

Rev. Julie Belman

Bethel August 12, 2018 - Blessing of the Backpacks

Isaiah 43:16-21

<sup>16</sup>Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, <sup>17</sup>who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: <sup>18</sup>Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. <sup>19</sup>I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. <sup>20</sup>The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, <sup>21</sup>the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

### A New Thing

A couple I know chose this passage for their wedding. They had waited a loooooong time to get married, and there had been many bumps in the road for them. So, when the big day came, friends and families from every stage and corner of this couple's life were gathered together... all of us a part of the thick memory of their on-again / off-again relationship, and it almost felt like many of us there were holding our breath to see if they were really, finally, going go through with it.

The pastor who married them read from Isaiah: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" And then she said these words to the couple: "It is quite a thing, to step into a future that is unknown, on a path that has yet to be cut. You enter a wilderness—a beautiful one to be sure, but a wilderness all the same — in that there is nothing safe or tame about the journey of marriage. May God be with you as you go."

Now, for that wedding couple, Isaiah word's about "doing a new thing" hit the nail on the head. In fact, for newlyweds, there isn't much that doesn't fall in the "new thing" category: new spouse, new home, new families, new names, new chores, new quirks to smile at, (or sometimes just to tolerate!) ☺

But those “new things” pretty quickly settle down into routines. Pretty soon those newlyweds are old-marrieds. Or that city you relocated to becomes familiar; it’s your city. Your new job is just your job. Time passes and we adjust. No matter how hard the face cream commercials try to convince us, we can not “be made new”.... for long, anyway.

So, we can see how this scripture applies to a married couple. But what about us here in the church?? How could God do a new thing that would make us forget the former things of our faith? We aren’t in the business of forgetting tradition, right? That’s why we say a creed and pray the Lord’s Prayer each week. We value the things of old - the “way we’ve always done it!” We cherish our traditions! We try to remember them and keep them, honestly and faithfully.

“Do not remember the former things?!!” Surely Isaiah is not talking to us, right? My friends, in this passage from Isaiah, I hear words to live by! God’s promise to Israel, God’s promise to that wedding couple, and even God’s promise to us, is this: Each day we travel this beautiful wilderness of life, God will do a new thing. God will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, so that we can ‘live our best life,’ and give praise to God.

Isaiah promises a new thing to God’s people. The Israelites are in exile, trapped, far from home, humiliated, without much hope of having a meaningful life. They are dejected and depressed and homeless. So - a new thing is a promise they are happy to hear. They would WELCOME some change in their lives.

I think sometimes when we hear about new things we cringe because we don’t want to change! I mean, as far as we can tell, we are not in exile or hopeless or homeless, right? But.... The Israelites were isolated in a strange land. And I wonder if any of us can relate to this – feeling isolated in our own land today?

Isolation can be understood as feeling cut off from a meaningful life; as the emptiness and absurdity of living in the world with no sense of purpose, and a growing sense of alarm and discontent. Feeling a restlessness that is not easy to name.

I wonder if, with the way the global and political climate is today, some of us have the sense of being overwhelmed by events that we are unable to control, or find it difficult to sustain a belief in happy endings and the possibility of anything good??

Isaiah addresses the people in their sadness and calls them to remember the good old days, the time when God did great things for them, (In their case the exodus from slavery) and then he says something truly radical: NOW FORGET ABOUT IT! What comes next is even better!

The people of Israel are also called to remember how they have failed God in the past; all their sins and sorrows – and then again Isaiah says, forget about it God is not only doing a new thing, a thing even better than before, but God is making US new! Forget about the failures of the past and embrace the hope of the future.

When we hear from the prophet Isaiah today, that God is about to do a new thing, do we get excited? Do we still have hope? Can we embrace change? Or will we resist change, always fearing a new thing?

Isaiah's words this morning remind us that we always have hope. And it's a HOLY hope.

- It is not hope in our own ability to turn things around
- Not our ability to do some good
- Not the wisdom to figure everything out
- NO - it is hope in God's ability to do ANYTHING and EVERYTHING!
- And Isaiah is saying, not only can God do it but God will do it.

So, how are we to respond to Isaiah? The Gospel story that comes to mind is that of Mary, going to visit Jesus and his disciples in the upper room. She brings her most precious gift – a bottle of expensive perfume – and pours it out over Jesus feet, then dries them with her hair.

