Will God Do a New Thing?

ISAIAH 43:25-21 (NRSVUE)

I am the LORD, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.
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.

The Word of God for the people of God…

Isaiah was a prophet during the last half of the 8th century BCE. We first hear of him around 740 BCE when he received his prophetic call while serving as a priest on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). During the liturgy, the heavy curtain that divided the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple was pulled back to allow the high priest to enter. Isaiah, who may have been the high priest or an attendant, saw inside the few square feet that comprised the holiest place in Judaism. Here is a first-person description of the experience:

ISAIAH 6:1-8 (NRSVUE) ***In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3And one called to another and said,***

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

4The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5And I said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" 6Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7He touched my mouth with it and said, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." 8Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Whew!!! Can you put yourself in his place and just imagine having that kind of experience? Would you have said, "Here I am; send me!"? Isaiah went on to become the premier prophet of Israel whose metaphor of the "Servant of the Lord" became Jesus' chosen model for his role in God's kingdom.

It's now some 200 years later. The children of Israel are in exile—in Babylon. Jerusalem is destroyed; the temple is a pile of rubble and charred timber. For ten generations, the disciples of Isaiah have preserved the prophet's writings and have sustained the core of his teachings. And now the Spirit of the Lord speaks through one of those disciples—words that portray the redemptive activity God is about to introduce into Israel's life.

The prophetic poem draws from the images of Israel's exodus from Egypt

and their wandering in the wilderness. And yet, even as the prophet lifts these memories, he calls on the people to forget them. Not even that great liberation from Egyptian bondage is adequate to describe the redemption God is about to bring. All past examples lie shattered, like the ruins of Jerusalem, before the enormity of God's Grace![1]

And the examples are too many to be numbered—for Israel, and for us.

Bill read only a short stanza from the poem, but note the repeated reference to water: ***Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters…*** Remember the movie, "The Ten Commandments:" that dramatic scene of the parting of the Red Sea? The prophet says, "That's nothing compared to what you're about to see!"

Over and over there is reference to "a river in the wilderness," "water in the desert… to give drink to my people." This God, who commands the waters of the sea and who creates rivers in the wilderness and water from the rock—this God is about to do a new thing.

And it's not just the waters. Still looking back at the Exodus, the prophet says when Israel had passed through the waters of the Red Sea, God "brought out" the Egyptian army and crushed it (the text says, "extinguished, quenched like a wick"). The enemies of human liberty respond to the initiatives of the same sovereign God as did the liberated children of Israel.

The text reminds us that the God who brought the children of Israel through the waters safely is the same God who extinguished the forces of oppression and injustice in those same waters—the same God on behalf of whom the prophets repeatedly called Israel to justice and mercy toward the poor.

Yet, even as the prophet remembers the great redeeming and liberating acts of God in the past, he says, "Forget the past!" Something is going on, here! Hebrew Scriptures scholar, James Newsome[2] points out that, while the prophets frequently refer to the past sins of Israel, in this text the reference is specifically to the exodus, and the prophet says what God is about to do surpasses all patterns of God's redemptive activity even the preeminent pattern: the exodus.

In the final verses of this short text, the prophet shares the reason God is about to do this surpassing "new thing:" not for the people's own sake, but because that's just the way God is… In the book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament, God says (21:5), "Look: I am always making all things new!"

Past, present, future: the God who is always making all things new is about

[1]Adapted from Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, Jr., James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year C* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press,1994) page 228.

[2] Ibid., page 230.

liberation, justice and the end of poverty and oppression of all kinds. That's how God deals with people. Again, quoting James Newsome: "Grace is who Yahweh is."

Looking back at the original statement, speaking through the prophet, God says, "***I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?"***

So, what "new thing" is God about to do at First Christian Church, Conway, Arkansas—and will we perceive it?

