Better is the end of a thing than its beginning says Ecclesiastes. I have found this to be so true. There is a secret among pastors - but not too closely held. We love funerals, memorial services so much more than weddings (as with all general rules, there are notable exceptions - Susan and Bill Untereker, Edmund and Donna Kay Jones). Rarely does one need to ask a family, “Why do you want a Christian funeral?” (though I have done that from time to time here) - but ALWAYS in the case of weddings. I have never had anyone snap a photo with their cell phone during a memorial service. Nor worried that the price of the flowers alone would feed a poor family in Chester for a month. Despite the Martha’s beautiful work, knew folks were not there just for the reception. The ending - the life rich and deep and with testimony to the gracious God who called it into being, held her, empowered him for ministry, loved her into her best self, and holds his life now in eternity. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning. 

Contemplating that as I stand here with you at the end of a thing, and about to be at the beginning of another. And this is a good thing, a better thing than our beginning, this ending. It is made so rich and full by other endings we have shared. Hands in blessing on foreheads of the dying or newly dead. Tears. Ends of marriages, ends of jobs. Endings are better because at the end you know the value of a thing. You can count its cost, appreciate it. There is deep joy present in goodbye - not mirth not happy - but the deep joy that comes when a baby emerges a mess from her mother’s body, and when a beloved one takes his last breath, hand held by his daughters, forehead stroked by his wife.

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning--

That is my main text this morning--but there is another alongside it. The wise words of a hospice chaplain who says the gift of terminal illness, the gift of knowing that the end is coming, is that there is time for 5 important words. The first of these is: Thank you!

I found my first sermon from January 13, 2008 when I was candidating to be your associate pastor - “Endings and Beginnings” it was called. I chose to depart from the lectionary then as well— choosing Revelation! Perhaps in 6 and a half years time I will look back on this morning’s choice with as much regret as I did that one as I reread my first sermon last week. And I want to say: Thank you! Thank you for calling me any way! Thank you for the privilege of this pulpit and listening me into being a better preacher. For the privilege of getting a text in my head on Monday morning first thing and carrying it and you around in my head, my heart, my prayers, my holy imagination all week until a word from the Lord appears. I have loved the workaday sermon - one nestled in the life of this community of our life together—whether on a Sunday or a Saturday afternoon proclaiming resurrection hope and the good gifts of God as lived out in a particular life—they have been a gift and joy and delight.

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning.

I have been thinking a lot about that first day I met you when I preached that first sermon. One among you saved me that day from mooning the entire congregation, after I had mooned just a few of the early arrivers, my skirt tucked up in my pantyhose in the back - beginning with you with more “vulnerability” than I had intended. Thank you to that woman whoever you are - if you are here, oh do tell me today! I give thanks every Sunday for this robe (which once was Hal Lloyds) which covers a multitude of sins!

That first day, Bob Dawes, a member of your associate pastor nominating committee, had to be in the congregational meeting, so he left me and my three kids with the gift of hanging out with his Sunday school class. I asked if they had any questions for me, and Jamie Ashbrook (from whom I have permission to share this
story) said, “I have a question for you. What is the sum of the numbers from 1 to 100?” My son, Joe, quickly replied, “5050.” I had come in that room thinking that I needed to have a lot of answers as a pastor, and I learned right then that “we” would have the answers. Or sometimes, more often perhaps, we would live with hope into the questions.

That was also the day, though we did not know it then, that Bert Ashbrook’s obligation to be my son’s friend in faith, and my abiding affection for Jamie, was sealed. Thank you for loving my children though they lived at a distance. Thank you for giving them the gift of not one, but 3 pastors in John and Dick and Eric, so that I could continue giving them gift of a good enough mother.

Thank you for trusting me before I proved trustworthy, for accepting me as pastor before I really knew how to be one, for listening to my early sermons to hear a Word from the Lord, even when you had to lean in and work hard to find it.

Thank you for the constant gift of encouragement -- which you have given from start to finish. Thank you for being a place and a people that accepted my vulnerability, my foibles, my mistakes. Which brings me to my second word:

1. Thank you. 2. Forgive me--

Forgive me:
When I did not visit you. Or call you back. Or follow through on a solemn promise.

When I did not thank you. Or encourage you. Or exhort you. When I did not hold you accountable or confront you in love but turned away from that sometimes difficult work. When I did not make space for you to confront me in love or when I did not listen well when you did.

When I bowled you over in a meeting with my well chosen arguments and words, sharpened by 20 years of lawyering - instead of listening in love and talking with you after.

When I chose time devoted to my family over time devoted to you. When I chose time devoted to you over time devoted to my family.

That the first 5 years of this call my “daily prayer and scripture reading discipline” took 2 to 3 days off a week.

That though I tried to grow in my stewardship commitment each year, and that I gave generously to leave a legacy in this beautiful chancel renovation, I never managed to tithe here - to give 10% of my income. I sent my tithe pledge to Hightstown last week - and people - it feels really, really, really good. I commend it to you - working toward a tithe by increasing your pledge to the next percentage of your income. It makes that hot stone massage I just booked a thing of relaxation and grace without any guilt attached.

Forgive me:
For the things I said about you that I ought to have said to you. For the emails that should have been face-to-face conversations. For the care I did not let you give me

Forgive me that I am leaving now. That the call of God to go was stronger than the call to stay to hold your hand when you died; to gather your stories; to proclaim with all my heart and all my hope the resurrection at your funeral; to stand in the garden weeping with those who love you best as we commended you to God’s care. This is hardest part of this going for me.

The 3rd word: Thank you. Forgive me. I forgive you.

I forgive you
For the things you said about me that you ought to have said to me
For the things you did not say in gentle rebuke which might have made a better pastor or person of me
For the emails that should have been face-to-face conversations
For the thanks you did not say
For the care you refused to receive from me

The fourth word: I love you.

And the final word: Goodbye. Beginning October 1, I am not one of your pastors anymore. You have two
wonderful, capable pastors. And, in God’s good time, will welcome others to that place in your life. Receive
the gifts they bring - your present pastors and the ones who will come. Welcome their ministry among you.
They seek to serve God and you with energy and devotion and skill. Receive their service with gratitude and
trust.

I will be another peoples’ pastor come Wednesday, and will need to turn my attention and heart and energy to
them. But, you, I will hold you in my prayers and my heart always. I give thanks to my God always for you!

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning.