



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 27, 2015

"Necessary Endings" — Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Ron Mathieu

To get started this morning...I need your help with a couple of easy questions:

How many of you were at one of our Christmas services last Wednesday or Thursday?

Nearly 3,600 people attended five services over two days, and more than 300 staff and volunteers served in one capacity or another. A huge mahalo to Roslyn, the worship team, and all who participated!

Now let's see a show of hands: How many of you made a New Year's resolution for 2015?

I'm going to predict that yours was one of these three:

- 1. Lose weight**
- 2. Get organized**
- 3. Spend less and save more**

Raise your hand if I correctly guessed your resolution. I confess I don't have prophetic gifts, but I do have the spiritual gift of research!

According to a Journal of Clinical Psychology survey, losing weight, getting organized, and overcoming debt are the top three resolutions we make.

In that same study they reported that nearly two-thirds of

Americans make resolutions every single New Year, but only 8% of us successfully keep them! (Source: *University of Scranton. Journal of Clinical Psychology*)

You know what this tells us? It tells us that if you made a resolution last year and didn't keep it...you're perfectly normal!

It also explains why health clubs see a huge surge in January memberships that are rarely used after February!

Why is it that people make resolutions and then don't keep them?

Every year since 1981 I have resolved to lose 10 pounds. For the record, I've lost at least 900 pounds during that 36-year span...problem is I failed to resolve to **not** gain them back!

I'll probably do it again this year. The other morning Angela came into the bathroom and saw me standing on the scale with my stomach sucked in. Ever the encouraging wife, she told me that sucking in my gut wouldn't help my weight. And I said it would, because if I didn't suck it in, I couldn't read the numbers!

So here's another question for you.

If you could make only one more resolution that would have to last the rest of your life, what would it be?

By the end of my message, you'll hear about a New Year's resolution that will do more than change your waistline...it'll change your life!

Join me in prayer: "Lord, I pray that my words will be Your words, that You will breathe Your truth through me and that through the power of Your Holy Spirit someone, hopefully many, will be drawn closer to You, in Christ's name I pray, Amen."

In just a few days we'll start a new year!!

I actually like this week between Christmas and New Year's Day. I really enjoy hearing the reviews of the last twelve months: Barbara Walters' Ten Most Fascinating People of 2015; the top sports events of the year; the news stories that captivated the world.

It's also a time when we think about the coming year. Many of us sigh a sigh of relief if it's the end of a tough year; many look forward to a fresh start; and yes, two-thirds of us make New Year's resolutions.

This propensity to look back and forward is even reflected in the name of the first month of the calendar. The root of the word "January" is derived from "Janus," the mythological Roman god pictured on this ancient coin.

Janus is always depicted as having two faces, signifying that he looks both to the future and to the past.



The Romans believed that he was the god of beginnings and transitions, and thereby the god of gates, doorways, passages and endings.

So it's been an ancient custom to look back and forward for a long, long, time!

I also like this time of the year because Angela and I got married in late December 46 years ago! (It's not every day you meet a couple who got married when they were six years old!)

Back when we were courting, I was part of a folk group and actually performed at the famed Newport Folk Festival...on the same stage as Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Joan Baez.

(I didn't say I performed with them...but it was on the same stage!)

If you're too young to remember who they were, ask your grandparents. And if you're lucky, they might also explain what "courting" is!!

One of my favorite folk singers of that era was Pete Seeger, who composed a hit song called "Turn, Turn, Turn." It's been performed by many, most famously by a rock group called the Byrds.

Pete Seeger composed the tune, but the thought-provoking lyrics are right out of the Bible, from a book called Ecclesiastes.

Like the Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is considered one of the "Wisdom" books in the Bible. The title roughly translates as "Teacher."

It's an unusual and puzzling book to many, as it ponders the meaning of life and death and everything in between. Some people find it despondent because in the writer's search for meaning he finds that riches, reputation, sex, love or anything else is not enough on its own to give life meaning.

It's best-known section is the start of chapter three that Pete Seeger quotes in his song.

Hear God's Word as "the Teacher" describes how there are seasons and cycles in life:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

*To everything there is a season,
A time for every purpose under heaven:
A time to be born, And a time to die;
A time to plant, And a time to reap;
A time to kill, And a time to heal;
A time to break down, And a time to build up;
A time to weep, And a time to laugh;*

*A time to mourn, And a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones;
A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to gain, And a time to lose;
A time to keep, And a time to throw away;
A time to tear, And a time to sew;
A time to keep silence, And a time to speak;
A time to love, And a time to hate;
A time of war, And a time of peace.*

Isn't it fascinating to realize that God designed the entire universe to be filled with cycles and seasons...beginnings and endings!