Like with Israel, there are past landmarks. In 1953, when Mary and Howard Canten moved to Conway, there was no Christian Church here, so they drove into North Little Rock to go to church. The Regional office had hired a consultant who said the area was "overchurched." But Mary wasn't buying it. She and Howard placed an ad in the Log Cabin Democrat and hosted a meeting to gage interest. They never looked back.

In October, 1955 they held their first worship service in the American Legion building downtown, and in 1959, they moved into the building at 550 Watkins St. Through periods of growth and periods of division, the church has maintained a faithful presence and a significant ministry in this community.

On April 16 of this year, after six weeks of prayerful preparation, we gathered to discern God's vision for this congregation. We discerned some very specific ways we believe God is about to do a new thing through us going forward. One of the questions that guided us was, how will we know whether it's really God's vision, or just a projection of our own needs and ideas? Four Task Forces have met to begin the prayerful process of making the vision happen.

When we look through the entire collection of Judeo/Christian Scriptures, there is a clear pattern whenever God does a new thing. We believe what we discerned on April 16 is consistent with that pattern of God's creative, redeeming, and sustaining work, and today we gather to reaffirm our commitment to the vision we believe God is calling us to live out in our community.

Please stand, as your are able, as

A Litany of Reaffirmation *(From Micah 4)*

L/ In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.

P/ Many nations shall come and say:
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'

L/ Hear now the witness of God's Vision for us:

- ***Mary Ann:*** *On April 16 we discerned that we needed to* ***"Relaunch"*** *our presence in this community because we had become settled and satisfied with who we are and what we do. We*

needed a refreshed energy and vision. We are focusing our life and work with the theme, "Where Are We Needed?" Now we commit to the vision we believe God revealed to us.

- ***Amy Hutto:*** *On April 16 we discerned that we needed to* ***"Reconnect"*** *with our immediate neighborhood. We've done well with "one-and-done" projects, but we now commit to the vision of being involved more consistently as our first response to the theme: "Where Are We Needed?"*
- ***Rita:*** *On April 16 we discerned that we needed to* ***"Reimage"*** *our presence, both in affirming our congregational self-awareness, and in being more intentional about what our presence communicates to our community. As one element of our commitment to the vision, we are recommending fresh, new logo and signage.*
- ***Jo Lynn:*** *On April 16 we discerned that, as part of our* ***"Reimaging"*** *work, we need to* ***"Refresh"*** *the appearance and functionality of our building and facilities, inside and out. While our present facility is adequate for present congregational life, there's wasted and inefficiently organized space, and the external appearance is not inviting. In our commitment to the vision, a task force is now working to develop conceptual recommendations to the congregation.*
- ***Ben Hutto:*** *On April 16 we discerned that, as part of our* ***"Reimaging"*** *work, we need to* ***"Reboot"*** *our online presence. Our youth will form the core of our commitment to make that part of the vision happen.*

Unison Prayer of Reaffirmation: God of vision and purpose, we offer you our commitment to faithful witness and ministry through the vision you have shared with us. Guide us in our work, and keep us on the path toward the fulfillment of your purpose for us, so that our vision always aligns with yours. Amen.

A Hymn of Reaffirmation: *"Here I Am, Lord" #452*

Pastoral Prayer: Lord, too often we are like the kings and people of Israel. We forget your covenant. We don't keep your commandments within our hearts and within our souls. We grow satisfied with the way things are, and in our complacency we aren't always alert to see your vision for us; so, we fall out of step.

In our worship we sometimes are just going through motions—not always magnifying you. We grow careless in our stewardship of the resources you enable us to accumulate, and we've not consistently worked with you to lift up the downtrodden, to feed the hungry, to clothe those who need it. We just do it in spurts.

Grant us renewed commitment to fully embrace who you are so we might not live as a people living on scraps of your grace, but instead by a people woven together by your blessings.

Invitation to the Table

In the ancient Middle east, breaking bread was a token of covenant

- Mortgage: Promissory Note
- Wedding: Ring
- Ancient Salt Covenant
- Breaking Bread: when we come to the Table it is in token of our pledge…