

The Best is Yet to Come

Sermon by Marilyn Matevia, 3/17/2013

I am borrowing our prayer from the Vanderbilt online lectionary. Our sister Anne Carey would be pleased, as she is visiting her family in Nashville even now.

Creator God,
you prepare a new way in the wilderness
and your grace waters the desert.
Help us to recognize your hand
working miracles beyond our imagining.
Open our hearts to be transformed
by the new thing you are doing,
so that our lives may proclaim
the extravagance of your love for all,
and its presence in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Anne and I have both joked about regularly breaking the unwritten 11th commandment of Lutheran sermons: thou shalt preach on the Gospel text. And I'm going to break it again, because the first reading – as short as it is – has so

much to say to us on so many levels: personal and historical and - perhaps especially - at this time in our congregational life.

The brevity of the text is a bit of a drawback, actually, because in the context of the whole chapter – the many preceding verses - these few lines become less perplexing. Read it later: Isaiah 43. Chapter 43 occurs in the section of the book we know as “Second Isaiah,” the oracles of an anonymous prophet who is, first, promising God’s people that they will be led out of their Babylonian exile; and later is celebrating their deliverance, and helping them to envision their new life together in Jerusalem. Second Isaiah, in other words, is addressing a group of people in flux, in transition. These people are holding fast to their memories and traditions, which constitute their whole identity, and at the same time, they want a roadmap to the future; they want to know who they are becoming.

So, indeed, if this tantalizing little snippet of chapter 43 was all they heard, the words could be a very confusing. God seems to be saying, in essence, “remember when I parted the sea and drowned your captors and enemies? Remember when I led you out of slavery? Remember when I miraculously fed you and kept you alive in the desert? Remember how I helped your leaders defeat enormous armies and odds? Well, forget it, now. Stop clinging to the past. Things are going to be different.”

Seriously? Why remind the people of all the ways they could count on God in the past, and then pull the rug out? “The days of miracles and acts of God are over. You’re on your own.” (I have to say, it does feel like that sometimes, doesn’t it? Or is it just me?)

When we back up a few verses, we get a clearer picture of what the prophet is doing. He is reminding the people of God that they have never been on their own; God has always been with them, even when they were unfaithful; God has been steadfast and loyal:

Starting with Isaiah 43.1:

“But now, this is what the LORD says—

he who created you, Jacob,

he who formed you, Israel:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

²When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,

you will not be burned;

the flames will not set you ablaze.

³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

And in the two verses just prior to our text:

This is what the LORD says—

your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:

“For your sake I will send to Babylon
and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians,
in the ships in which they took pride.

¹⁵I am the LORD, your Holy One,
Israel’s Creator, your King.”

This is God telling the people, through the prophet Isaiah, “you know me; I’ve demonstrated repeatedly that you can trust me.” And having established that credibility, and reminded them of their mutual bond, God goes on to say: “you haven’t seen anything, yet. This is going to be different... even better. But your old ways of thinking and coping are not up to the task. If you limit yourself to the old ways of seeing the world, you’re not going to be able to get your head around this. I am about to do a new thing.” Specifically, God is about to send a new kind

of leader, a new kind of messiah, and establish a new kind of community. This community will thrive anywhere – even in the wildest wilderness and the driest desert – because its life source is God’s grace.

It is not easy to open oneself to the prospect of a new thing on this scale – a new way of being – when the old way is familiar and reliable. And it’s especially difficult when the traditional way has become part of our identity. That makes it a part of us – and to forget it, to “not remember the former things, or consider the things of old” is to somehow disavow our own histories. Surely the prophet is not counseling that? God is, in these passages, invoking the covenant with the Israelites, and the covenant tradition is full of visual and ritual remembrances, isn’t it? God’s people are to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Jesus instructs us to share the Eucharist “in remembrance of me.”

This is quite the balancing act we’re expected to master: between moving forward and looking back, between hope and habit, between mindful remembrance and mindless rituals... And do note that I said “mindless” rituals, because I do not mean to imply that all rituals are bad, in and of themselves. Just the “mindless” ones. ☺ Rituals become problematic when they are divorced from the historical circumstances that gave rise to them, and when they go on auto-pilot. We are, individually and collectively, people with a history. Sometimes our traditions and our rituals honor and commemorate that history; *but* sometimes they blind us to

new possibilities. Sometimes they bind us together, *but* sometimes they shut others out.

