

## **A New Thing**

Isaiah 43:15-21

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### The Second Last Sermon

Last week I preached my first last sermon, a final liberty I afforded myself since I could find no rule allowing me only one last sermon. Today I am preaching my second last sermon as your pastor. That officially makes this the longest preaching series I've ever attempted during my years in ministry. Extended preaching series were never my thing. Perhaps I was never creative or focused enough to pull that off. In a world where things change fast, however, I was never comfortable presuming I'd know what the Spirit might wish the church to hear six weeks from now.

Over the years I've seen the church change in ways in ways both exciting and discouraging. Mainline denominations have struggled demographically. Declines in attendance and membership; the dying off of a generation of the church's largest givers; buildings that were once full are now empty and crumbling—the old mainline church today faces some pretty stiff headwinds.

And yet those struggling churches are full of folks who remember the way it all used to be. They remember, like it was yesterday, The Good Old Days. They speak longingly and reverently about the “good old days.”

In a way, the prophet Isaiah was speaking to folks just like that. Israelites—Babylonian exiles who remembered their past with Yahweh. They remembered how Yahweh's presence had sustained them from generation to generation. Through the waters of the Red Sea, when they had crossed over the river Jordan, when fire and flame had threatened them in the desert of Sinai, and when out of a burning bush had come the word that Yahweh was with them.

But all of those wonderful memories that had sustained them for generations, seemed to lay buried in rubble, just like the city of Jerusalem itself, which had been conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians. And it shook them to the core. Had all of their hope been in vain? Were the promises of God no longer trustworthy or reliable?

With the land stolen from us, and the temple, king and priests gone, maybe Yahweh was not the God we thought—the one we had been told Yahweh was supposed to be?

And so the people of God found themselves standing on the threshold of all that had been, and a future that now seemed less than certain. And as dramatic and sweeping as that may sound, might I suggest that it is always where we stand. We live our lives, both as individuals and as faith communities, standing on the threshold of the past we know and a future we don't.

I have a heightened awareness of that myself these days, as I make this transition to a new, and as-of-yet unknown thing. And I know that as a church, you share that in common with me as you too face a new and unknown future.

And that was the context in which the prophet Isaiah told them to stop looking to the past, which might initially seem strange. Much of religion, after all, is based on the premise of memory. *Do this in remembrance of me...*we Christians remind ourselves every time we break the bread and pass the cup. A healthy knowledge of and appreciation for what went before, is important. As God's people, we are called to live between memory and promise—the future.

But as parts of the church struggle today, and the temptation to look backwards is so great, so inviting, something we also do in our cultural and national life, by the way, perhaps these ancient words of the prophet are to be heeded once again?

Focus not on the former things.

Because you know how that goes. As the past gets remembered, it also gets romanticized—it gets rewritten a bit. In our nostalgic longing, we let our memories slip into becoming selective—choosing to remember and embellish only the parts we want highlighted.

Remember the good old days when...before all these changes came along? Oh how good it was in the church back then. Men's groups were flourishing and so were women's groups, before they all got careers.

Remember the days when there were 500 children in the Christmas Pageant?

Remember how beautiful the front yard of the church used to be before we planted a garden, with a fence around it, to grow fresh produce for hungry people?

Remember how great it was when we had that old order of worship and the sermon was at the end? So that after the choir had sung and the preacher was climbing up into the pulpit to preach, the choir, having already heard the sermon once, would get up walk out like, "We can't bear to listen to it again!"

Can't we go back to the good old days, when things were good and right and great?

Oh, don't you remember how great it all was and how good we had it when we were slaves in Egypt?

Speaking on the Lord's behalf, the prophet Isaiah says to the people of God, stop that. *Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.* Stop looking back longingly to a past to which you can never return, because it is preventing you from imagining a future you have yet to inhabit. And that is where you need to go. That is where your energies should be spent. Besides, *I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

Change simply for the sake of change is foolish. Change without understanding the reasons necessary for change is shortsighted. But change that comes as a result of desiring to do the will of God and maintaining an openness to the Spirit's leading, will often produce surprising, life-giving results and consequences you never anticipated.

Churches like this one must always remember their Reformed heritage—that we are Reformed and always being reformed, according to the word of God. Change is not only in our DNA, it means we, of all people, should know how to navigate it. Throughout our history, we have been living into the promise that God is always capable of speaking a new word in and for a new day, and of catching us off guard by doing a new thing.

I mention earlier that I have seen the church change in ways both discouraging but also exciting. And where I find it exciting and life-giving, is in all the new things that are springing forth all the time! Springing forth like paths in the wilderness and rivers in the desert—in ways so startling and surprising you can only understand how much through the perspective of time.

Consider this: a \$7 million renovation of this historic church took place because someone said, a couple of years before I arrived, "You know this beautiful church building needs a lot of work and we've got the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary coming up in 2014, we should start planning for that now."

An idea, a vision that took shape and then took root, like a pathway in the wilderness.

I think of how one introduction and one meeting, led to an invitation which led to many, many meetings over the course of four years, resulting in Prior Crossing, a 44 unit housing development for homeless youth who no longer have to couch hop, live in danger or ride a city bus all night to stay warm.

Ujamaa Place, an idea, a concept eight years ago that grew and took shape over individual breakfast conversations that turned into formal meetings that turned into raising money

and eventually, the doors being opened and through which have come over 1000 young African American men who have had their lives transformed, as have the staff and members of the board. Little did I know that accepting an invitation to breakfast one morning would transform my life the way it has.

It's kind of like the time in high school when my minister invited me to have lunch with him. Sitting with him at the Red Lobster I was a nervous wreck because I didn't know why he'd extended this invitation. My first thought was, "I wonder what he knows?" And my second, "I wonder who told him?" And then he popped the question, "David, have you ever considered going into the ministry?" I lied and said no, but then spent the next hour asking him about ministry. Questions like, "What do you do all week?"

Most of the really significant things that happen to us in life, or that take place in this world begin small. I mean, really small and are often unrecognizable. An idea. An introduction. A conversation. An invitation. A question. And yet out of those seemingly random, insignificant gestures and exchanges, can spring forth the things we simply could never have imagined let alone considered.

That's why the future of this church is so bright. You are idea people. You are kind and thoughtful and engaged in the world around you. And you know that your faith requires you to act—to do something with what you have to offer, and to make the love of Christ known for those in need and on behalf of this world God so loves.

People of God, House of Hope Presbyterian Church, hear the word of the Lord as it comes to you this day, and every day, "Behold, I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?"

Amen.