

Isaiah 43:16-21

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.

Philippians 3:4b-14

3:4b If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

You may have noticed that in our lessons for today Paul and Isaiah are saying the same thing, “Forget about the past, and embrace God’s future.”

To put it in the words of some famous songs, “The best is yet to come” or maybe “You ain’t seen nothing yet.” This unshakable hope in the future is not based upon what we have done or what we will do. This hope is based upon the promises of God.

We might stand still, but God does not stand still. God is always doing something new. God is always moving forward. And it is our job to catch up.

THE EXODUS

In our lesson from Isaiah, the prophet recalls a scene from the Exodus. The children of Israel are trapped between the pursuing Egyptian army and the Red Sea. And what happens? God makes a way where there seems to be no way.

God opens a path of dry ground in the middle of the water. One of my favorite scenes from the movies is that scene in the Ten Commandments when the children of Israel plod through the Red Sea as the Egyptians seek to catch them.

Most of us know the story. The Israelites were saved, but the pursuing Egyptians were drowned when the water closed in upon them. And that story was particularly important to a people who had been defeated and taken into exile by their enemies.

In some ways it was good to remember the good old days. In some ways it was good to think about the time when it seemed like God was on their side, and how they were a great nation.

FORGET THE PAST

But, those memories of deliverance were bittersweet.

Now it seems like God is not on their side. Now, the Bible tells us they have laid down their harps and refuse to sing the songs of Zion. The victories of the past only serve to exacerbate the pain of their present. They cannot see anything beyond their captivity in Babylon. (Psalm 137)

Do we ever lay down our harps and refuse to sing because we are captive to something or someone? Do we worship the glory days of the past because we fear the future?

I think we do. You hear it all the time. We say something like, “When I was a child, we didn’t have to even lock our doors. We looked out for each other. But, now, things are really scary. I feel sorry for what the children have to face today.”

Now, granted there are some really frightening things going on in our world. And like many of you I sometimes remember things in the past being better than they are today.

(Although, to be honest, I think our memory is distorted when it comes to the good old days. The good old days were never as good as we are apt to portray them.)

But, living in the past can be destructive to our psychological and our spiritual health. Living in the past can make us rigid and pessimistic. Living in the past can cause us to despair about the future.

And so the prophet says something that must have been shocking to a people whose faith was largely based upon remembering the salvation of the past. God's message through the prophet is "forget about it."

Forget the past. Why? God is going to do something new, and in order to see that new thing you will have to let go of your old expectations. (Isaiah 43:19) God told his people, "I am going to make a way for you in the wilderness. I am going to make streams of living water flow in the desert. I am going to make a way where there seems to be no way."

HE LIVES

This is the last Sunday of Lent. Next week is Palm Sunday, and the week after that is Easter Sunday. Plans are already being made for the special worship services in which we remember the passion, crucifixion and the resurrection of our Lord.

But, the point that I think we often miss in our celebration is this: it's not just about remembering what happened long ago, there and then; it's also about what is still happening today, here and now. We used to sing a song in the Baptist church entitled, "He Lives." (Yes, you heard right. Your pastor grew up in the Baptist church!)

Anyway, the first line of that song, "He Lives" went, "I serve a risen Savior he's in the world today." The refrain drove home the point. "He lives. He lives. Christ Jesus lives today."

That's a good song. That's a song and a message that we need to hear.

To put it another way the old, old story has also become our story, and that changes everything. It overshadows our past and guides our future. The Spirit of the risen Lord is doing a new thing in our world and in our lives today.

A RULE CHANGE

Sometimes the new wind of the Spirit blows away our unhealthy dependence on the past. That's what Paul was talking about in his letter to the Philippians.

Apparently some were suggesting that in order to become a Christian you had to become a Jew first. (Remember in the early church many Christians thought of themselves as a sect of Judaism.) And so this group suggested that new converts needed to pay homage

to their faith history. The men needed to be circumcised as a sign that they were joining God's family.

