

A New Way of Living

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 43:16-21

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,

¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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,

²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

How is life going for you? Have you had any losses? Have you had pain or illness? Have you had disappointments? Our scripture promises that God has not abandoned or forsaken us!

In the larger section of Isaiah to which this passage belongs, the overriding concern—both of the prophet and of God's people—was their exile, a painful and embarrassing time in their lives. They felt 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 theological questions: Where was God in the midst of this great disaster? Why had God allowed this to happen? What kind of a future did the chosen people of God have now? In other words, God's fidelity, God's goodness, God's omnipotence—indeed, God's very

identity—were at stake for the Hebrew people, as they questioned whether God had gone back on God's promises to be with them always.

Into their desperate situation the words of God recorded in Isaiah were spoken to God's people, words that were well characterized by the opening verse of Isaiah 40: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." From this verse, we know that Isaiah's message to God's people would be a word of encouragement, a word of consolation, and, most importantly, a word of hope; and from the thirty-nine chapters that precede it, we know that it came to a people in dire need of a good word from the Lord. No wonder the great Hebrew scholar Abraham Heschel calls the proclamation of Isaiah 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—though some people do—but rather because we all have experienced the grim 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. What's more, they also raise for us the most serious of theological questions, as they cause us to

doubt the promises we have received in Jesus Christ: divine forgiveness, new life, and the love of God.

In this paralyzing situation, Isaiah's words are like a beam of light that scatters 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. Our God is the God who creates streams of living water in the desolate deserts of our landscapes, 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 belief 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 faith. What God has in store for you is as miraculous and satisfying as water in the wilderness.

These chapters in Isaiah, and particularly these verses in this text, 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. Thus, what is at stake in this text is 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? Finally, can we hope that God is still at work in our lives, creating a future for us where no future seems possible? Can we count on God if we try a new way of living by putting our total trust in God?

Isaiah, of course, speaks a word from the Lord that answers all these questions in the affirmative, and in so doing, he restores the people's faith in their God and encourages them to believe and hope beyond what they can see, beyond what they can envision for themselves. Because, in fact, these verses are a testimony to the identity of the one true God, the Lord of heaven and earth. Here in this passage in particular, Isaiah shows us that God is a God of the future—and not just any future, not just any new way of living, but a future full of hope and promise and renewal. 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, a future that teaches us a new way of living and trust.

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 will raise Jesus from the dead, but will raise us into new life as well—a life with more promise and joy than we ever could have imagined. God promises us a new way of living that will bring God glory and honor, and us joy and hope. **Kristin Johnston Largen**

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