And whether 2015 was a good year or a disastrous year for you, it's really important for us to understand that we're always in constant transition.

In order for one thing to begin...it's natural for another thing to end. This is the way the world works, right?

But there are not only natural endings...there are also necessary endings.

I became really interested in this concept after reading Dr Henry Cloud's book by the same title as my sermon.

Dr Cloud is a Christian, a clinical psychologist, and a renowned author and speaker who has assisted many Fortune 500 companies. Some of his other books include "Integrity" and "Boundaries for Leaders."

He contends that we often get stuck...at work in dead-end jobs, with addictions and unhealthy relationships, with unsuccessful projects, products, and strategies... because of our inability to see that there is a time, and a season, for every activity under heaven. And sometimes it's necessary that they end!

God created seasons, in nature and in our lives, to remind us of this. Here in Hawaii, even though we know that Kona winds will always be replaced by cooler trades, the seasons are not as obvious as in England or New England where Angela and I grew up.

Instead of plants growing year round, in both Englands everything either dies off or goes dormant every winter...and you look forward to new life in the spring.

I would marvel when crocus and snowdrops would pop through the thawing ground, and an English bluebell wood can literally take your breath away.

Spring is a time to plant, and autumn is a time to reap. There's a time to be born and a time to die. Or as I heard one preacher conflate those two, "There's a time to plant and a time to be planted!"

Crops are planted in faith that they will produce a bountiful harvest, a time when we stop to express thanksgiving.

This can also be true when things are going great. But don't forget: "There's a time to gain, and a time to lose!"

Henry Cloud puts it this way: "No matter how comfortable you are in the fruitfulness of autumn, a harsh winter can, and will come."

Because that's true, the parents of the two beautiful babies we'll baptize later this morning will wonder what happened when their child reaches their terrible two's. That's right, there's "a time to laugh and a time to cry!"

Not to mention when they become teenagers...when it's often the case that there's a time to talk, and a time when you shouldn't talk back.

There's wisdom in knowing that the sun will rise as surely as it sets, and no matter what your lot in life, to remember that this too shall pass.

But one of the points I want to make this morning is that it's not only *natural* for things to change... often times it's *necessary* for them to change.

The truth is, **Some things must end for better things to begin.**

These things that must end are what we're calling "necessary endings."

As we look back on the last year—for some of us, maybe longer than that—we may be in a place where we don't believe things can or ever will change.

That might be depressing... and for many of us, it's also in our human nature to fear and resist change that needs to take place.

In either case, those are the times when we should be especially aware that some endings are necessary!

And whether it's a resolution to get in shape or end a substance dependency or a relational co-

dependency, what has not been working in the past is not going to magically start working if all you do is make a resolution...you gotta **DO** something!

Making a resolution without doing anything is like wanting a glass of milk and then sitting in the middle of a field waiting for a cow to sidle up to you.

You see, there's a time to gather stones, and a time to cast away the heavy stones that weigh us down in life.

Jesus described it as pruning: "*Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*"

Henry Cloud calls pruning "the process of proactive endings", and contends that "When pruning is not happening, average or worse occurs."

A healthy vine produces more buds than it can sustain; it needs to be pruned to redirect needed resources to the buds that have the greatest potential to mature.

This is true for how much stuff you store in your garage, a product line that's overdue for replacement, spiritual growth, and career adjustments.

Last January 1st I made a necessary ending when I stepped down as Executive Director of First Prez. This wasn't an adverse action, it was a very healthy pruning of our leadership.

I've been very blessed to co-lead our church, and look back with amazement at the many seasons of change we've experienced...last year and the last fifteen years!

But I also realized that although my call to serve Christ is still strong, I wouldn't be able to keep the same pace without other areas of my life suffering.

Having been intimately involved in the successful succession plan for the outgoing President of Compassion International, I approached Pastor Dan and our Personnel Team to find my replacement well in advance of when I was ready to step down...certainly before I was ready to retire from full-time ministry.

You see, a major reason for pruning one shoot of a vine is to make room for a more productive shoot to flourish...and it's a lot easier and healthier to do so *before* one becomes dead wood!

For our church, it was a time to build up. I had to become less so that Chris Pan (who replaced me as Executive Director) could become more.

It's already proven to be an excellent proactive ending. Chris has brought the kind of energy and entrepreneurship I had at age 39, but no longer possess. And redirecting my efforts to focus on longer range planning of our campus will help our church move into the future in ways the Executive Director just doesn't have time to pursue.

I've been asked a number of times in recent months how I'm enjoying retirement...so I guess we passed the baton pretty seamlessly! But I haven't retired, I've just stepped back.

