

September 20th: A Season of Beginnings

My friends, welcome to our new fall series, and welcome to a new season.

As we shift into Fall, and all that this different phase of our year entails, we know these transitions can have a powerful impact on our spiritual lives and on our souls. Our bodies, minds, and spirits are sensitive to change—and yet change is one of the only constants in our world. So this series is an attempt to offer language, support, and encouragement for those transitions that might be occurring in our lives. As we navigate these moments together, we'll be relying on passages from Old Testament wisdom literature to guide us—these texts, stories, and sayings will hopefully speak to our needs for reassurance and clarity. Wherever you are on your faith journey, we invite you to join this conversation and space for reflection.

Before we jump in, I invite you to pray with me.

Creator God, you breathed life into our lungs and fashioned us from the dust. We are your people because you have woven us together and prepared our souls for birth. You have made us for these beginnings, and you have redeemed us to give us a fresh start. We gather now as people ready to start a new journey, so we ask for your blessing on our thoughts and meditations. Prepare our hearts for the exciting changes that await us, and equip us to enter this new week with your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever felt that giddy, butterflies in your stomach feeling when you're about to start something new?

Maybe it was the first day of school and you were rocking a new outfit, or it was the first day at an exciting new job that was the perfect fit for your skillset. Maybe it was waiting for takeoff the first time you traveled on an airplane, or it was the blind date that introduced you to the person you would spend the rest of your life with.

I've only felt this sensation a handful of times in my life, but each time, it felt like I was on the edge of something important, I had this feeling that something big was about to happen, and I would want to remember this moment. It was this emotion of possibility—this idea that this new thing or new experience would change my life in a real and tangible way. To be right on the threshold of that significant transition is to be just steps away from a new journey, just a split second away from a clean slate.

Psychologists sometimes call this feeling “the fresh start effect,” and it’s a real phenomenon. When our bodies and minds encounter what’s called a “temporal landmark,” it can reframe our perspective and give us new motivation. Certain temporal landmarks can be found on a calendar: the New Year, or Monday, for example. But others are found in our own personal experiences: a significant birthday, a family milestone, or a change in physical location. These landmarks not only help us to separate our present from the past, including any mistakes we may have made, they also give us a chance to reimagine who we want to be. Instead of being bogged down by previous failures or a sense of shame, a new beginning can inspire us to take on a better habit, focus on our personal goals, and embrace different routines. This is what mental health professionals call “aspirational behavior,” meaning that human beings can access a renewed sense of optimism and willpower that helps us see the bigger picture in a powerful way. We may not always carry out that aspirational behavior, or hold onto it long term, but it can still be an important part of our discernment and transition process.

Of course, new beginnings also contain a certain amount of uncertainty and even anxiety, and these emotions can exist in tension with the excitement that we might feel. That is completely natural, as these moments of change do impact our lives in both seen and unseen ways. It can be tricky to hold these competing feelings inside of our bodies and brains, but that doesn’t mean we’re doing something wrong. In fact, it often means that we’re doing something right: new beginnings invite us to see ourselves in a new way, that might include sorting through beliefs, habits, or reactions that exist beneath the normal routines of our daily lives.

If you have joined us this morning, and have either this feeling or excitement or a feeling of anxiety, then you've come to the right place. Together, we're going to dig deeper into how this can intersect with our spirituality, and discover what God might be teaching us through a season of new beginnings.

To help us, we're going to return to Old Testament wisdom literature—the section of our Bible that is rich with insight into how to navigate our lives with faithfulness and discernment. Our scripture passage for today comes from the Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, a book that we don't often hear from in the context of Sunday worship. And that's partially for a good reason—this book is one of the most controversial writings in our biblical canon—it's filled with sensual imagery and language, references to intimate relationships, and a kind of humanness that can be uncomfortable to talk about in large groups. There's a reason it is not included in typical Sunday School lessons or youth group curriculum—it would cause a lot of giggles to read this book with kids and teenagers—but we're mostly adults here, so I'm going to trust that we can study this passage with some spiritual maturity.

In this particular section of the text, we are introduced to a poem about two young people that are just starting their romantic relationship. This poem alternates between his and her perspectives, capturing the emotion and vulnerability of the early days of what we might call the “honeymoon period.” As the dialogue unfolds, we get the sense that these two people are exploring this new connection—both with their minds and their physical bodies. Both parties are filled with passion and conviction—ready to encounter their beloved with enthusiasm.

And so we get this invitation from the male partner to his female companion:

“Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early

fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.”

It’s a lovely piece of poetry, is it not? I think it captures an evocative image of this gorgeous landscape—one where the old season is gone and the newness of fresh flowers and budding fruit is unfolding. If we close our eyes, we might be transported there—smelling the earthiness of the soil and the heady fragrance of blossoming vines. We might be able to hear the soft coos of the doves or the singing that has been promised. We might be able to enter into the joy and anticipation that is woven into these verses. Because this text is filled with a sense of preparation—our characters are fully embracing this new season and all of the excitement that is waiting for them.

