

A New Thing

Isaiah 43:16-21

In this section of Isaiah to which our scripture belongs, the overriding concern—both of the prophet and of God's people—is their exile. They had lost everything: their land, their homes, their livelihood, their families; and, to some extent, they felt they had lost God as well. This crisis had raised the most serious of questions: Where was God in the midst of this great disaster? Why did God allowed this to happen? What kind of a future did the people of God have? In other words: Is God faithful? Is God goodness? Is God all-powerful? Is God who we have been told God is? These were questions at stake for the Hebrew people, as they questioned whether God had gone back on God's promises to be with them always.

Into this desperate situation the words of God were spoken to God's people. Isaiah 40 says: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." This message to God's people was a word of encouragement, a word of consolation, and, most importantly, a word of hope; to a people in dire need of a good word from the Lord. The great Hebrew scholar Abraham Heschel called this proclamation ageless, saying, "No words have ever gone further in offering comfort when the sick world cries."

Indeed, the situation in which the Hebrew people found themselves is a timeless one, not because all of us today understand the experience of exile but because we all have experienced the shadow of past tragedies, the way in which those ghosts of past loss, shame, and grief swirl around us and cloud our vision, preventing us from seeing anything but darkness and despair. Sudden deaths, broken relationships, bad decisions, cruelties of others, and cruelties of our own—all these things linger about us and hinder our ability both to see the future and to move into

it. Also, these thoughts raise for us the most serious of questions, because they cause us to doubt the promises we have received in Jesus Christ: which are divine forgiveness, new life, and the love of God.

In this paralyzing situation, Isaiah's words were like a beam of light that scattered the darkness and drives away demons. Just as he did for the Hebrew people so long ago, Isaiah reminds us that our God is the God who has delivered us in the past—the God who parted the sea to lead the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt—and who will deliver us again. Our God is the God who makes a way where there is no way, who creates streams of living water in the desolate deserts of our landscapes, and bringing new life into parched, dry places. Our God is faithful to God's promises, our God does remember the covenant God has made with God's people, and our God will not, will never abandon us, no matter how bad things get.

The great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls these words of prophecy "poetry of homecoming," rich, evocative language that uses the power of memory—looking back through the immediate situation of exile to recall the mighty deeds of God in the history of God's people—to stir up a faith in the power of God at work in the future. What God has done for you before, God will do again; hold on, trust in the Lord, and keep the faith. What God has in store for you is as miraculous and satisfying as water in the wilderness.

These verses continue to resonate with God's people almost three thousand years after they were written, precisely because we too so often find ourselves in need of a good word from the Lord; because we too so often find ourselves in crisis moments before God, wondering how God will reveal Godself and come to us. Little has changed; the same thing that is at stake for us in our relationship with God today, and that is our very faith. Can we still believe in a good God when awful things have happened to us? Can we still trust that God will be faithful to us,

even when God seems absent? Can we hope that God is still at work in our lives, creating a future for us where no future seems possible?

Our text reminded the listener of the intervention of God to allow the Israelite slaves to cross the barrier of the Sea of Reeds. This very same God then closed the water around the forces of Pharaoh: "they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick" (v. 17). The story of the escape from slavery through the sea, told in Exodus 14, became an essential part of the identity of both the Israelites and of their God. The God of Israel is the God who makes a pathway through the barriers to freedom, whether they are constructed by Pharaoh or are natural formations like the Sea of Reeds.

What are those barriers, creations of human ingenuity or features of the natural landscape, that stand in the way of our congregation's following God's lead toward freedom? How do we as a congregation listen to the call of God away from whatever would enslave us, whether that is prosperity or poverty, success or failure, growth or decline? What could it mean for us that we follow the God who specializes in making a pathway through whatever barriers would stand in the way of the freedom of the people of God?

In our scripture the prophet/poet made an unusual turn. God instructed the listeners, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old" (v. 18), which is very unusual, because every time the Israelites forget their history, terrible things happened: they began to worship other gods and neglected widows and orphans. Usually, the prophets encouraged their listeners to remember the one who brought them out of Egypt. In fact, did not God just remind us of that fact? Why in the world would God, who keeps reminding the children of Israel of that miraculous escape through the sea say that such recollection was not important?

The answer came: God is "about to do a new thing" (v. 19). What was a barrier became a conveyor of life. They were asked to experience the reversal that God was initiating for the sake of all creation. "Do you not perceive it?"

Do we perceive it? Are we prepared for the reversal that God is about to perform? Or will we, like the children of Israel, proclaim that we had it better when we were slaves? Most of us have heard the phrase, "We've never done it that way before." These words are evidence that we do not perceive the new thing that God is doing now. Are we so comfortable that we are unable to perceive what God is doing in our midst? We are blinded by our water crisis, or lack of young families, or our mature membership, or our mortgage.

God is once again going to provide a pathway, this time through the wilderness. God's new thing will spring forth like rivers that water the desert. Water will once again be a source of life, rather than a barrier. There will be water to drink, to irrigate fields, and to water livestock. The prophet/poet spoke of a God who will cut a path through the water when it gets in the way of the divine call to freedom, and will use water as a pathway through the wilderness of the world toward the new thing that is God's yearning for a beloved people.

The rivers of water are not intended for humans alone, but for the jackals and the ostriches as well (v. 20a). These are not common creatures, but we are told these wild creatures will honor God for the water that is provided to preserve their lives. Humans could take a lesson from such beasts! The chosen of God are offered this way and this source of life for the same reason as the wild beasts. The goal of freedom and new life is to offer praise to the God who provided them in the first place. Has God provided our congregation with a pathway through the wilderness of our world? How will we respond? **Michael E. Williams**

Isaiah, of course, speaks a word from the Lord that answered all these questions that the people asked in the affirmative, and in so doing, he restored the people's

faith in their God and encouraged them to believe and hope beyond what they could see, beyond what they could envision for themselves. Because, in fact, his was a testimony to the identity of the one true God, the Lord of heaven and earth. Isaiah showed us that God is a God of the future—and not just any future, but a future full of hope and promise. God is the one who brings hope out of desperation, day out of night, and joy out of mourning. God makes a way where there is no way, and God leads us into a bright future that we are able neither to see nor to create for ourselves.

In this season of Lent especially, as we walk the road to Jerusalem and the cross with Jesus Christ, entering further and further into the coming darkness with each week, we too do well to remember this promise of Isaiah and the fidelity of God. In the face of the terrible events of Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion, God not only raised Jesus from the dead, but will raise us into new life as well—a life with more promise and joy than we ever can imagine. **Kristin Johnston Largen**

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