
A New Thing

Isaiah 43:16-21

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 3, 2022 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

At this point in Israel's story the news coverage of the occupation had stopped. The headlines were no longer filled with reports of the Babylonian captors. In fact, the Babylonians controlled the media by the time the prophet speaks the words of Isaiah 43. No doubt the news would have been full of reports in the early days of the Babylonian empire's unprovoked invasion of the Kingdom of Judah and the destruction of its capital city Jerusalem. Had the technologies of the day been similar to ours, the reports likely would have mirrored the news coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But those days are long past. It's been years, even a generation, since so many from Judah and Jerusalem had become refugees and religious and political exiles. No doubt many had settled into the places where they landed, seeking to establish new life in new lands. Yet the time of exile was a time of disruption, disillusionment, and displacement—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

The exile called into question everything the people knew about themselves and the God who had created them. As compared to the Promised Land's life of flourishing, freedom, and welcome, the exile was a wilderness, a desert, a place of bondage and death. The promises the people had made with God and God with the people seem to have all crumbled. Imagine the deepest existential questions of life heaped with a heavy dose of physical need and compounded by a seeming loss of God. What's the meaning of a life like this? How do we even survive apart from the land and our work? What's our purpose now as a people? Where is God in all this mess? This is where God's people found themselves as the prophet began to declare the word of the Lord.

Perhaps this is where we find ourselves this morning. Sure, not many of us have been run out of our homelands or had our places of worship and centers of our lives destroyed physically. Yet some of us, perhaps many of us, have experienced or are experiencing times of disruption and disillusionment, of dread and despair, of death all around. I wonder if you are familiar with dry and deserted places in your life and all around you. Perhaps you can't trace your state of exile or wilderness to as clear of a situation as the Babylonian invasion, but maybe you know you are in a wilderness and not where you thought your life would be. So you find yourself asking questions such as: What's the meaning of a life like this? How do I even survive apart from that source of income or that stability or that relationship? Where is God in all this mess?

The prophetic message of Isaiah 43 comes in the midst of the mess, in the middle of the morass. Just when hopelessness and despair seemed ready for ultimate victory, the prophet speaks a word from the Lord. In the verses before our lesson begins, God reminds the people of who God is to them. This God is their redeemer, the one who created this people out of nothing, their King. Before they were God's people, they were not a people. This God is the one who has revealed God's self to the people through sign and wonder, through rescue and redemption, and through covenantal relationship. "I am YOUR God." This declaration of who God is roots the word that is about to come in the most profound truth and reality. Yet the message doesn't stop with God's self-declared names.

Isaiah 43:16-17 says, "Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick..." Here the prophet also provides some descriptors about

God that connect people to the larger story of God's people and to God's history with this people. The Lord is described as the one who makes a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters. You remember this story, don't you? God's people had been in slavery in Pharaoh's Egypt, and had been crying out to the Lord to be set free. God called and sent Moses to convince Pharaoh through words and signs, and eventually plagues, to let the people go. After some time and much loss Pharaoh relented, set the people free, and sent them on their way. As you know this decision didn't last long before Pharaoh sent his army in pursuit of God's people. When they came to the sea, and the future looked bleak for the people, God made a way through the mighty waters allowing the people to pass to safety. This story of God's liberation of the people, the story of Israel's exodus, became a foundational story for Israel's relationship with God. It gave shape and texture to all their ways of living and being in the world. It was the memory that inspired their faithfulness to God and ensured them that God would show up for them. Remembering this story and who this God was to the people was everything.

With their hearts and minds primed to hear a word from this God who has such a history with them, the word of the Lord comes. "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." At this point, if I could play sound effects through the speakers, I would play screeching tires because this word from the Lord should stop us in our tracks. This is a counterintuitive word. This is a strange word. It is a word that seemingly contradicts other messages from the Lord. In fact, later in Isaiah, the Lord says: "Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me..." (Isaiah 46:8-9).

The dissonance of this instruction from God must have raised questions for God's people. Why this instruction? And why would this command not to remember come on the heels of words that evoke memories of the former things God has done? Perhaps there is a word of warning here about a particular kind of remembering. Perhaps remembering is wise and good except when it is not. But when is it not good to remember?

