

Eyes Forward Daring to Hope

Isaiah 43:14-21 Lent 5, 2019 year C
(Ps 126; John 12:1-8; Phil. 3:4b-14)

One day an older church member came into my office all excited. A former pastor was coming to visit the guys his age in the church. I knew this pastor because my dad had dated his wife in university, he had been a staff person at seminary who I got to know, I knew his son from university, & my brother had dated his daughter. So it was fun to hear another angle about him. The gentleman took a lot of time describing the time when this former pastor was at the church and all the ways how wonderful it had been – and wished it could be the same again. I enjoyed and affirmed his stories that those years were a great time for the congregation, their spiritual growth, and the relationships of guys his age had back then. But it's tough to recreate the past. It's like paddling a canoe up stream against a current that keeps pushing back.

And there is something else which should be much more significant than the past. For the scriptures around which our communities are built, and which form the foundation of our Christian living, again and again give us a message which is all about change and moving on to new things. Again and again we read warnings about the dangers of looking back, and encouragement to look forward to the fulfilment of wonderful visions and promises.

At the time Isaiah was written, the kingdom of Israel, the northern half of people, were conquered by the Assyrians. And the southern half of the kingdom, Judah, was overtaken by the Babylonian Empire. So Isaiah talks about the sins that led to their slavery. He talks of Israel's destruction as well as the fact the God would return them to the promised land.

Isaiah is a book that unveils the full dimensions of God's judgment and salvation. That is the background of our Isaiah text. This prophet was trying to give the people hope. He was trying to get the people to change their

thinking, to consider what new thing God would do - even though they longed for some thing they did not have – or would ever have - to be home again.

Many Israelites were in Babylon, far from home, far from free and far from hope. For more than 50 years they have been in exile – displaced, disheartened. By then, some had adapted to the culture of their oppressor. They were blocked from Judah by an impassable desert and the harsh empire of Babylon. It felt like God had abandoned and forgotten them. So their attitude was one of lament. (Is 40:27): “They complained and grumbled - My way is hid from the Lord.”

But Isaiah urged them and us, to “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, God is doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?”

The world became a difficult place for the Israelites and Isaiah confronted a discouraged people. He reminded them that God had pulled them through before. God parted waters and stopped chariots to free them from slavery. God provided bread from the sky and water from the rock to get them through the desert. He made a way where there was no way. He gave them laws to help them become a unified people. But now, God is about to do a new thing.

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, God is doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” This verse from Isaiah is not an isolated verse. The whole thrust of scripture is a message of God doing new things and inviting people to see it and to get on board and become part of it.

Jeremiah says: "The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant." (31:31) Ezekiel says: "I will... put a new spirit in them." (11:19) In 2 Corinthians 5:17 we read: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" 2 Peter 3:13: announces, "we are looking

forward to a new heaven and a new earth.” Revelation tells us, (21:5): "He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Plus, have you ever reflected that the Bible starts in a garden and ends up in a city? And God coming to earth in the form of Jesus, to identify with us and then the King of Kings being crucified? And brought from the dead? That's new. That's real hope!

The message of scripture is not about returning to some lost paradise. It is always about moving towards new promises. This divine intention to do new things leads people to do what was unfamiliar, or even unimaginable.

Had anyone ever thought of building a ship miles from water and large enough to contain the world's animals, before Noah did it?

Had any military strategist ever instructed his forces to march around a walled city blowing trumpets before Joshua did that at Jericho?

Had any medical expert considered curing leprosy by sending the patient to dip 7 times in the muddy River Jordan before Elijah commanded the Syrian General Naaman to give it a try? None of that was anywhere in their religious or medical traditions.

These are stories of people doing new things, because they perceived that God was doing new things and they were ready to get on board. So what does this have to do with us?

Well I think we are as prone to nostalgia as anyone else. We look back to days when we had more strength and energy, and in some cases – hair. We look back when our lives had more purpose and direction. We look back to days when the church was more vital and active.

We look back just as the people of Israel did when they had been set free from Egypt. But they found the security they had known as slaves more attractive than an uncertain future. We look back just as the people living in exile

in Babylon looked back to the great days they had known in Jerusalem. We look back just as the Sadducees and the Scribes of Jesus time did, longing to enforce religious practices on people in the way they thought was right.

But none of them were ever commended for that attitude. All of them were instead invited to look for what God may be planning for their future, and to get on board, and to become part of it. And so, of course, we are. For the heart of this, is not about lifestyle or the management of organisations. At heart, this is a spiritual matter.

Whenever we exhibit an excessive affection for the past, whenever we talk about it as if there will never be anything better, we demonstrate a lack of faith in the God who is always making all things new. We don't ever move forward by clinging to our past. The Apostle Paul expresses that when he said, "This one thing I do, forgetting the things that are behind, I press toward the mark of the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus." (Phil 3:13-14)

That's what Isaiah meant when he said "forget the former things; [and] do not dwell on the past" (43:18). Our faith is in a God who creates a better future than anything we have known in the past. Our calling is to forget the former things, to look forward, and to move forward.

