

"A New Thing"

Isaiah 43:16-21

March 17, 2013

5th Sunday in Lent

We all enjoy recalling the past. How many times have you said (or heard someone else say) something like this, "Well, you know when I was young..." followed by some remembrance about the past which indicated that life was better then than it is now? Prices were lower. Sports heroes were better. Television and movies were cleaner. The list could go on and on. There is nothing wrong with recalling the past as long as you don't live in the past. I must have used one too many "Well, you know when I was young" stories when one of my sons said to me, "Dad, I don't care WHAT things were like when you were young." Recalling the past becomes a problem when it is used to give the impression that there is nothing good now and there is no hope for the future. It was to such people Isaiah was speaking in our Old Testament reading for today.

"Those were the days," those Israelites were thinking. They had a land of their own and freedom from their enemies. They had witnessed great victories by God and the amazing acts of God. The nations around them feared Israel and her God back then – back in the good old days. Now, those glory days were a long time ago and far far away. They were captives in Babylon, dragged there when the walls of Jerusalem and Judah's meager army were much too weak to keep out the Babylonian invaders. Now, they were weak and helpless. Oh, if only those mighty acts of Yahweh were for now – instead only in the good old days!

Then came word from the prophet, Isaiah – God's Word. God had something to say through Isaiah, not only about the past, but good news for today and hope for the future. God reminds the people of how He had delivered them in the past. Seven centuries before Isaiah, God had saved the people of Israel from their bondage of slavery and from the tyranny of Pharaoh by the blood of the Passover lamb which had been sacrificed.

God then “made a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters” of the Red Sea and led the people through. He destroyed the army of Pharaoh by drowning “chariot and horse, army and warrior.” The Lord had rescued Israel from Egypt and led them through the desert to a whole new land, a new home, of streams of water and the flowing of milk and honey.

Yet Israel sinned. Instead of separating themselves from the culture of their neighbors, they embraced it. Instead of destroying the idols of the nations, they joined with the idolaters in worshiping the false gods. Instead of living by the Ten Commandments, they lived in opposition to the Ten Commandments. Instead of heeding the call of the prophets to repent, they refused to repent and killed the prophets instead. And that is why they found themselves in exile in Babylon.

Isaiah says, “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.” What does that mean? Shouldn’t Israel look back to how God had redeemed them? It’s not that Israel should forget God’s deliverance from Egypt by his mighty acts. They should remember it! But God’s people needed something new – a new deliverance, not from Egypt, but from Babylon. God didn’t want His people grieving over past glories lost, but looking ahead to what He was going to do next.

“Behold, I am doing a new thing”, the Lord declared. “Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” The Lord would deliver the people of Israel from captivity in Babylon and return them to their old – new – home. Although this rescue seemed extremely unlikely, in view of their present position, it was right there in front of them. Instead of causing a foreign ruler to capture the people, the Lord would cause a foreign ruler to release His people.

The Lord said, “I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Just like the first Exodus, the people would pass through water and wilderness to get home. They would return to their homeland and flourish. God would recreate His people for Himself that they might declare His praise. It is to this coming deliverance the people of God should look and not concentrate solely on His past deliverance. The Exodus was a testimony to God’s power and faithfulness in the past. But God always gives His people what they need for the present, as well as hope for the future.

And so it is with God and His people today. We like to look back to the good old days when everyone went to church and churches were filled. We think of the time when there were no money problems and the church's coffers were always full. We remember when the morality of the culture often supported the morality of the Bible. We long for the days when the society respected our beliefs and actions as Christians and usually supported them.

Then things changed. Sin in the world became worse and worse. But sin in the Church also became worse and worse. Instead of separating ourselves from the culture of this world, we have embraced it and have even tried to bring it into the church. We compromised the Word of God in order to be liked and accepted. Instead of rejecting the idols of this age – materialism, sex, power, success, and so on – we often worship these idols along with our unbelieving neighbors. In our behavior, we fell further and further away from the Law of God expressed in the Ten Commandments and, instead of repenting, we often justify our behavior. And thus we find ourselves in the moral and doctrinal quagmire of our own Babylon.

Like with Isaiah, the Lord reminds us how He has rescued us from our bondage to sin and the tyranny of Satan. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be our Passover Lamb. His blood was shed on the cross so that we might be forgiven of all our sins, released from the punishment due those sins, and freed from the control of Satan himself. The mightiest work of God ever – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – was given as proof of God's acceptance of Jesus' sacrifice for our sin and guarantee of our salvation.

But the Lord says to us, "Remember not the former things nor consider the things of old." Does that mean we should forget Jesus and not remember all that He has done for us? Of course not! We treasure the forgiveness we have for all of our sins. We preach and hear the Good News of what Jesus has done for us two millennia ago, as we should.

But we, like the people of Judah, need something new. We need a new deliverance from the mess we find ourselves in. God doesn't want us to be living in the past and grieving over "the good

old days” when everything was going smoothly in our country and in our church. He wants us looking ahead to what He is going to do next.

To us, He says, “Behold, I am doing a new thing.” As bad as our situation is – financially, socially, morally, and theologically – the Lord is going to deliver us. If you look around our world and inside our churches today, you may think it to be very unlikely. But the Lord will do it.

By virtue of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, the Lord will lead us through the evil of this world, through death, and through the grave to a completely new and glorified existence. We will not have to struggle with an evil culture any more. We will not have to deal with temptation to sin. We will not have to repent of sin. For there will be no more sin, no more pain, and no more punishment.

We read about this in the book of Revelation where St. John says,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” (rev. 21:1-4)

As the Lord said of His “new thing” to Israel, He says to us, “Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” As unlikely as a deliverance might seem now and as unbelievable the culmination of that deliverance might be, He is saying, “Don’t you see it? It’s right here in front of you.” Although the final deliverance is not yet here, we see it happening here on our altar in Divine Service. Here, as the body and blood of our Savior Jesus Christ are intimately united with bread and wine, in our eating and drinking we are intimately united with Him, with one another, and with all who have gone before us into heaven. As we say in our post-communion prayer, this is “a foretaste of the feast to come.” For a short moment, we participate in the culmination of God’s deliverance and experience heaven on earth in this Holy Communion.

And so, remember the “old thing” which God has done - the forgiveness of sins won for us by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Every time you come into church and see this baptismal font, you should think of that. But don’t simply live in the past. Look forward to the “new thing” which God is doing – salvation from death and hell through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is right here in front of you. Every time you participate in Holy Communion you are getting a taste of that. In the mean time, live in the present as the people of God, gathering regularly and frequently around His Word and Sacraments in this place, rejoicing in what He has done and anticipating the new thing which He will do. Amen.