Mary's response is to the sadness of her time, the coming suffering and death of Jesus. She seems to be the only one in the room who gets it, who knows what is coming when she literally wastes all her expensive perfume in one reckless, generous outpouring of love. Her response is to offer everything she has. All of her love - no turning away, no hardening of the heart, no giving up

hope, just a reckless outpouring of love and compassion. Mary's response is quite different than our natural inclination to turn away and hide, to find solace in personal pleasure, and denial of the broken world we live in.

So, my friends, how will we here at Bethel respond to God doing a new thing among us and through us? First, we could start by believing the outrageous Word of God, that says the future is better than the past, and trust that the future will be as God has planned it. Our response could be to pour out recklessly and generously all we have inside, holding nothing back! For it is in the pouring out, in the surrender, in the abandonment of our safety and security, that our hearts are emptied and opened to what God has promised.

This will not be easy for us - for we are trained to be reasonable and cautious. We play it safe. We don't give too much away. We are not interested in wasting our time on anything unless we know it will turn out in our favor. There have been too many let downs, too many broken dreams, too many nothings to still believe in the God who makes something out of nothing. And. That. Is. Isaiah's Point! It is when there appears to be nothing left that God will make something new.

But still, our human imaginations may be limited at this point. We are like the cynic in Ecclesiastes, thinking, there is nothing new under the sun. We have seen it all. Even if we had a Godly revelation, we are likely to chalk it up to mere coincidence, a random event that is more accidental than providential, something to keep quiet, to ignore even, for what good is it?

Bishop Will Willimon writes, *"We've got to break ourselves of the habit of dealing with things that happens to us, or visions that come our way, or words that are at work in us, the habit of dismissing this as mere coincidence. For those who are convinced that the Word has been made flesh, and the son of God has intruded into the world, nothing in the world is mere."*<sup>1</sup>

Once we have encountered Jesus Christ in our life, we don't respond to life as merely anything. For in the eyes of faith, NOTHING is ever merely coincidental, accidental or happenstance. It is REVELATION! It is a gift from the God who will not leave us alone - who loves us enough to seek and

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon's Lectionary Sermon Resource book, Year B part 2

reveal, who calls us to the new thing that is already happening if only we had eyes to see.

The sprinkling of water on the head of a baby here at First Church is not *merely* a baptism. It is the baptism of Alice. Of Ace. Of Wyatt. It is the promise from God that there is a future, and that the future is good. The baby's little life represents all of us. Each life is significant to God, as each one of us holds within us the promise of God's future, of a life to be lived for God on earth.

The holy meal we call communion is not *merely* a rite of the church. It is where the temporal world meets eternity. It is where the past, present and future are gathered as one in memory and hope. All the usual boundaries are gone. Like Baptism, Holy Communion is where an invisible grace is made visible. It is where the promise of God is given life in the lives of God's people.

Nothing in the world is *mere*. Everything living is potentially the new thing that is promised. We all have within us the love that overcomes the suffering of the world.

And my friends, this is the attitude needed to hear the prophet's word.

- For the new thing is not just what God will do, but the change of hearts that enables us to transcend history
- to transform all the former things that we were taught will never change,
- to see in the reality of a broken world, the wholeness of God's creative vision,
- to embrace God's will for us,
- to overcome the obstacles of our fear and pettiness and despair.
- And to BE God's transforming people in the world.

Isaiah proclaims: I am about to do a new thing . . . do you not perceive it? My friends, are we not as desperate to hear such a word as the Israelites in exile? Are we not ready for something new? Are we not weary of the media and violence and materialism that leaves us numb? Are we not ready to look into the eyes of our children and grandchildren, and not fear what they may have to face? Are we not ready to open our hearts to such a hope that it fills our

souls with an un-limited imagination about what is really possible for humankind?

What might happen if we could listen to the Word of God proclaimed, participate in worship, and then be sent forth into the world with our eye out and ears tuned to the sacred? To the new things that are being revealed to us right now?!?

This is the great hope of our faith: that God will do a new thing. That God has given us permission to forget the old things that hold us back, that keep us sad and afraid. God has invited us to live into the future with every hope that what God promises is indeed what will be.

Therefore we can live as those who are no longer restrained by fear, or overwhelmed by despair, but who will invest our lives generously and with gladness in the bright and beautiful future, in the new thing that God will do.

My friends, God is doing a new thing. May we have the courage to perceive what is springing forth in our midst.

LET US PRAY: Almighty God, thank You for leading us in the path of life. Help us to trust that wherever we are, wherever we have been, wherever we will go - there you will be also. Lead us to places of great faithfulness, and help us to believe that our best days are ahead. We pray in your holy name. Amen.