It's important to acknowledge that we are who we are because of where we've been, what we've done, and what we've endured. But that's never the end of the story. Our past shapes us, but it doesn't have to *define* us. That, again, is one of the balances we have to discern, in this reading and in our faith lives. We are invited to embrace *who* we are, and *why* we are, but imagine and envision what we can *become*, what God wills us to become.

I've been circling suggestively around the point, but now I'm bringing out the sledgehammer: isn't this the perfect text for us to reflect on right now, at this time in our congregational life? We may not be able to identify with the Babylonian exile, but surely we can identify with the, "what now? What next? Who are we? What does God have in mind for us?"

The delicate balance between looking back and looking forward is one we try to achieve all through the season of Lent. We may turn our attention inward to some extent, to examine ourselves, our sins, our excesses. Perhaps we attempt some kind of spiritual discipline – in the form of either giving something up or taking on a new practice. (I know I always start with good intentions, last about 3 days, and then spend the rest of Lent feeling bad about it, and promising I'll do better next year.) We recall Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, Moses' 40-day fast

on Mt. Sinai. Perhaps some of us will share a Seder meal with our Jewish brothers and sisters, and listen as they retell the story of the Exodus. At the same time, we know this is not the end of the story. We look forward to Easter Sunday, to Christ's victory over death. To the kingdom coming. We look to the new thing God is going to do, what new creation?, and trust that it will be better than anything you or I could imagine... The best is yet to come.

But, boy, what a leap of faith that assumption requires! "Do not remember the former things... I am about to do a new thing," says the Lord. We've interpreted that to refer to God's acts of rescue and deliverance, because that is the direction the text takes us. But it applies as well to our visions of reality and possibility. Just as our traditions can bind us, we can suffer from a loss of hope – or a rejection of hope – carried over from frighteningly lean times. "Scarcity thinking," Pastor Sandra has called this. For some of us, perhaps 'scarcity thinking' is another term for stretching limited resources, and it's a point of honor, a practice of stewardship: perhaps you kept your family fed and sheltered when others couldn't, or kept a nonprofit open and functioning while others were collapsing – and were able to do this precisely because of your caution. But again: we have to discern the delicate balance: we must steward our resources faithfully, prayerfully, and *hopefully*. We may have absolutely no idea what God has in store for our community, for any community; all we know is that it's going to be a better

vision, a more universal vision, a more common good, than any single one of us can imagine. This – Holy Trinity – is not “our” church; this is Christ’s church. We’re here to serve Christ. Our challenge now is to remain open to where God takes us, and to give ourselves permission to be hopeful. I don’t read “Christianity Today” very often, but in thinking about Lent, and change, and Easter, and hope, and stewardship, I was “surfing” some articles and came across this wonderful description of Christian hope: “Christian hope... does not have to filter out all that negativity, but in fact absorbs it and redeems it, through Christ's death and resurrection. Our hope—for salvation and redemption and the kingdom fully realized—is not grounded in thoughts of our invincibility but [indeed in our] vulnerability, not on the strength of our will to accomplish our goals, but on the strength and finished work of Christ.”¹

Our sisters and brothers in the United Church of Christ had a great billboard campaign going a few years ago: “God is still speaking,” with a comma at the end of the phrase. The creation story is never ending. Our task as people of faith is to remain open to its call, wherever it is going to lead us. However unpredictable and even frightening the journey will be.

I will say this again, because I am a good Lutheran existentialist. The past shapes us, but it doesn't *define* us – unless we let it. God invites us to embrace who

¹ “The excitement of hope.” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/august/21.21.html>

we are, and how we got here, but God also invites us to be open to new realities and opportunities. Without bemoaning or belittling or second-guessing our past – indeed, *because* of our past – we can face the future, and when God says, “see, I’m about to do a new thing,” we know it’s going to be bigger than any of us can imagine. The best is yet to come.