that this *one* is all there is to the

world, and that is exactly how everything fits together. The image might be beautiful and awe-inspiring, or it might be crazy and chaotic, but it is only one perspective.

In order to get the best views of the world, we have to constantly be turning our kaleidoscopes, and focusing them on other parts of the world, too -- getting as many perspectives as we can, *knowing* that there is not only one, that images can be portrayed and perceived in hundreds of ways. Sometimes, though, our kaleidoscopes get stuck. We simply forget to turn them, and get mesmerized by that one image of the world, that one image of whatever situation we're in.

Henri Nouwen is one of my favorite Christian authors. He's written books like *The Wounded Healer*, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, and *Bread for the Journey*, to name a few of dozens. During his vocation as a Catholic priest, he quickly became respected as having insight into the spiritual life that gave people guidance and hope. Long after he became a spiritual leader, he went through a period of loss and hopelessness. He describes it as "a time of extreme anguish, during which I wondered if I would be able to hold on to my life. Everything came crashing down on my self-esteem, my energy to live and work, my sense of being loved, my hope for healing, my trust in God" -- everything. Here I was, a writer about the spiritual life, known as someone who loves God and gives hope to people, flat on the ground and in total darkness (*The Inner Voice* xiii).

I sincerely hope that none of you are going through quite the darkness that Nouwen describes here. But I know that all of you have been through really tough times in your life when it feels like there is no point of light at the end of the tunnel, or that it's so small and so far away that the energy it would take to get to it is just impossible to gather. Sometimes there are things going on in the chemical functions of our bodies that take more to change than just a change of perspective. Something like Depression that we can't control, we can't seem to fix, and we need help from mental professionals to help us deal with it. Those things are real and we need to know that we can use that help and not feel guilty that simply changing our perspective doesn't work.

For Henri Nouwen, it took work and guidance from loyal guides to help him through his darkness. And a change of perspective. It wasn't something that happened overnight, and it

wasn't the kind of change of perspective in which he just told himself that he should not despair any longer. Instead, he began to look at his despair differently, and treat it differently. He didn't deny it, but began to use it. The thing that had triggered this dark time in life, he says, "forced him to enter the basement of his soul and look directly at what was hidden there, to choose, in the face of it all, not death but life. Thanks to my attentive and caring guides, I was able day by day to take very small steps toward life." (xvii) In other books after this time period, Nouwen speaks of choosing joy and hope instead of despair. It is a conscious effort, he says, to focus on the life-giving parts of life instead of the things that make us bitter. In other words, it is a conscious effort to continuously change one's perspective. If we cannot always change the circumstances of our lives, we can at least change the way we respond to these circumstances.

For instance, Nouwen recommends that at the end of each day we could spend a moment and "decide to remember that day or whatever may have happened or as a day to be grateful for. In doing so," he says, "we increase our heart's capacity to choose for joy. As our hearts become more joyful, we will become, without any special effort, a source of joy for others. Just as sadness begets sadness, so joy begets joy." (*Here and Now* 33) Eventually, Nouwen's period of anguish became a published book of his journal entries during that time, a book that has brought hope to thousands of others going through their own difficult times.

We have to change our perspective from time to time, or our vision gets narrow, and we start feeling deflated, and gray, and hopeless. We have to start looking at our stories differently. Our life stories are not simply beginning, middle, and end. Instead they are collections of thousands and millions of beginnings and thousands and millions of ends. Sometimes we get stuck looking at some period of our lives as ONLY an ending, or ONLY a middle part that desperately needs resolution, as Nouwen felt when he was in the middle of a dark emptiness in his life and could not see the end. What would happen if, instead of seeing those dark periods of your own life as a middle between beginning and end, you changed your perspective and viewed it as a beginning of the new wellsprings of life that God has for you? What if we turned our kaleidoscope and started looking for ways to turn seemingly empty parts of our lives into periods in which God is *already* at work?

Revelation says "It is done! I am the alpha and omega, beginning and end." God isn't bound by the seasons of life. God says to the prophet Isaiah, the messenger to the Israelites: "For I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." Ahhhh. Those words themselves are like rivers that spread thirst-quenching water through my soul. God says "now" it springs forth. Even in the midst of future plans, that new thing is already happening.

God telling *me* this reminds me of my sense of vitality. That thing that I depend on to feel like all is right in my world is not of my own source. It is not me or my brain or my rest or anything else to do with me that controls it; instead, it is all from God. God is the source of the rivers that run through the desert; God is the Alpha and Omega, beginning AND end, from which all wellsprings of life come.

When the beginning feels like an end, when I am not yet ready for that new beginning to happen yet but deeply desire that middle time between the end and the beginning, God is the thing that will renew my spirit, as God is doing even now. Or, when it feels like I am stuck in some middle ground somewhere, not able to see either how I got there or the way out, changing my perspective to look for God's joy often gives me just enough hope and faith to start taking tiny steps forward. It's all about perspective.

Unfortunately, it can be really difficult to change your perspective. It takes energy, and it takes willpower, and it takes drawing on strength outside of yourself. God's wellsprings of life come in many different forms -- sometimes in the help of a friend, sometimes in something that happens, sometimes in distancing yourself from a situation. Sometimes we have to ask other people to describe it for us to see it from a new perspective. All are just different ways to turn your kaleidoscope.

Think about a painting on display. I recently went to see the "Becoming Van Gogh" exhibit at the Denver Art Museum. It showed some of his early work, and gradually, as I walked through the display, his work began to develop and looked more and more like the Van Gogh that I am familiar with. If I had just seen his early work and formed my opinion of Van Gogh on one of

those, I would not have been very impressed. Or, if I had just seen his later work without seeing the steps he had taken to get there, I could easily take his talent for granted and assume he was born a master. I can assure you -- he was not. If Van Gogh himself had viewed any of his early works as the end of his art, instead of the beginnings of new possibilities, he would never have achieved the skill that he developed. One painting tells one story. Change the perspective and put that painting next to others, and we see a new story. Or, listen to a description of the same painting by another person, and you will get a completely different perspective. Or, look at that painting at different times in your life, and you will get a new perspective.

It is the same for your life. Each moment in your life is the brand new beginning of a new story. Each moment can be seen in many perspectives.

What story are you living right now that needs a change of perspective, a turn of the kaleidoscope? When will you choose joy and hope instead of despair? What new thing is God doing in your life?

Amen.