

## Sermon- Behold the New

Scripture: Is 43:15-44:5

Sunday, January 12, 2020

Life is a balancing act. We have to constantly balance between our work and home lives, balance between attending to things that are important versus things that are urgent, between spending and saving. But have you every wondered about balancing the old and the new? Dwelling on the past versus looking to the future? Well, focusing on the old helps us learn from past mistakes and build old skills, deepen old friendships. It is a reminder of where we came from. Focusing on the new helps keep life fresh and exiting as well as helping expand our horizons and grow in new ways. In the Bible we have verses that ask us both to remember what God has done in the past but also to journey with God into the new. God wants us to cherish the lessons from the past but also be sensitive to the new things that God is doing in our midst. Today we stand at the beginning of not just a new Year but a new decade as well. So I think this is a good time to think about the new. Entering the New Year is like reached the shore of a new land waiting to be explored. To help deal with this moment I have chosen a passage from Isaiah 43 that was a prophecy that God was about to do a new thing for His people. In many ways Is 43 and 44 are as true for us today as it was when this prophecy was first fulfilled. So let's get exploring.

Our passage opens with Isaiah speaking God's words and I am going to heavily paraphrase it. God says, I am the God who rescued you from Egypt by opening up a way through the water and making a dry path through the sea. I drowned the whole mighty army of Egypt so that your enemies could be destroyed and you all would be safe. And through that process I formed you as a brand new nation that is one day going to be the envy of the world. But if you think that that was a great act, you have not seen anything yet. Let me quote this next part exactly from verse 18 to verse 21, from the NLT.

***But forget all that—***

***it is nothing compared to what I am going to do.***

***<sup>19</sup> For I am about to do something new.***

***See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?***

***I will make a pathway through the wilderness.***

***I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.***

***<sup>20</sup> The wild animals in the fields will thank me,***

***the jackals and owls, too,***

***for giving them water in the desert.***

***Yes, I will make rivers in the dry wasteland***

***so my chosen people can be refreshed.***

***<sup>21</sup> I have made Israel for myself,***

***and they will someday honor me before the whole world***

What is God saying here? God is saying to his people the new thing he is about to do is much greater than what he has done before. And what is that new thing? It is a pathway in the wilderness. It is water in the desert. The result of this will be that my chosen people will be refreshed and the whole nation of my chosen people will someday honor Him before the whole world.

So let me break this down for you. God is saying, he has already started doing a new thing for his people that will make all the things that God has done for them in the past look small in comparison. And what is this new thing that God is about to do? Three things. A pathway in the wilderness and a river where there was a wasteland, both of which will have the effect of transforming God's people from a bunch of rebellious hard hearted, stiff necked creatures into people who will actually bring honor to God in the whole wide world.

You know how hard it is for people to change, right? So saying that people are going to be transformed in really a big deal. But the first two things mentioned- the highway through the wilderness and river through the wasteland are metaphors so let me translate them for you.

The first metaphor is a highway in the wilderness. Having just driven a thousand miles from Alabama to Kansas City through Memphis, Nashville and Branson I can tell you that there were many times I was contemplating all the engineering and finances that must have been employed to build a highway through forests and rivers and all kinds of terrain so that I could fly through the landscape at 60, 70mph and even higher to get to our destination. I am not going to reveal all the speeds I was clocking along the way in case I am given a retrospective ticket 😊. But the point is that a highway through the wilderness means that you can race to your destination which, if this was the US wilderness before we put all the roads in, then I can assure you that the 17<sup>th</sup> century version of me would not be reaching this point on the map in 3 days or even 3 months. 😊. But no worries because we are promised that God is about to do a new thing and one of the new things is that his people will be able to reach destinations that would be otherwise humanly impossible to do so.

The second new thing that God says he is going to do here is to transform wasteland into a refreshing river. The river will “quench your thirst and irrigate your parched fields” This river is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. This is spelt out when he says, “And I will pour out my Spirit on your descendants, and my blessing on your children”.

So the effect of His spirit flowing through the landscape will be that his people will be able to be refreshed on this journey to this otherwise impossible destination. Afterall even highway speedsters need rest stops and a sustenance along the way 😊

So what is the new thing God is doing? He is giving His people two things, a highway and a river. A highway to enable his people to get to a new destination and a river to refresh and sustain his people along the way.

But to understand fully this new thing that God is doing, you will have to understand the old situation. That is what verse 22 to 28 is talking about. You see in verse 21 God is saying, "I created Israel for myself". A nation that would worship Yahweh and be used by God to fulfill his plan for the whole world. But Israel did not really function in that way. Verses 22 to 28 is a list of complains about his people from God Himself.

- "You refuse to ask for my help". That means God's chosen people don't depend on God.
- "You have grown tired of me". God's chosen people have grown weary of their own God.
- "you have not brought me sheep or goats for burnt offerings" God's people have not honored their God with the honor due to Him
- "instead you have burdened me with your sins". God's chosen people have fallen for every temptation and followed the desires of their own will.
- Vs 28, that is why I have disgraced your priests and decreed the complete destruction for Jacob and shame for Israel.

In other words God's only possible just response to the way all people in general and his own chosen people have responded to Him would be to bring destruction on everyone and shame on his chosen people.

This "destruction and shame covered people" is the wilderness that God is describing in is 43.

It is this desolate landscape that God sees when he looks at the world he created. But it is in this landscape that God says he is about to do a new thing. It is in this landscape that God says he is going to put in a highway and a river.