Paul, a very orthodox Jew said that this was very misguided. In Jesus God had done something that changed all the rules. In Jesus God had done a new thing. In Jesus God had done something so powerful that everything else paled by comparison.

Paul said, "I have more reason to be proud of my spiritual heritage than anyone else. I was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. I was a spiritual leader.

But compared to the change that the risen Christ has made in my life those other accomplishments mean nothing. I want to forget the past and press on toward the future, God's future. Nothing is as important as knowing the risen Christ."

A LIVING FAITH

I want you to be honest. Do you relegate the story of God to the past? Do you think that faith is simply a matter of reciting the creeds and giving the "right answers" to catechism?

The old hymn puts well. God is an "ever-present" help. (Psalm 46:1) God has been our help in ages past, but God continues to be our hope for years to come. God's story is not trapped in the annals of the past. God's story continues, and we need to hear that story afresh every day.

Every day we need to hear the life-giving word of forgiveness. Every day we need to hear the astounding word of grace as if for the very first time. Paul does not claim to be a perfect Christian who knows everything. He wrote,

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." (Philippians 3:11-14)

Do you hear the striving in Paul's voice? Paul "wants" to know Christ. Paul "wants" to know the power of his resurrection. Paul "wants" to find the courage to suffer for the faith. But, he's not there yet.

More than most Paul knew the power of Christ. I mean how many of us have received a heavenly vision of Christ that blinds us and knocks us flat on our backs? Not many. And yet Paul did not live his life just thinking about that powerful vision from the past. Paul was always straining to catch a glimpse of God's future. Paul was always pressing on to reach God's goal for him.

Paul was never satisfied. Paul had a holy longing that gave his life a sense of purpose and direction.

I fear that too many of us are just the opposite. We have become so comfortable with pat answers and the stories of the past that we have become stagnant. We have forgotten that we do indeed serve a risen Savior who is in the world, in our world today.

Like Israel we need to be shaken out of our complacency. We need to abandon a faith that has no room to learn something new about God's activity in the world. The greatest threat to our faith is the belief that we know it all and that we no longer need to expect anything new from God.

FAITH AND IMAGINATION

The story of the Bible is just the opposite. God was and is always doing a new thing. And that requires the faithful person to use not only their memory but also their imagination.

When officers are ordained in the Presbyterian Church they are asked, "Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?"

The part of that vow that has always intrigued me was the promise to serve the people with imagination. What does it mean to serve the people with imagination? What role does imagination play in our faith?

Quite frankly often imagination doesn't play much of role at all. The battle cry in the church is often: "We've always done it that way." And the implied threat in that statement is: And don't you dare change a thing. Use anything except your imagination when it comes to church work.

This has always been a problem in the community of faith. When God's people were slaves in Egypt they couldn't imagine being free. They scoffed at the idea that God had appointed Moses to lead them out of the land of Egypt.

Indeed, at various points during the Exodus, God's people even longed to be back in Egypt. They were slaves in Egypt, but at least they could be assured of having something to eat each day.

In their minds, the freedom of the wilderness provided no such assurance. No amount of miracles could convince them to go where God would lead. Their fears were stronger than the hope that was right in front of them.

Perhaps this story provides a clue as to why we are so unimaginative in the church. We are really seeking comfort in that which is familiar and safe. Never mind that such thinking is condemning us to a kind of captivity.

Like the exiles in Babylon we have forgotten that sometimes God leads us through the wilderness in order to reach the Promised Land. Only those who can imagine something

new and greater will have the courage to make the dangerous trip to the land of promise. And only those with imagination will be able to hear the call of God in the events of their life.

Serving God with imagination is not just about being creative in how we do things. Serving God with imagination is learning to see our own little lives as part of the big picture, the continuing story of faith.

I like the way the author of the book of Hebrews talks about faith. He wrote that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Do you see the element of imagination in that definition of faith? It is not a definition for people who like straightforward cut and dried answers. Believe these three things and you’ll be saved.

No, in this passage the essence of faith is described as a willingness to leave the past behind and embrace the vision of the future that God gives us. And that vision is always unfolding. It is a vision that we cannot see in its entirety.

