

Sunday, November 12, 2017

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SERMON

## MAKING ROOM: *God is Doing a New Thing*

Isaiah 43:1-3 & 15-19

### INTRODUCTION:

The Prophet Isaiah is often thought of as the greatest of the writing prophets. The second-half of his writings were addressed specifically to an exiled and beaten nation who were being held in Babylonian captivity. The nation of Israel was groaning in despair and displacement.

Isaiah writes forcefully about how God would redeem the people from Babylonia. One day, Isaiah writes, the Jews will return home. This redemption prophecy also anticipates a greater salvation from the bondage of sin through Christ. This restoration and renewal of Israel is like a **new** exodus and also poetically foretells God's plan to redeem all people through a messiah.

No matter what oppression and difficulties the people of God might face, we can confidently put our trust in a redeeming God who always leads the beloved ones to liberation, a God who is always doing a new thing.

Hear the Word of God from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 43

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But now, O Jacob, listen to the Lord who created you.  
O Israel, the one who formed you says,  
"Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you.  
I have called you by name; you are mine.  
When you go through deep waters, I will be with you.  
When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown.  
When you walk through the fire of oppression,  
you will not be burned up;  
the flames will not consume you.  
For I am the Lord, your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
I am the Lord, your Holy One, Israel's Creator and Ruler.  
I am the Lord, who opened a way through the waters,  
making a dry path through the sea.  
I called forth the mighty army of Egypt with all its chariots and horses.  
I drew them beneath the waves, and they drowned,  
their lives snuffed out like a smoldering candlewick.

But forget all that—  
it is nothing compared to what I am going to do.

***For I am about to do something new.***

See, I have already begun!

Do you not see it?

I will make a **pathway** through the wilderness.

I will create **rivers** in the dry wasteland.

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Will you pray with me,

*Our God of goodness and light, illumine in us the cluttered places that fill up our souls and narrow our minds. Help us to make room to freely and joyfully receive the new thing that you are doing among us even now. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Here in Isaiah we find the Hebrew people in a bind once again, captives in a foreign land. It's kind of like that old classic TV show Gilligan's Island where each week the colorful cast who are shipwrecked on an island discover some kind of hope for rescue only to find themselves exactly where they were at the beginning of the episode. Essentially every single episode was identical to the last. They kept doing the same things over and over again expecting different results.

The Babylonians forced God's people into exile. They are miserable and aching for liberation but like Gilligan and friends they are hoping for some kind of miracle to happen. God does show up and through the great prophet Isaiah says those not very helpful words "Do not be afraid for I have ransomed you." I am sure they looked around at their pathetically weak and unenviable position and thought, "Well we're still here, and I'm still terrified." God reminds them of their past and how they will be safely led through every peril and terror you could imagine. Isaiah says that deep and turbulent waters will threaten to drown them and their oppression will burn like fire, but God will uphold them just as he did in the great exodus from Egypt. I can't imagine this prophecy was very comforting or inspired much optimism. When you are in a tough spot the last thing you want to hear is that it will get worse before it gets better. It's like when Teresa of Avila reportedly cried out to God from her sick bed. "If this is how you treat your friends it's no wonder you have so few!"

It seems to me that our fundamental mistake is that we are surprised when trouble comes into our lives. Somehow we think that struggle, sickness, disappointment and failure are not supposed to happen – at least to us. Yet it seems quite evident that is not at all the case. God doesn't promise us a way around troubled waters and fiery trials, God promises to be with us and to deliver us *through* the storms of life.

We like to imagine the end of the journey and how happy we will be someday when we get there. We like to plan our future and plot the ascending steps to an imagined measurable goal that will mark our success. But our dreams of what success looks like might be quite different than what God's purpose for us is. When we look at the text we see how Isaiah reminds them of their epic past when

God showed up with massive and overwhelming power to supernaturally open the sea before vanquishing their enemy; high drama to say the least. But then the very next thing out of Isaiah's mouth is "Forget all that!" Remember when you were rescued by my awesome power before? Well forget all that. Fortunately he continues. "You ain't seen nothing yet! That was nothing compared to what's coming. In fact I'm about to do something completely new and I've already put it into motion. Can't you see it?" I doubt they could.