And the effect of this highway and river will be that God's chosen people will start acting as his people. Verse 5 puts it this way. " They will thrive like watered grass, like willows on a riverbank.

<sup>5</sup>Some will proudly claim, 'I belong to the Lord.'

Others will say, 'I am a descendant of Jacob.'

Some will write the Lord's name on their hands

and will take the name of Israel as their own."

So the new thing that God is doing, is sending his Holy Spirit on his chosen people and where previously there was only dishonor and spiritual lifelessness, now there is new spiritual life. People will have their very identity transformed so that they will speak and act on this new identity in the Lord. And when people do that, they are taken to the new promised land, which is the kingdom of God. God promised from the time of Isaiah, a highway into the kingdom of God.

Now at the time of Isaiah this was a very future event. It was a prophecy. But post the coming of Jesus, this prophesy is present reality. When he says, "For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?" That is God speaking to you and me. Those who live in the time of the fulfillment of Is 43. So we need to be watching out for this new thing that he is doing around us.

This is where we come in now. If we are God's people who have spiritual life in us then we should be able to see where God is busy planting new spiritual life all around us.

So the task for us as a church in this new year is to be new life detectors. Why? Because where there is new life, there God is working. And where God is working we should be

partnering with God because that's where he calls us to work. This is how God operates. Never just by himself. First he starts something and then he recruits his people to be part of that work.

So if God is creating new life, how can we detect it so that we can partner with God in this work in the new year?

Well, to recognize something in others, we have to first experience it in ourselves, right? So step 1 could be to look for new life in ourselves. In other words ask yourself what new thing has God done in you recently, maybe even in the past week, or maybe in the past 24 hours. This could be a big coming to Christ moment but it would be something smaller like something you read in your morning devotion that jumped at you. You see if you read a passage and see something in it that you never saw before, it is not because suddenly something got added to your Bible that morning 😊 No nothing gets added to the Bible ever once the "canon was closed". And that happened in the year 367! 😊 So if you are seeing something new in scripture it is because you have been given new eyes to see something that was always there but you just did not see it earlier. That also shows you the living Holy Spirit's work in your life. When you see God work in your own life it kind of wakes you up, isn't it? And it makes you fill up with wonder anew at our God and who He is and what he is doing in the world. Now if you do not detect anything new that God has done in your life in the recent past then you need to speak to God about it and plead with Him to come and revive you and do a new thing in you. God will.

When you know what it feels like for God to do a new thing in you, then you know what to look for in other people. After yourself the next place to look for new life is our own church community. This community that we have is not just a social group. When we share and ask God activity questions of each other we will have that "iron sharpening iron" effect that the book of Proverbs talks about.

When we become good at these spiritual conversations within the safety of our church we will be able to have those conversations outside as well. I don't mean going up to strangers or acquaintances and asking them if they believe in Jesus. That would be too much, too soon. But you can ask God to take you deeper with people God has put in your path. And you will be surprised what opportunities open up. After our ISI Christmas party I was taking some Chinese visiting scholars home to KUMC. It is a half hour drive and I prayed and asked God to help me see what he was doing with these individuals. At that time the conversation turned to what they thought about the presentations at the Bible party. One person said they got a lot about the meaning of Christmas because guess what? Christmas is celebrated in China and is very big in Japan. But for them it is about decorations and gift giving without any spiritual context. Another talked about how amazing the meaning of the Christmas carols were. God had opened their mind to the message of Christmas in so many ways and I hardly had time to deal with all of it. Now if you are thinking it is different because these were people who came to our ISI event, well on Christmas morning Sonia and I were taking an Uber to the airport. The driver happened to be a Muslim from Ethiopia. We got talking right away. He asked what I did and where I came from. I told him that I came from India and was a pastor here and he was really surprised that I was not in computers 😊 We talked quite a bit. I shared the gospel and my testimony. And I don't know what the effect of that was but that is God's problem. What is important is that God opened a door and I had the opportunity to share all kinds of things. Once you are spiritually prepared for a conversation, all kinds of spiritual discoveries can be made. You have to catch people when they are open to talking and then pray for God to lead you in the right way in the conversation and see what God will do. He will open the conversation up. Of course everyone is not going to be open to spiritual things and talking with you. If they are not open, don't worry about it but move on. The trick is finding where God is working and you have to give yourself the opportunity to be with people to find those opportunities.

When you do find a person who is willing to have a productive spiritual conversation, seize the opportunity and partner with God to have a spiritual conversation that will enable this person to draw one step forward in their spiritual journey. Just one step. That is how it works. That new thing that God is doing in someone God is enabling you to cross paths with whom you will be able to take one step forward on their spiritual journey.

Now if you are thinking, I have not seen opportunities like that in my life, well, this is what I want to tell you. You will only see what you are looking for. If you are trying to buy a new car and decided on a Toyota, now suddenly every second car you will see on the road will be a Toyota. Have you ever noticed this? The proportion of Toyotas on the road never changed overnight. It is just your perception. Well, what if you were looking for new opportunities for spiritual conversations? If you look for it, you will start noticing it all over the place. Imagine if all of us became new life detectors? We would collectively bump up our spiritual awareness of what God is doing all around us.

Think about this on three levels. Look for what God is doing in our lives first. Then in our church community. Then in the community around us. And when you spot what all God is doing around us, imagine how exciting that would be? And imagine what our church community look like at the end of 2020? Let us pray.