The next words the Lord declares provide a clue. "I am about to do a new thing," says the Lord, "now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" The Lord tells the people to be watching and waiting for the new thing God will do for them. God does not want the people to miss the new deliverance, the new rescue, the new redemption, the new life happening right in front of them. There is no room for the kind of remembering that locks God's best action on behalf of the people in the past. There is no room for the kind of remembering that keeps people driving with their eyes locked in the review mirror of nostalgia for the old days and the Lord's prior ways of relating with the people. When memory works to limit God to the ways God has worked in the past, then considering the things of old does not have the impact all the other calls to remember intended. Remembering is intended to help people know the God who has acted in the past well enough that they will not miss God's new things in the future. When remembering restricts God's freedom to provide new grace for a new day, then it counteracts its purpose of connecting the people to the living, acting, and relating God.

I wonder if you're familiar with this kind of negative remembering. I wonder if you ever get stuck focusing so much on the past, that you're unable to perceive the new things God is doing right before you. Perhaps you lock the Lord into old ways of working within you at the expense of missing the prompting for something new. Perhaps your remembering serves to bind you so much to your past mistakes and former ways of being, that it seems God can't even do a new thing to set

you free or to give you new life. This is not to say that past hardships and struggle and wounds don't have real impact on our present reality, but it is to say that God desires and is at work doing a new thing for us for the sake of our flourishing and for God's praise.

I wonder if as a church we get so attached to our memories of the past, to our former ways of engaging and being engaged by God, that we can't perceive God's invitation into something new. This is surely present at times in our longing for the good old days when more people showed up on Sundays and folks gave more money and volunteered more time. And in this longing, we can get stuck in a wistful remembering simply wanting God to repeat the good things of the past using the same means as in the past because we are more comfortable with the past.

God's people in exile must have needed to hear that God's work for them and for their flourishing was not bound in the past or closed off by their history of failures. The people must have needed to hear that their unfaithfulness to God and God's ways and the brokenness of their life with God had not destined them to desert and wilderness places forever. Perhaps they needed to know that God's acts of deliverance and provision would be particularly suited to their needs in their present day. So the Lord asks, "Do you not perceive it?" and then continues, "I will make a way in the wilderness and waters in the desert." In former times God opened the waters to make a path on dry land out of slavery. Now God is opening the dry land to create rivers of life and a path for flourishing. The word of the Lord reinforces the truth that the God who made way for exodus and escape and freedom in the past is also about flourishing and life in the future. God declared that God's work is about more than being set free **from** bondage or oppression or sin. God's work is about being set free **for** flourishing and life. And it's precisely in the places that are dry and without much life, precisely in the places that are treacherous and deadly, that God tells the people, "I will create the conditions for life and joy and flourishing. I am doing a new thing!"

The God, who invited people in exile to perceive new things in dry and dead places, came in Jesus to show once and for all that precisely in the place where death has the final word and no life seems possible, God does a new thing and life springs forth. Isaiah's word from the Lord takes on flesh in Jesus, and in Christ, God makes the conditions for all people and all creation to flourish. Life-giving blood flows from the cross of death and life-giving glory shines from Jesus's grave, not simply for deliverance but for the flourishing of new life for all. Through Jesus, we enter the story of a God who is always at work anew creating and recreating the conditions for life. The desert places of our individual and communal lives may be abundant, stretching like the wilderness beyond the horizon of our future. But the good news for us is our God gives new grace for new days and makes a way for life even in the wilderness. Can you perceive it?

Perhaps God's people today need to hear that God's work for us is not limited to the past or restricted by our pasts. In Christ, God is still at work doing new things, giving new grace for new days. Isn't this good news for us today? Don't we long for God to do a new thing in our dry and lifeless places? I wonder what wilderness needs water for you and what deserts need flowing rivers to spring forth? Perhaps the Spirit of the Lord is whispering in your heart or proclaiming in your ear even now, "Look, behold, I am doing a new thing" in your mental health, in your work situation, in your family, in your cycle of addiction, in your intimate relationship, in your health situation, in your relational wounds, in our church, on our campus community, in our city. "I am doing a new thing." This is what God does in Jesus. So I ask, "Are you ready for Christ to do a new thing?" Amen.