But how does this translate to our lives, far removed from this original biblical context and the historical setting of this text? What does this have to say to us as modern people of faith?

Well, I think the obvious answer is that beginnings of all kinds, not just the start of romantic relationships, have a specific kind of spiritual and emotional beauty. There is something deeply divine about a chance to start fresh and begin anew and we see that the idea of new beginnings is woven throughout our Bible, not just in the text that we read this morning. Here’s what the rest of scripture has to say about the goodness that can be found in beginnings:

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah in chapter 43 speaks to a God who is perpetually invested in his creation, a God who is active in their midst, and this God says, “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” And in Paul’s letter to the early church in Corinth, he gives them this good news about belief in Jesus, found in chapter 5 verse 17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

These pieces of wisdom teach us that newness is not something to be afraid of, because newness is actually the fulfillment of God's promises. Newness isn't something to avoid or run away from, it's something that reminds us that God is at work in our lives and in the world! When we are discovering something new about ourselves, or are committing to a new endeavor, we are entering into the beauty that God offers us. When we begin a new season or we are made new in some way, we become part of God's plan for recreation and restoration. When we are transformed, we become woven into the fabric of God's overarching love story—the transformation of the whole world.

Like our passage from Song of Songs voices an invitation to a new beloved, God invites us into new beginnings because he cares for us. The more we can believe that a new beginning is not a threat, but a gift, the more we will see how God's spirit is with us and for us. The more we can trust that there will be goodness for us in this new season, the more we will perceive that goodness when it arrives.

Practically speaking, what should we do, if we want to lean into trusting God with our season of new beginnings? I have two thoughts for us to consider.

First, I think we can use the “fresh start effect” to our advantage, it can help propel us into action when we are stuck in analysis paralysis or general uncertainty. If there's a specific temporal landmark that has been useful for us in the past, it's natural that a similar landmark could help us navigate something new that's happening right now. Use that date or sense of timing to more firmly anchor yourself in the new season. Tap into those giddy feelings! Embrace some aspirational behavior, or engage in some dreaming about what could be ahead of you. Give yourself permission to start a new rhythm or try something else new that excites you.

You might find that this phenomenon gives you that extra boost of courage that you need to take the next step—and that next step might show you that you are more capable and more confident than you previously imagined! Maybe you have a new skill just waiting to be tried! Maybe you have a new

friend waiting for you in that class or training! Maybe you have a new passion that will add so much joy and dimension to your life! Gradually, you may discover that what was once unfamiliar or uncomfortable is now something life-giving and full of wonder. What may have been anxiety producing or scary can become transformative. All it takes is that first step. As Father Richard Rohr lovingly reminds us, “We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.”

Second and in a similar vein, I think Song of Songs gives us a clue about how to respond to new beginnings with our whole selves and not just our brains. I know that I have a tendency to be very cognitively focused, and that is amplified during times of change—I’m always trying to mentally figure things out or problem solve, but that can sometimes remove me from what I’m actually experiencing which is rarely helpful. So here’s what I try to tell myself, when I can feel myself slipping down the cognitive spiral or rabbit hole: give your brain a break. If our minds are feeling overwhelmed by new circumstances or changes, and our bodies need some time to catch up, it can be effective to lean into the sensory nature of what’s happening around us. What can our senses hear, see, taste, smell, and touch? Can dig deeper into these senses to give us a different perspective on this particular moment or season? Can these senses put us in touch with some soul reality or truth?

There’s a reason that there’s so much descriptive poetry in our Bible—our spiritual selves can use those words and images to inspire us to be perceptive about our own environment. So if you’re going back to this passage from Song of Songs later this week, perhaps see it as an invitation to focus on your own reactions to the sounds, sights, tastes, smells, and sensations around you. Maybe there’s a different route that you can take to work that gives you a new and beautiful vista. Maybe there’s a Fall themed drink at your favorite coffee shop that could make your average Tuesday a lot better. Maybe the softness of your coziest sweater or hoodie brings you the comfort you need.

All of these feelings can make a new season or new beginning more real, more tangible, but in a grounded and supportive way. So try it out, and see how these sensory experiences can guide you forward.

My friends, beginnings are an essential part of our human journey, we could not avoid them even if we tried. And I don't think we would want to, because there is so much beauty and joy to be experienced in these seasons. There is so much to learn about ourselves, so much powerful transformation promised to us, and so much for our souls to be enriched by.

If you're navigating a beginning this week or this month, it is my deepest hope that you can embrace this opportunity to be part of our divine story of newness. May this fresh start or clean slate be a place where God's endless love meets you and strengthens you for your journey.

Amen.