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# Transitions: Endings

## Sermon Template

**Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**

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*The following sermon is part 1 in a Sermon Series by Rev. Andrew Conard of the Great Plains Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The rest of the series is found at [www.greatplainsumc.org/pastoraltransitions](http://www.greatplainsumc.org/pastoraltransitions)*

## Introduction

[Share brief personal story about a significant ending you've experienced that connects with the current transition. If you're leaving, you might mention your announcement to the congregation. If you're arriving, you might acknowledge the departure of the previous pastor.]

Our lives are made up of many transitions. Over and over, we experience periods of change – in our bodies, in our relationships, in our work. In practically every aspect of our lives, things change, and we go through the process of transition.

This is true for our congregation right now. We are in the middle of a significant pastoral transition, saying goodbye to the familiar and stepping into the unknown.

Ecclesiastes 3 reminds us:

“<sup>1</sup> There's a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens: <sup>2</sup> a time for giving birth and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for uprooting what was planted,”<sup>1</sup>

Seasons are real for our families, church, and community. There are times of transition. There are times of change. There is death, new life, and every change along the way.

## Sermon Series Orientation

This is the first in a series of sermons designed around the three parts of every transition – endings, neutral zone, and new beginnings.

William Bridges outlined this model of transition in his book *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* (originally published in 1980 and updated in 2004). In this classic work, Bridges addresses the transition process that each of us goes through – no matter what the ending or loss. This insightful resource will guide our exploration alongside Scripture as we navigate this season of change together.

[Describe the transition model visual if using one]

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, CEB.

In this model:

- **Endings** come first and involve letting go of the old way
- The **Neutral Zone** is the in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational
- **New Beginnings** happen when we embrace a new identity or reality

Today, I want to invite us to reflect on endings and how they can set the stage for new growth in the future.

## Endings in the Bible

The Bible is filled with stories about endings:

- Abraham and Sarah end their wait for a baby
- Slavery in Egypt ends for the people of Israel
- The long wait for a Messiah ends with the birth of Jesus

Perhaps the most famous ending in the Bible is Jesus' death on the cross.

Listen to these words from Luke 23:44-46:

<sup>44</sup> It was now about noon, and darkness covered the whole earth until about three o'clock, <sup>45</sup> while the sun stopped shining. Then the curtain in the sanctuary tore down the middle. <sup>46</sup> Crying out in a loud voice, Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I entrust my life." After he said this, he breathed for the last time."<sup>2</sup>

Imagine the scene for the disciples. They had followed Jesus for three years. They had seen him do amazing things. He taught, healed, and showed them what life was like in God's kingdom. They may have come to Jerusalem thinking, "Now is the time!" Jesus would become the new ruler, the Romans would leave, and Christ would reign.

But then, in an instant, it was all over. Jesus was nailed to the cross and breathed his last.

## Endings in Our Lives

Sometimes endings in our lives come just that fast:

- The death of a loved one
- A relationship ending

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 23:44-46, CEB.

- Losing a job

Life is one way, we are moving ahead, things are looking good. Then, suddenly, that way of life has come to an end. We had hoped, planned, and expected something different in our lives, in our work, in our relationships. But then it is over. An ending has come.

Some events in our lives are easy to recognize as endings, while others are more subtle.

[Share an appropriate personal example of a subtle ending, such as a child starting school, retirement, or other life transition]

What endings have you experienced in your life? What endings might you be experiencing right now?

## **Our Response to Endings**

We have endings throughout our lives, yet that doesn't mean we deal with them well. As humans, we don't really like endings. We want to avoid the loss and grief that come with these times.

### ***Common Responses to Endings***

1. **Jumping into the New** - Sometimes, we try to avoid endings by quickly jumping into something new and denying that an ending has occurred. We ignore our feelings and grief, telling ourselves and others, "I'm fine. I can outrun this loss."
2. **Staying in the Old** - Sometimes, we try to avoid endings by pretending nothing has changed. We keep doing things as we've always done them. We don't adapt or change. We try to avoid the ending entirely, but it won't go away.

The problem with both strategies is that they don't work. If we don't engage with the loss, grief, and endings in our lives, they will hold us back. They can negatively impact our lives and relationships. We may not be able to embrace a new beginning if we don't first embrace the ending.

## **Embracing Endings**

In his book "Transitions," William Bridges writes that there are four ways to embrace our endings, and they all begin with "dis":

### ***Disidentification***

We may lose some of the familiar ways we identify ourselves. We might say, "My life is falling apart," which is true – our old roles, behaviors, and relationships may be literally falling apart in the ending.

### ***Disenchantment***

This is when we feel in limbo between two worlds. Consider times of change for our country: September 11th, Kennedy's assassination, or Pearl Harbor. What we knew to be true is no longer so. The world we had lived in is not here anymore, and we can't go back.

***Disorientation***

We used to know what was up and down. We were able to orient our lives toward past and future, yet in an ending, we may find ourselves confused. There becomes a sense of emptiness. We used to have plans, but when an ending comes, we may have to let go because they don't make sense anymore.

***Disengagement***

Whether it's a vacation, a few days away, or even a bit of time each day, time apart helps make space to grieve. It breaks up old patterns and roles that used to sustain and shape our lives. It helps us let go of who we were so that we can begin the journey of whatever is next.

**Conclusion**

Robert Frost describes the hope in endings this way: that you would be "lost enough to find yourself."

When we embrace endings, we will struggle, be confused, feel empty, and have to deal with grief and loss. Yet when we grieve our loss and embrace our endings, we may become fertile soil out of which a new beginning will sprout.

The good news is that endings are not the end. The end of Jesus' life on the cross led to resurrection. The resurrection brings hope for all the endings in our lives.

So, don't avoid endings – engage them, go after them, live into them. Recognize the reality of loss and take time to grieve so that you can experience renewal and resurrection.

When we let go of the previous life that is no more and lean into the endings of our lives, it is then that we find new beginnings, new life, resurrection.

There's a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens:

- A time for endings.
- A time for beginnings.
- A time for grieving loss.
- A time for being transformed in resurrection.

Jesus knows this path. He knows you. He invites us to take his hand and walk into the endings we face, so that out of the ashes of our loss, new hope, new life, and new beginnings will come.

***Closing Prayer***

Let us pray:

Jesus, we want to walk with you. We are sorry for the times we mess up and turn away. Forgive us and make us new. Thank you for your love. Please fill us with your Spirit. Help us to follow your path in all the stages of life. In Jesus 'name, Amen.

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## **Adaptation Notes for Pastors**

### ***For departing pastors***

Emphasize specific aspects of ministry you're letting go of. Consider a ritual element where you symbolically "hand over" certain responsibilities or relationships.

### ***For arriving pastors***

Acknowledge the congregation's sense of loss with the previous pastor's departure. Affirm their grief while pointing toward hope.

### ***For either context***

Consider adding a ritual element that allows the congregation to name endings they're experiencing, perhaps through written prayers, a responsive reading, or a moment of reflection.

### ***Personalize***

Add your own stories of significant endings and how God worked through them. Your authenticity will help the congregation process their own endings.

### ***Visual aids***

Consider using the Bridges transition model diagram or seasonal imagery (autumn leaves, sunset) to illustrate the natural cycle of endings that lead to new beginnings.