Scripture always reminds us to look back, to recapture, remember, marvel at how God has sustained and led us. And we need to look back so that we learn, and take our wisdom with us into the future – to mature and not repeat past bad habits, and to not be stuck.

But this is to help us look to a new thing, change, and hope. They are tied together. Isaiah challenged discouraged people to hold on to the hope that in life, in death, in life beyond death, God lives, moves, intercedes, acts, and even intrudes among us. Our call is to continue to live life, as a sign of trust and faith in God. Trust that God is leading even

though we don't know how or when or even fully know what we are being lead toward.

All of us have had times in our lives that were difficult or we felt like we were spinning our wheels. But it's dangerous to grumble and point fingers. Isaiah reminds Israel that their past grumbling and rebellion was an offense to God. Ultimately the only four things we can do is manage ourselves well, build up the places we live in, trust in our Creator, and keep our eyes open to the new thing.

Isaiah 43 compels us to view our experience of God's grace in the past, as a springboard so that we view neither present nor future with fear, but with expectation. That was the challenge Isaiah was offering to the people of Israel.

That is our challenge today. The early Christians were known by how much they loved one another. But it may be that Christians today need to be known by how much we hope. Alban Boultwood says, "Our faith is the answer not so much to the question, 'What must I believe?' but rather, 'What dare I hope?'" Especially today.

How large is my hope? Can I hold on to it? How large is our hope as a congregation? Can we hold on to it? Dare we hope that God will do a new thing in us?

This attitude has little to do with religion. When change is introduced into any organisation, opposition will rise up. It is something deeply engrained in us all, and if you are still young enough to think you are immune to such negativity, just wait until the next generation starts to challenge your once revolutionary ideas – if your children haven't already!

Change is often frightening. It comes with no guarantees. There is the challenge to learn. But we also know that more of the same, brings no magical fix. And while change itself has little to do with religion, it is a fear which religious organisations do seem to be blessed

with in extra strong doses. That is understandable.

One of our key selling points is that we have a long history, that we have grappled with the big questions of life over many generations and have answers which have been tried and tested and have stood the test of time. We should rightly be cautious about giving any of that up. When ever we have experienced things in our past which have helped us and encouraged us and enabled us to more fully love God and love our neighbour, we should clearly value that.

And for us that may well include memories of days when churches were bigger and busier and more influential in all sorts of ways. So when we do hear a desire for change expressed, it is generally a desire to get back to what we had before. I think that is perfectly natural and understandable, and it seems more natural and understandable the older I get. It may not be a 'life rule', but I think its accurate to say that we tend to romanticize past positive experiences to a point that the memory of the event is much more positive than the initial experience.

But when we look around with expectancy that God will work in us and on us and for us, often, in God's timing, something happens. "What are we hoping for?" is a key question.

One of the most painful yet most joyful meetings I was in, was with the patriarch and matriarch of a small congregation. She was the spiritual head of the church & he was the richest guy in church. Three pastors had come and gone in a short time. And there we were, meeting with the fourth pastor. The two long term members shared how they resisted any new ideas from parishioners or their former pastors. They shared how they had focused on guarding the traditions and history of the congregation. It wasn't working. So they made plans to close. That was the painful part of our meeting.

But then, the joy filled part of their story telling started. Those two decided to get one more

pastor, and let him lead. Parishioners ideas would also be on the table. They decided to get out of the way and instead assist, encourage and provide what the pastor and parishioners thought they needed to try. They committed themselves to "forget the former things; [and] not dwell on the past."

After a few years, attendance started to increase – mostly with people with handicaps and their families. Members and the pastor noticed that these kinds of people had few services and little support. So they began offering some services. They could not get wheelchairs into the basement fellowship hall – so they changed the upstairs of the church to be handicap friendly. The congregation's reputation in the community became positive. But then after 4 years – there was a problem. Not enough parking. Behind the church there was land – but there was a good big drop off. What to do?

But then the town had a problem. They were replacing all the town water and sewer lines. To carry all the dirt out of town, was costly. So they asked the church if they could dump the dirt off the small cliff. This would save them thousands of dollars. Trucking the dirt to the edge of town where the church was instead of way out of town. The church said yes. It turned out to be a win – win.

The town saved a lot of money. The church improved its reputation even more by saving people a big increase in taxes. And the church ended up with more parking spaces. Coincidence? Or God's timing & God's idea, because a congregation acted and looked forward - expectantly. Had eyes to see – in anticipation – that God would provide concrete hope.

That church had the posture like ocean surfers – looking for the next wave to catch. Willingness to change. Expectant hope. Eyes forward. Looking for Jesus to show up – in some way. What do we dare to hope for? "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, God is doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" What dare we hope?

Psalm 126; Isaiah 43:18-19; Phil. 3:12b-14

Leader: When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, When the LORD restored to health those in Zion.

People: we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.

Leader: Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."

People: The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, LORD, Bring back our captives, like streams in the Negev.

Unison: Those who sow with tears - will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, - carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Leader: Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

People: But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.

Unison: But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.