

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C
March 17, 2013
Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14
“...I Am About to Do a New Thing.”
Rev. Janice M. Lamott Adams

Our Lenten journey with Jesus is winding down. Next Sunday, now called Palm/Passion Sunday, we take the critical next steps with him into Holy Week. As we walk these Lenten and interim paths together, it is imperative that we stay close to the scriptures. For in God's word we find the assurance that God, and God alone, is in charge of our future and promises to do mighty works in and among us.

The Old Testament book of Isaiah is a powerful witness to God's work among God's people. Biblical scholars tell us that this book contains the writings of three prophets. The one they call First Isaiah, recorded the history of the Israelite people living in their home lands, before the invasion of the Babylonians. Second Isaiah recorded the time they lived in exile in Babylonian territory. And Third Isaiah recorded their release from captivity and their return to their homeland and holy city, Jerusalem.

I want you to turn to the back of your bulletins and read one of the scripture passages your Pastor Nominating Committee has selected to guide their work. I think its no coincidence that this reading from Isaiah turned up in today's assigned passages from the common lectionary. Not knowing the PNC's selection, I had already started writing a sermon which includes this passage.

This section of the book of Isaiah was written in exile. From what we can tell, this Second Isaiah, spoke as a refugee in Babylon. How often that prophet and his people must have heard and relived the stories of their ancestors; how they had been ripped from their Jewish homelands by Babylonian soldiers and carted off to live in that foreign land; how nothing in Jerusalem had been left standing, even their sacred temple which they knew as the dwelling place of God.

It was pretty amazing that despite all the trauma and displacement, this small but faithful remnant of people managed to hold fast to their faith. And though there seemed to be no visible signs of change, with the prophet's encouragement, they continued to hope and trust that someday God would lead

them home.

Today's reading is prefaced by God's reminding the people where they came from and whose they were:

"But now thus says the Lord, the One who created you, O Jacob; the One who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ...For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel; your Savior."

Listen to these words again, for they are for us too: "I have called you by name, you are mine." They were God's own; we are God's own. Through the prophet, God reminded the people of a time in their history when the Hebrew leader, Moses, led their ancestors out of captivity in Egypt, with the Egyptian soldiers in hot pursuit. Barely escaping with their lives as they waded into the waters of the sea, God made a path of dry land for them, delivering them safely on the distant shore. But Isaiah then cautioned the people:

"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?"

It seems so strange that Isaiah would remind the Israelites of a past event and immediately caution them **not** to remember the things of old. One of the commentaries I read suggests that the prophet may have been saying, "you ain't seen nothing YET! You think God did great things in your past, well get ready. God will act again in ways far beyond anything you can imagine in your wildest dreams! The signs of the future are already here! Don't you see them?" All the old paradigms would be shattered by the enormous grace of God. And the people would be given new lenses to view the world and their future as the people of God.

Dr. Walter Bruggemann, a retired Old Testament professor at Columbia Seminary, believes that we who live in this day and time; we who seek to be followers of Jesus Christ, are living in our own kind of exile. The values of the society we live in do not reflect the Bible's values. The religion of many of our people, is not the worship of God, but of the idols of fame, fortune, consumerism, eternal youth, to name a few. Not unlike our biblical ancestors, we in the Christian church today are living in a foreign land waiting for God's deliverance.

Like them, we are a tiny minority of believers, like they were a remnant of God's people, trying to stay faithful to God, trying to hold on to the belief that God will someday intervene in the world and bring us out of exile into a land where God is sovereign.

Like those early believers, we must stick together at all costs, not only in our congregations, but with Christian sisters and brothers here and around our world. The life and future of the church universal depends on our unity. We cannot afford to let our differences divide us. As one people, we must keep our focus only on God, and God's vision for the future.

The scriptures and our own experiences of God, are proof that God has always been faithful even when the people were not. And God has always found a way through the next wilderness and delivered the people to the place that God intended for them to be. Let's listen again to the prophet's words because they are for us as well:

"I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. 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..."

Trusting that God will lead us and care for us, we can be free to watch and wait for God's new thing to happen. Immersing ourselves in prayer and in scripture, the signs will become evident to us. And as these signs appear, it is important to share them with one another. For they will give us hope and point the way to God's vision for our future.

God's vision for the future was dramatically demonstrated in the life of a man named Saul, a devout Pharisaic Jew who firmly believed that his mission from God was to help stamp out the Christian community. Setting out on this mission, heading for the town of Damascus, the presence of the living Christ literally blinded and knocked him off his feet, turning him around full circle to become one of the very people he had despised, a follower of Jesus Christ. From that moment on, he saw himself, the world and his mission in life very differently. Even his name was changed to the one we know as Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ.

It was that knowledge of Christ that spurred Paul on to an active life of anticipating what God would be doing in the future. God's acceptance of him energized a continuous pursuit of the new vocation to which God called him. Saul/now Paul said:

.“This one thing I do. Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

“Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” May these be our watchwords as we continue on our journey of faith. Because, God is about to do new things in our midst! Amen.