

## A Way in the Wilderness

Isaiah 43:16-21

Did you ever notice bodies of water serve as both barriers and conveyances of life? In this passage Isaiah speaks for God using the images of the sea (as barrier) and rivers (as conveyors of life). This text comes from a time when the prophetic and poetic are mingled, and some of the most powerful words of God in judgment and comfort are spoken in the imagery of creation; giving natural things spiritual meaning and insight.

Isaiah begins with a reference to God's very identity as one "who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters" (v. 16), reminding 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 closes 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?

Then the prophet says God instructs the listeners, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old" (v. 18). Usually, the prophets encourage their listeners to remember the one who brought them out of Egypt. Why in the world would God, who keeps reminding the children of Israel of that miraculous escape through the sea, now say that such recollection is not important? The answer is God is "about to do a new thing" (v. 19), and because of that, the imagery shifts from water as a barrier to water as a conveyor of life. The prophet/poet is asking the listener to experience the reversal that God is initiating for the sake of all creation.

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? You and I have heard the phrase, "We've never done it that way before." These words, sometimes called the seven last words of the church, are evidence that we do not perceive the new thing that God is doing now. We may be so comfortable in our present self-understanding that we are unable to perceive what God is doing in our midst. There a difference between remembering the God who leads us to freedom and clinging to past practices that continue to enslave us.

God is once again going to provide a pathway, this time through the wilderness. Let us think of the wildernesses in the lives of our own congregation: lack of people; lack of youth; lack of resources; we are living in an age where many people don't think they need God so evangelist is difficult, we don't have the energy that we had in days past. 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. Isaiah speaks 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 (if disobedient) people.

The rivers of water are not intended for us alone, but for the jackals and the ostriches as well (v. 20a), ones that we forget are God's creatures. We are even told that these will honor God for the water that is provided to preserve their lives. Humans are to take a lesson from such beasts and praise God also. (Michael E. Williams)

In the section of Isaiah to which this passage 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 caused them to ask serious 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 this desperate situation the words of God were spoken to God's people, like those in Isaiah 40: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." So we know that Isaiah's message to God's people was a word of encouragement, a word of consolation, and, most importantly, a word of hope; and we know that it came to a people in dire need of a good word from the Lord. The great Hebrew scholar Abraham Heschel calls this proclamation of Isaiah ageless, saying, "No words have ever gone further in offering comfort when the sick world cries."

This 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 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. They also raise for us the most serious questions about God, and 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 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, who creates streams of living water in the desolate deserts, 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." 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 words continue to resonate with us almost three thousand years after they were written 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. So, 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? Can we hope that God is still at work in our lives, creating a future for us where no future seems possible?

Isaiah, of course, speaks a word from the Lord that answers all these questions in the affirmative, and 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. These verses are a testimony to the identity of the one true God, the Lord of heaven and earth; a God of the 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. (Kristin Johnston Largen) Remember these promises are the on-going work of God. This is the God "who *makes* [not made] a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters" (v. 16), "who brings out chariot and horse" (v. 17), and who is "about to do a new thing" (v. 19). He suggests that all necessities will be provided in the present and future ("I give water in the wilderness," v. 20), because of the ongoing faithfulness of God; which describe the ceaseless, miraculous work of God.

For those who had grown comfortable with life in Babylon, this passage points them toward a necessary return. For those who despaired of ever going home, the message is a hopeful one. By alluding to the earlier exodus and wanderings in verses 19-21, Isaiah urges the people to be courageous in envisioning a similar event, a safe passage. (Samuel L. Adams)

Isaiah say move on to the future. Yesterday Sarah Beth Simonds and I attended the Regional Board meeting in Lansing. After the meeting we stopped to visit my cousin Anna who is in an area nursing facility. Anna has had a stroke and cancer in the last few years. When I saw her a year ago she said she wanted to go home. I

called my sisters and brothers to say things didn't look hopeful. Yesterday Anna said she hopes to return to her home next month and I believe she will. She attributes all her blessings to God!

Isaiah says remember the past, but remember that God can reverse the past. . I don't know if I told you that my mother died of pancreatic cancer. I remember how ill she became and how quickly she left us. A few years later I went to the hospital to see the mother of two dear saints which whom Leroy and I worshipped for 30 years. When I arrived the mother was hooked up the machines and looked like she did know if she was in heaven or on earth. The next time I saw her she was in her chair in her daughter's living room, bossing her daughter about as usual. That's when I learned that God can and will do a new thing in our lives. Anything God can do, God can do better, and backwards and upside down as well.

Isaiah ends in the promise of doxology. God's promise to the people is that they will live and prosper to praise God. Because we are God's people, God promises to redeem us; what God promises to redeem us for is to be God's people. We remember what God has done and to anticipate the ever-new thing that God is about to do. (David L. Bartlett)

In this season, as we walk the road to Jerusalem and the cross with Jesus, entering further and further into the coming darkness with each week, we 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. (Kristin Johnston Largen)

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