

SERMON: "PERCEIVING NEW THINGS"

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 43:16-19

DATE: SEPTEMBER 27, 2015

Isaiah 43:16-19 (NIV)

- ¹⁶ This is what the Lord says—
he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
¹⁸ "Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.
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Amidst all the activity of getting the new Church year started and preparing for my retirement today, it's very easy to forget that today is Anniversary Sunday for St. Timothy's. Indeed, today marks the 55th Anniversary of our congregation.

In some ways having the Anniversary on my last Sunday with you fits very well.

Usually during an Anniversary Service the preacher calls on people to look back and appreciate where they've been and how they got to where they are.

Usually some time is spent looking backward---and that's good---that's to be expected.

But, any Anniversary Service I've been to or preached at has never left it there. Looking back and remembering has its place but an Anniversary theme always uses the past as a platform to look ahead.

Anniversaries are times to look back and enjoy and appreciate but always, always to also look ahead, plan and get excited and enthused about the future to come.

And so, that's what I want to be about today.

Our lesson couldn't say it any plainer when God proclaimed through Isaiah:

¹⁸ "Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.

¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!

God spoke through Isaiah to the people of Israel at a difficult time. Some of them were in exile. Others were under threat. They were a conquered people who were living in the past. They loved to remember.

Remember when God called us to be God's people?
Remember when God looked after us in the wilderness?
Remember the manna and the water from the rock?
Remember the entrance into the Promised Land?

Of course, none of the people had been alive for any of these memories but God's connection with them had been a part of their history---a foundation for who they were and how they saw themselves.

Their memory, as with most of us, had an element of selectiveness to it.

Remember grumbling in the desert---no!

Remember hating the manna---no!

Remember the lack of loyalty to God that had them in their current situation---no!

It was "the good old days" they recalled and, in their current situation, the good old days were much better than the present struggles.

And so, God said to them "Forget it!"

Forget the old days.

Forget the good times.

Forget the bad times.

Forget the past.

Now, God wasn't being mean in encouraging such amnesia. God wasn't wanting them to lose track of how they had become who they were or cut the ties with the lessons they had learned throughout their history. God wasn't saying the past was useless or over-rated.

God simply wanted them to keep looking ahead.

If they spent all their time dwelling on the past, they would never come up with the vision or the energy or the enthusiasm to pursue the new things God had in store for them.

And it was God who had their future firmly in sight.

¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

John C. Holbert, in his commentary on this passage, writes:

"Our God is the God of the new thing. If we expect this God always to act in the ways we expect, based on our memories, based on what we have experienced before, we run the terrible risk of missing what God is about now.

'Don't we see it, this new thing of God?' pleads Isaiah.

And too often we must answer, 'No, we are too busy doing things in the old way, the tried and true way, the familiar way, the way we know and trust.'"

God never rests upon God's laurels.

God never wishes for the past and all its comfortable memories.

God always pushes forward and God wants us to follow.

But the fact that we are to follow God brings with it the assurance that we always move into the future with the Lord.

Just as we're never alone in the midst of our personal and individual struggles and joys, so too we are never alone as the Church. As a congregation, we have each other but, even more, we have God with us.

And so, as we now go our separate ways---Eileen and I into retirement---St. Timothy's into a new phase of its history and ministry---we are all following God's lead. We are all walking into new things and new times in the presence of the One who knows what we need and knows that the future, while scary sometimes, isn't to be feared.

We can forget the past---by that I mean not concentrate upon it.

It's okay to forget---to lay aside the past---in order to embrace the new things God has in store.

Change isn't easy but it doesn't have to be intimidating.

Callie Plunket-Brewton in her commentary on our passage writes:

"This (passage) is a wonderful and very necessary word for the Church to hear in this current age when there is so much change and upheaval. The character of our God has not changed. God's grace and power have sustained us in the past, will see us through the present and guide us into the future."

When we do think of the past, remember that God has always been there.

When we think of the present, remember that God stands with us at this very moment.

When we focus on the future we do so informed by those truths--by that history.

That's our hope---our assurance for the future.

And because we have hope based upon God's presence we can pass hope along to each other.

I want to conclude with words of hope. They were written by a very wise Grade 5 student:

"What is hope?

I think hope is the feeling that you have a chance, that you can survive, that you can do it, that you can make it.

You can give hope by showing someone they always have a chance. That if they try hard enough they can do it.

Sometimes those who need hope can't change their outcome so it's entirely up to us. We can all give others hope in a big way.

What is hope? We may not know. But every day someone gives it; through donations, through words and actions, even through the little things we do.

I've given hope before. How about you?!

What is hope? You are hope!"

The wise student, who wrote those words, is our own Lisa Devlin!

God is hope.

You are hope.

New, hopeful things are in store.

Looking ahead, God's truth through Isaiah, rings out for us to hear, hold on to and cherish:

"Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?"

I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the desert."

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