I think it is very hard to see God's vision for us until we empty ourselves of our own vision for the future. It's like the theological scholar who visits a Zen masters temple. He is warmly received and offered tea. The scholar tells the master of his complex theories about God, creation, salvation, the nature and destiny of humanity. As the scholar expounds his vast knowledge, the Master begins to pour tea into the cup. It fills up but he calmly continues pouring. The tea overflows the cup spilling it all over the table. Suddenly the scholar stops mid sentence and says, "What are you doing? Clearly there is no more room." "Exactly" said the Master as he rose from the table. "You are like this tea cup, so full already that nothing more can be added." To experience something new, we have to learn to first make room. The old saying is that in the beginners mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's there are few. Our very own local hero Henry David Thoreau wrote that real progress could only be made when we unlearn and learn anew what we thought we knew before.

I think it's hard for us to see what God might be doing because we are so distracted by what we think we already know. We rarely question the assumptions we've already settled on as facts, so seeing God's new way completely escapes us and instead of trusting God we continue in our own fixed ideas.

It's like the old gardener who told everyone who would listen that he had no faith whatsoever in predictions that some day scientists would learn to control the weather. According to him all that was needed to control the weather was prayer. Then one summer, while he was away recovering from an illness, a drought hit the land and wiped out his entire garden. Upon his return he was so upset that he changed his religion.

The old gardener could not even imagine that his view of God was the problem. You see the question we always need to ask is not what is *my* vision for our future but rather what is **God's** vision for our future. We have to let go of our ideas of what the future should be to make room for the new thing that God is doing. It's happening even now. Can you see it? What would it be like to release all expectations of success and simply trust that God is making pathways for us to

follow into the future and that whatever storms we face along the way God will be with us. It is God's vision that we want to step into not ours. It is God who will transform even our mistakes into useful experience and resurrect what we have let die into a new thing. All we must do is empty ourselves of expectation and stick around long enough to watch the miracle happen. God only wants us to pay attention to the present time, notice the ways that the Spirit is moving among us and remain faithful in loving God, loving each other and loving our neighbor.

What old things are you carrying that you might want to let go?

- Yearnings to return to the way things used to be but never will
- Resentments that hold you in a prison of anger?
- Paralyzing fear of losing what you already have now?
- Feelings of worthlessness or irrelevance?
- Anxiety about an uncertain future?

What fixed ideas do you have about God and your relationship with God that might need to be prayerfully examined? What new thing might surface if we dare to let go of all attachment and expectation?

When we make room to receive this new thing that God is doing we will begin to see it. God always unfolds the new from what has gone before added on to what is already here today. This is a path of least resistance and requires only that we show up, watch carefully, listen deeply with open hearts and minds and leave the rest to God's care. We strive for nothing.

As God's beloved creation, we already have an inherent value and worth. If we can simply come to accept our own dignity is matched equally with the dignity every other part of God's creation, we will have nothing to hide or protect or preserve. We will connect organically to the vision God has for us and see our purpose clearly for today.

When we go through deep waters, (and we will) God will be with us.

When we go through rivers of difficulty, (and we will) we will not drown.

When we walk through the fire of oppression, (and we will)

we will not be burned up; the flames will not consume us.

So let us walk in humility and holy confidence, trusting that God will continue the good work that has begun and will lead us to the next new thing one step at a time.

What a relief.

***Above all, trust in the slow work of God.***

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955)

We are quite naturally impatient in everything  
to reach the end without delay.  
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.  
We are impatient of being on the way  
to something unknown, something new.  
Yet it is the law of all progress that is made  
by passing through some stages of instability  
And may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.  
Your ideas mature gradually.  
Let them grow.  
Let them shape themselves without undue haste.  
Do not try to force them on  
as though you could be today what time  
that is to say, grace  
and circumstances  
acting on your own good will,  
Will make you tomorrow.  
Only God could say what this new Spirit  
gradually forming in you will be.

Give our Lord the benefit of believing  
that his hand is leading you,  
And accept the anxiety of feeling yourself  
in suspense and incomplete.  
Above all, trust in the slow work of God. Amen