

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 43:14-21

Pew Bible O.T. pg. 632

¹⁴Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation. ¹⁵I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. ¹⁶Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down; they cannot rise; they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. ¹⁹I 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. ²⁰The 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, ²¹the people who I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Isaiah 43:14-21

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“A New Thing”

Rev. Amy Terhune

The Rev. Lori Wagner writes, “...on June 22nd of 1972, Hurricane Agnes hit the East Coast of Pennsylvania with a vengeance. The severe storm with its heavy rainfall caused the Schuylkill (*pronounced Skookle*) River in the areas surrounding Reading, Pennsylvania to rise suddenly by 18 feet above flood level. A middle school student at the time, I had been dropped off at summer band rehearsal earlier that morning. By the time practice was over and we stepped outside, the water was rising fast. The band director volunteered to deliver three of us home, so that our mothers did not have to go out in the storm. As it turned out, we wouldn’t arrive home until the next morning.

As the band director tried maneuver his 1970 VW Beetle through a street not far from the school, the rain pounded the car, and the water rose suddenly and exponentially. Soon, the water was rising inside of the car. We looked outside and saw the other cars around us floating in the road like boats on a lake. The sky by then was dark grey and the torrents made it hard to see. Then murky lights began shining through. Firemen were rescuing people from cars and loading them into their heavy trucks. As the water reached out chests and the steering wheel began to disappear, we too were brought to safety. We spent the night in the firehouse as the storm raged on. All I remember from that ordeal are the words of the fireman as he pulled me from the waters, “It’s okay, I’ve got you.” [adapted from “Don’t Worry, I Have You” by Lori Wagner, www.Sermons.com.]

In our lesson today from Isaiah 43, God essentially tells the Jewish people much the same thing: it’s going to be okay. I’ve got you.” I didn’t read the very beginning of chapter 43 this morning, but it reads, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and mighty rivers shall not overwhelm you...” And our lesson ends with the promise that God will give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people...”. But before we explore that further, let’s review Israel’s history. Approximately 600 years before Christ is a babe in a Bethlehem, the Babylonians ransack Jerusalem. They raze the city to the ground, including their gorgeous temple built by King Solomon several centuries earlier. Then they pack up all the leaders, the scholars, the artisans, anybody with any talent and they march them hundreds of miles across the desert to what is now modern-day Iraq, where they are pressed into servitude for the oppressing regime that destroyed their homeland. Families are separated, broken up, destroyed. Lives are lost. History, culture and tradition are obliterated in the rubble. I’m not sure we can really imagine what this does to the faith and mindset of a people. And this didn’t just happen once – it happened in successive waves over about a decade and

a half from 600 to about 585 BCE. In this far off place where the Jews live in exile, some gave up. They left their religion and assimilated into the new culture around them. But others seek out other Jews, try to maintain their heritage, tell their stories, remember their faith, hold on to their identity.

And during this time, prophets arise. Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah – they explain this crisis by calling out sin and corruption. This is divine punishment – that is the prominent theology in the immediate wake of the exile. The first 39 chapters of the book of the prophet Isaiah are filled with doom, gloom, punishment, and lamentation. But after they have been in captivity a while, a new generation is born, and new prophets find their voice. Chapters 40-55 in the Book of Isaiah are thought to be the teachings of someone scholars call Second Isaiah – probably a disciple or student of the original prophet. But his words are different. They're more hopeful. Return to your faith, to your roots, to your calling. Find your trust in God, for God is mighty. God is merciful. God is still creating. And these days in exile are numbered. Something more awaits us. Something better is coming. It's going to be okay. God has got you. That's the overall message of Isaiah chapters 40-55.

But let's focus in on the words in today's lesson, and if you'll cut me a little slack, I'm going to loosely paraphrase what Isaiah says to us in the middle of the 43rd chapter: "This is what God says – the same God who led us out of Egypt, who parted the waters of the Red Sea so that we could escape slavery in Egypt, the same God who then caused the waters to fall back in on themselves, and all those Egyptian chariots and horses and armies of warriors all got stuck in the mud and drowned as the waters returned to their normal levels. I wiped them all out in one blow to save you and then I established an annual holiday called Passover so that you'd remember your deliverance, says the Lord, but I don't want you to remember that now."

Wait. Back up. What? He purposefully invokes the past, paints a vivid picture of a grand and glorious history, and then says to forget about it and not dwell on what was because God is about to do something new and different.

Biblical Scholar Scott Hoezee explains, "Instead we are told to focus on things yet unseen, on the future, on new things God was going to do. The imagery shifts from a place that had too much water to a wilderness setting that does not have enough. It shifts from a scene where the Egyptians died to one where the people of God *could* die but will not die on account of God's making streams to flow in the desert. God is saying that despite all the reasons the people could find to praise God for his past faithfulness, the future would provide even more reasons. In short, "You ain't seen nothin' yet!" [adapted from Scott Hoezee, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2022-03-28/isaiah-4316-21-3/>].

