

Isaiah 43:16-21

MOVING FORWARD WITH HOPE

A young bride was going to cook a ham dinner for her husband. Before baking the ham, she cut off both ends and placed the ham in a large baking pan. He asked her why she cut off both ends of the ham and she answered, "I don't know, I guess it enhances the flavor; and because, Mom always did it that way." Sometime later the husband asked his mother-in-law about this strange practice, and she also replied, "Well, I don't know. I just remember my mother use to cook the ham like that." The next time he saw his wife's grandmother, he asked her why she cut off both ends of the ham before baking it. "Well, it's simple," she answered. "My baking pan was too small for a full-size ham, so I always cut off the ends to make it fit!"

That illustration reminds me of another story: in a small town in Mexico, the residents would walk by a blank wall, pause, nod their heads, and then walk on by. A visitor was curious about this custom and asked several people why they did what they did. Their answers were that their parents, grandparents, and elderly neighbors had done this so it seemed fitting that they should do the same. Finally, the visitor was talking to the old priest in town and asked him why people followed this strange custom with regard to the blank wall. The old priest thought for a moment and then said that, years and years ago, there had been a fresco painting of the Madonna and her child on that wall. Over time, the painting was damaged by the weather and it was decided to simply cover up the painting with whitewash. In time, people forgot all about the painting, but, still they bowed their heads like before.

As those two stories suggest, sometimes, something that was done in the past can greatly influence our lives in the present as well as the future. And, if we are not careful, events from the past can serve to hinder or obstruct our outlook on the present and into the future. Such is the case with regard to our scripture passage from Isaiah this morning.

Nearly six hundred years before Jesus was born, God's people were conquered by the Babylonians, captured, and carried back to Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed and all seemed lost. We get a sense of the people's despair from Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1-4)

Seventy years had passed, and there wasn't much to be hopeful for either in their present situation or the future, so, the people reverted to the past and longed for days gone by. It was within this context that Isaiah spoke the word of the Lord. Isaiah reminded his listeners of God's previous act of salvation on behalf of Israel. When their ancestors were slaves down in Egypt, God had heard their cries for help, and God made a way for them in the sea. Yahweh opened a path in the midst of the mighty waters and led them to safety and, at the same time, God removed the threat of the pursuing army. This important story of deliverance helped to define the Israelites as the people of God. This mighty act of God was stamped indelibly upon their collective memories. It was impossible for them to forget what God had done on their behalf.

Unfortunately, however, their glorious past was preventing them from seeing the new thing that God was doing on Israel's behalf. God didn't tell them to forget the past; instead, God commanded them not to dwell on the past to the extent that they were unable to see that God was about to do a new thing in their midst. "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old" - i.e., don't hang your hat on the good ol' days because they won't save you from your present predicament. That was then but this is now. Therefore, the call is to "reframe" the past and trust that, what God had done once before in Israel's past, God is about to do again only in a new and different setting. God isn't confined to the past. God is ready to move and act in a new way that will lead to the people's deliverance anew and bring them back home.

God didn't give a lot of details. There were no specifics about how God would accomplish what God had in mind. But God gave enough clues to show the people that God had experience and knew what to do. This "new thing" would involve making a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Just as the water would give new life to the desert, so also, God would breathe new life into his people. Even the wild animals, the jackals and the ostriches, would perk up and take notice of what the Lord was doing.

In time, God did in fact do a new thing. God raised up King Cyrus of Persia, who defeated the Babylonians and then allowed the captive Israelites the opportunity to return home. God acted once again to free and save the chosen people of Israel and restore them to the land God had given to them as promised to Abraham and Sarah.

As we move through Lent and reflect on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross, this text from Isaiah counsels us to move forward with hope. Yes, we are to remember Jesus' suffering, but we also need to recall how, even in the midst of Jesus' pain, God was doing a new thing in order to save God's people. We recall Jesus' passion for our sake but we don't stop there. We also remember how the tragedy of the cross gave way to triumph as Jesus conquered sin and, three days later, defeated death by rising again. We don't focus on just one part of the story at the expense of the rest of the story.

Likewise, Isaiah's prophecy cautions us as a community of faith from living in the glory days of the past, and thus, failing to see the brand new thing that is underway in our midst. I am all too aware of the golden days of Martinsville in general and of First Presbyterian Church in particular some fifteen to twenty years ago. I can only imagine that time when the economy was thriving, businesses were booming, people were moving to town, and churches were growing. That was then, and it looked a lot different than our current situation. But, we are remiss if we long only for that gone-by era and miss out on the new thing that God has in store for us. All too often, God is doing a new thing and when asked, "Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" we answer, "No," because we are not looking for it as our gaze is on the past. We are looking backward with longing instead of looking and moving forward with hope.

As with Isaiah's prophecy to the captive people of God in Babylon, we too are not given a lot of details. But, surely we can sense or detect something new in the air. This isn't the same place of old. Something new is underway and it has the Lord's mark upon it. God is doing a new thing for us and with us, and, while it's not the same as before, nevertheless, it bears the same stamp of God's grace upon it.

God has been on the move here as our emphasis on the "Four Sundays in March" suggests. A lot of people have put a lot of work into inviting our neighbors to come and have breakfast with us and then worship with us. Though we

have seen very few visitors thus far, we do not give up hope because God, in fact, is doing a new thing in our midst. Maybe God's new thing is intended to change us on the inside. We no longer wait for people to come to the church; instead, we are beginning to reach out to others and invite them into our fellowship.

God is doing a new thing through the hard work and long hours that our Associate Pastor Nominating Committee has put in to seeking and finding the right person to answer God's call to join us in ministry. I have no doubt that we will see this new thing take place and bless the future of our congregation. God is also doing a new thing as our Session and its committees take seriously the mission statement to "Share God's love, embrace our neighbors, and nurture each other," and strive to faithfully follow that mandate and, with God's help, bring those words to life. I continue to hope that one of the things God has in store for us is to once again identify some need within the community that our congregation can address - not just with money but with many of us rolling up our sleeves and going to work to meet that need and help others and give them a better future.

God has given us every reason to turn from our longing for the past and move forward with hope into the future that God desires to bestow upon us. And, as we look forward to the new things that God is doing, here and now and in the near future, there is one other thing to note from the biblical passage. Isaiah proclaims that when God does a new thing and makes a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, the people of God are to declare God's praise. Yahweh sets the captives free so that they may then offer praises to God. The purpose of their freedom is to praise the Lord - to enjoy God, to take delight in the goodness of God. Our calling to praise God confronts us with the truth that God has made us and saved us "and not we ourselves." Thus, we are to give credit and thanksgiving where they are due: to almighty God!

When South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke at Yale University in 1995, he began his lecture to nearly two thousand people with an outline. "I want to give you seven reasons for the miraculous changes in South Africa." The first reason, he insisted, was simply, "God." After he elaborated on five political, sociological, and economic reasons he concluded with a seventh. "God," he said. There was no other description possible, first and last, but that God was doing a new thing in that place and that time. In his own way, Archbishop Desmond Tutu witnessed to God's saving actions and God's deliverance of the people, and he made sure that praise was given to the Lord.

When the Lord says, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" I think it behooves us to be open-minded with regard to both the present and the future. If we are so focused on the past or if we are too busy in the present, it's quite likely we will not perceive the new thing God is doing but will miss it altogether. Let us cultivate the desire to keep both our eyes and our minds open to the new thing God is doing or to the new place God is sending us. And when we see that new thing or arrive at that new place, let us be sure to give praise and glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens

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