This brings me to my last point, and a New Year's resolution that could become the only one you need for the rest of your life!

The most necessary ending we can make in our life is to die to self, and to follow Christ.

This concept of "dying to self" is found throughout the New Testament. It expresses the true essence of the Christian life, in which we take up our cross and follow Christ.

In fact, "dying to self" is so central to following Jesus that the term "born again Christian" is as redundant as saying "American Yankee."

The phrase "born again Christian" suggests there is more than one kind of Christian. There isn't!

If you're a follower of Jesus you have been born again!

The apostle Paul describes it this way: *"We must die to the old self, and be reborn in Christ... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."* (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Jesus explained it with a metaphor everyone of His time would understand. He said:

"Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it's buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over."

Now if the person next to you has maybe drifted off as I've been speaking, nudge him because this next part is what Jesus meant with that metaphor, and what I came to repeat this morning:

"In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is... destroys that life. But if you let it go,...you'll have it [life] forever, real and eternal." (John 12:24-25)

Jesus says that holding on to this life, the life of the world, our me-centered self, will destroy us.

Jesus nails down the most necessary ending of all: To follow Him, we have to let go of our worldly life, and by so doing, we'll have a better life... real and eternal.

Don't skip over that word "eternal!" Eternal is a game changer. Eternal life doesn't come and go like the seasons. It's FOREVER!!!

Friends, it's God's plan for us to be reborn, to change so that we can experience even more freedom, even in the midst of all of life's inevitable cycles and changes.

Following Christ doesn't mean there won't be hard times. The Book of Ecclesiastes wisely tells us that stuff happens whether you're a saint or a sinner.

And the Advent candle stories we heard clearly demonstrate that bad things happen to good people.

Vietnamese immigrant Daren Tran's family overcame the tragic loss of their loving mother who sacrificed everything for her kids to have a better life.

Amber Willoughby shared the heartbreak of multiple miscarriages.

Angela and I described the depth of anguish we felt after our son committed suicide.

Lauren Stein's family went through repeated trial and grief in a year than no family should have to endure.

And the Linton family lost one baby three days after birth, then learned their adopted daughter was facing a life of disability, and even had the roof blown off their house!

But in the midst of their life's storms, each of those families witnessed to the amazing difference it makes when you have light in the midst of darkness, and Jesus was and is and always will be that Light.

And get this: Whereas everything else in our universe cycles in and out, **God is constant.** Listen to the words the Bible uses to describe Him:

He is our Rock, our firm foundation, immortal, immutable,

He will abide forever, from generation to generation,

From everlasting to everlasting,

He is the same yesterday and today and forever,

He is ETERNAL!

And whereas everything else under the sun cycles in and out, His Son Jesus broke the final cycle by overcoming death itself! The end of His human life, His dying on the cross, so that all the sins of mankind, your sins and my sins, would be forgiven...was a "necessary ending" that led to something so much better! Because:

"When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in

you, your body will be as alive as Christ's!" (Romans 8:11)

So...if you could only make one more New Year's resolution that would last the rest of your life, what could it be?

It's to resolve the following, not only this December 31st, but every day of your life:

**I will die to self.
I will follow Christ.**

You might be thinking: "Hey Ron, I'm new to this following Jesus idea." Or, "I want to follow Jesus but what does it look like to die to self every day?"

Well, it might mean getting up a few minutes earlier to spend time in conversation with God. Talk to Him, and listen.

Get to know Him better. Read the Bible. And if you think you don't have time, take the One Minute Challenge:

Commit to reading God's Word just one minute a day. None of you is so busy that you can't spend one minute reading the Bible, and that one minute will change your life. (You'll also find you want to read it for more than one minute!!)

Climb out of bed (like you did this morning!) and get to church where you can be guided in the care of your soul, as well as find selfless ways to help others.

Make a life-changing difference in someone's life. If you're stumped on how to do that, consider that it costs about the same to sponsor a Compassion child as it does to buy a Starbucks every day.

mmmm....Let's see: Which of those two looks like dying to self?

Dying to self can look like giving much more than 50% in your relationships with others, be it a friend, your kids, or your marriage...

Dying to self may look like giving up just a small portion of your money to support something other than your own desires...

Dying to self looks like refusing to give in to the temptations of pride, power, promiscuity, pornography, and pretentiousness...

It means sacrificing for others, for in losing what we have, we gain so much more.

Ultimately it means making God's will your will.

Change your life. Follow the Light. Let Christ's birth remind you that by following Him you can effect the most necessary ending of all, by saying, and more importantly doing, these nine words:

**I will die to self.
I will follow Christ.**

And I give you this promise: if you follow Christ, it will do more than change your waistline. It will change your life!

Amen? Amen!