That’s why we call it faith and not certainty!

FAITH IS AN UPWARD JOURNEY

We too must strike out in faith. We too must go to that land to which God leads us. We too must be trust in the goodness of God even though the way is not clear.

I’m not a big fan of bumper sticker theology, but there is one that I do like. It says, “Be patient with me. God’s not finished with me yet.”

God isn’t finished with us yet. We may wonder sometimes if we’re finished. But, God has a plan and a purpose for our lives. God will make a way when there seems to be no way.

Toward the end of Paul’s life, things got to be very discouraging. Almost everyone abandoned him. The churches that he helped found were terribly divided from within and persecuted from without.

But, Paul from his prison cell where he was being persecuted for his faith remembered that success did not depend upon his efforts or the efforts of those who followed him. Success was dependent upon the power and plan of God. And it was that hope which enabled Paul to go on.

That’s why he could say from his prison cell, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 3:14

The word translated “heavenly” means literally “upward.” “Lord, lift me up where I belong.” Those words from a popular song describe the Apostle’s sense of call. There is an upward pull, a goal in life that gives life meaning and purpose.

Faith is not about staying the same. Faith is having the courage to believe that something new is always possible. When it comes to faith, “new and improved” is not a hollow slogan. New and improved is a way of life ... God’s way of life.

True faith is a blend of the old and the new. The timeless decrees of God call us to be open to change. The mighty acts of God in the past call us to hope for something new and better in the future.

ALWAYS REFORMING

One of the slogans of the Reformation and a guiding principle of the Presbyterian Church today is “the church reformed, always reforming.” That is, in response to God’s Word, we strive to find ways that God is leading us (and more often dragging us kicking and screaming) in a new direction.

So we believe that the steadfast God whose love never changes is also the God of the new heaven and new earth. (Revelation 21:1-5) We believe that if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. (1 Corinthians 5:17)

We believe that death and resurrection describe not only what happened to Christ but also what happens to us as we follow Christ. We die to the old life and are raised to live in a new way. (Galatians 2:19-20)

God’s Spirit is constantly bringing change and renewal to the world in which we live.

I like the way this renewing function of God’s Spirit is described in the Presbyterian Book of Order in our chapter on The Church and Its Mission,

“God’s redeeming and reconciling activity in the world continues through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, who confronts individuals and societies with Christ’s Lordship of life and calls them to repentance and to obedience to the will of God.”

In other words God is not just the God of history. God is also the God of the present. God is the God who calls for change here and now. God is the God who calls for something new in a world that wants to do it the same old way. God is the God who gives us hope in a world filled with despair.

THE GREAT DAY

Langdon Gilkey wrote about prison life under the Japanese during World War II. He wrote,

“Most internees found no particular significance in what they did there. They did their work because it had to be done ... But, there was one vivid meaning that kept every person spiritually alive, the hope for the end of the war. However distant the Great Day seemed to become as the years wore on its luster never dimmed. We literally lived by faith in it.

We believed that when that Great Day arrived everything that made our present life grim would be removed, and every good that we so sorely missed would be returned. Above all we would be free to do what we wanted, to go where we wished.

No biblical prophets strained toward the day of salvation more eagerly than we did, waiting for the end of the war when all joys would begin anew and all tears would be dried. We did not know the time or the hour, but inwardly we were more than ready.”

I think this straining for the Great Day of salvation is a good example of what Paul and Isaiah are talking about in our lessons for today. Though most of us have never known what it means to be a prisoner of war, many of us do know what it means to be so discouraged that we are just “going through the motions.”

The tendency in those down times is to dwell upon the past, either the mistakes that we made to get ourselves into this awful shape or how things used to be so much better.

But, I believe God would have us forget the past, both our successes and our failures and be guided instead by the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. The Great Day of salvation is coming. God will continue to do new things.

Let’s press on toward that Great Day. Let’s live by this hope, “the best is yet to come.”

Amen.