We are entering a time of year when our scriptures begin to direct us to look ahead rather than backwards – to look for the coming of the Kingdom of God and the Advent of Christ the King. Scriptures at this time of year seem to ring a refrain that says: keep awake, pay attention, be ready, stay alert. That's what Isaiah is doing here as well. I know things are hard. I know things are wrong. I know you're disillusioned and losing hope. But God has got you.

After the Exodus, the people wandered in the wilderness for forty years. They ate the same old thing, manna every day. They drank water from a rock, rationed to each family. They dealt with poisonous snakes and vicious animals; with crushing heat and conniving enemies; with constant doubts and fears and questions and insecurities. Having been slaves for centuries, they hoarded resources and lived in suspicion of Moses and their neighbors and even time itself.

But this time around, there will be water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. Even wild animals will praise God and all creation from the sand to the animals to the weather and the geography will be part of the new thing God is about to do. Isaiah warns his people not to get so stuck in the past that they miss what God is doing now! Keep awake, pay attention, be ready, stay alert. God is about to do a new thing!

The relevance of that for us lies in a simple question: Knowing and assured that God is still moving, still working, still doing new things, and still directing us towards the Advent of the Kingdom of God, how should we live?

"According to preacher Larry Kalajainen, the answer to that question is to live in faithfulness to God... But that's just the rub, isn't it? It's not that we dispute the answer. We all know the answer... We don't doubt it. We know that we're to be faithful and serve...

"But the problem for many of us is that we get tired. It's hard to be faithful all the time. It's taxing to always pay attention to the needs of others more than we pay attention to our own needs and wants. It's tough to volunteer to help a neighbor or to serve faithfully on the trustees or cook meals month after month, year after year after year. It's tough, not only to give our time and energy to do these things that we know are right, but to be expected to pay for the privilege of doing them as well. It's tough to see those pledge cards come every October just as we're starting to think about the holidays and rising insurance premiums, and to somehow make our budget do amazing contortions to accomplish everything we want it to... It's really hard to be honorable all the time when it seems like we'd get ahead faster if we cut some corners. It's tough to be charitable to colleagues who'd just as soon stick a knife in our backs as not. It's hard to be committed to the causes and practices that we know are right, when it seems like we're fighting an uphill battle. We get tired and burnt out... Maybe if we always get stroked and rewarded for doing what is right, it wouldn't be so bad, but it doesn't always work that way... [2 ¶s adapted from "Not Yet Quitting Time" by Larry R. Kalajainen, www.Sermons.com.]

And that's when it gets easy to lose hope. William Carter tells about an exchange between a father and a daughter one afternoon when the little girl came home from fifth grade in tears. It had been one of those awful days when nothing went right—homework was left at home by accident, kids were mean on the bus, a test didn't go well, her friends failed to include her on the playground. Dad calms her down, gets her a snack, they talk, she heads up to her room to get ready for soccer practice or whatever. It's unusually quiet up there, so dad goes to check on her, and there she is, kneeling beside the bed, hands clasped, eyes closed, praying hard. "What were you praying for?" Dad wants to know when she finishes. "Dad, I've decided I don't like this world," she says, "so I'm praying for a new one." Of course, that little girl doesn't know it, but she has just placed herself squarely and solidly in two thousand years of Christian tradition. We're all praying for a whole new world, aren't we? [from "Praying for a Whole New World" by William G. Carter, www.Sermons.com.] But even more than that, we're working for it, watching for it, on the alert for it – or we're supposed to be. And that's Isaiah's promise. It's in the works.

Kalajainen goes on to say, "Now I don't know how it is for you, but it's just at the point of my weariness, just at the point where I'm ready to quit, where my energy is all used up and burned out, that the vision of God's new world sustains me... No, I don't know when, or what it will look like, or how it will be. But I don't need to know all of that, because I know the one who is organizing it... We may not be able to see the future in detail, but we can see the large outlines. That future means life from the dead, for us and for the whole creation. That future means that ultimately human greed and human evil and human selfishness will not have the last word... [adapted from "Not Yet Quitting Time" by Larry R. Kalajainen, www.Sermons.com.] If the wilderness is that place where things are confusing, and dangerous, and hard, and scary; where we feel cut off from God, from one another, from life, from hope; where Adam and Eve were sent to toil and suffer and work; then the future means the redemption of that wilderness into a life-giving oasis in God's presence. The thing that makes this so hard is that the future we dream of isn't so much a theory or academic premise as it is a way of living today...looking for God moving now with faith, with courage, with trust, with hope. A whole new world...right now. Amen.