

OSLC Sermon – Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 7, 2019

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

Grace to you and peace...

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.” That’s a pretty rough word to a congregation in the midst of celebrating a 150th anniversary of ministry!

On the other hand, perhaps it is exactly the appropriate reminder to us – remember, but do not cling. God is about to do a new thing – do you not perceive it?

Throughout scripture it seems that God is always up to something new...but I would argue the new thing is always in service to and in continuity with what God, the Eternal One, has intended from the first. I’ll call it God’s resilience. God makes a way. The people respond with good intentions to God’s commands, “oh, yes, great idea,” and then soon enough willfully and rebelliously go their own way. We mess up, individually and collectively, generation after generation. And God again does a new thing; makes a new way in the very places humans have botched and blocked the previous way of God.

An Anniversary history generally does little to lift up the errors, rebellion, or challenges of a congregation over the years. Most often we draw a through-line of God’s gracious blessing and the congregation’s flourishing, response, and longevity. It’s always tempting to remember and long for “the good old days.” Especially when things look bleak in the present moment.

Of course even the prophet Isaiah, who urges forgetfulness about the former things, grounds his proclamation in an account of the power of God on behalf of God's people in the past. Speaking to a people living in exile the prophet reminds them of their exodus history; specifically the moment when the newly liberated people were trapped by water on one side and Pharaoh's rapidly approaching chariots on the other. God makes a way when there is no way. We look back only in order to trust God's promised future.

We enter John's Gospel in the midst of a dinner party in the home of Jesus' dear friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The context is laden with significance. It is six days before the Passover – the last one Jesus will celebrate – and the friends live in Bethany, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. The party is in the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Clearly it is a celebration in Jesus' honor; an expression of gratitude, if you will, for the miraculous restoration of Lazarus from death to life. Talk about God doing a new thing! Who ever heard of a man being made alive after being dead for four days?

But not everyone was pleased. While the crowds who had witnessed Lazarus being called out from his tomb believed in Jesus, the religious leaders knew they were in trouble. People were deserting their authority to follow this new rabbi, and they were plotting to kill him. Though God was doing a new thing in Jesus, some were determined to resist it. With this scheming in the background, the festive dinner party was tinged with the smell of death.

True to character, the siblings were in their rightful places: Martha was serving; Lazarus was reclining at the table with Jesus; and

Mary once again was sitting at Jesus' feet. Only this time she was no passive listener. Mary, a faithful disciple, was extravagantly expressing her gratitude and devotion to Jesus with a radical act. Breaking open her costly treasure and anointing Jesus' feet, the fragrance of Mary's love and devotion filled the house. Caught in the tension between joy and fear, Mary clung to Jesus in silent acknowledgement of his impending death.

But resistance to the new thing God is doing doesn't only come from outside. Judas too was a guest at the party. He met Mary's lavish display of devotion with scorn and derision. Surely such extravagant love was wasteful. Artificial concern for the poor is always a useful critique of someone else's priorities. Never mind Judas' self-serving motives; doesn't common sense tell us to be practical?

In a life of faith...actually, no. With eyes of faith we are empowered to see differently. Paul's letter to the Philippians demonstrates that claim.

In practical terms, Paul had everything going for him...in his old life. He had all the credentials: the pedigree, the education, the accomplishments, the passion and drive to succeed. Everything was lined up according to the values and priorities of worldly success. His resume was impeccable. But with the eyes of faith, he counts it all as garbage. Rubbish. Trash. Manure.

Because, like Mary, Paul had been captivated by his devotion to Jesus. Like Martha, Paul was drawn into service to Christ. Like Lazarus, Paul had been dead in his self-righteous persecution of Jesus' followers, and was called out of his tomb of respectability

and success, unbound, and set free to live a life of extravagant faith in the One who makes all things new.

Paul, he tells us, regards “everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus” as his Lord – that is, as the one worthy of his love and devotion, his trust and his obedience. With the eyes of faith, Paul can see that in Christ God is doing a new thing; making a way where there was no way.

Isaiah; Paul; John; each of these writers urge us to look to the future God is creating, inspired by God’s promises and grounded in what God has done in the past. We are invited to extravagantly pour out on Jesus the treasure that we hold most dear; the convictions that we think define our value.

Our ancestors in the faith, the people who established this congregation 150 years ago, took risks and gave of their time and talent and treasure to be co-creators with God, to witness to God’s abundant love by perceiving and participating in the new thing God was doing. We are the beneficiaries of their faithful trust.

Now it is our turn. To dwell in the promises of God. To ground ourselves in what God has already done through those who have gone before us. And by our actions, to commit ourselves to witness to God’s presence to a world in desperate need of community, hope, and love. Following in the footsteps of our forbearers in the way of Christ, we are free to live out of our best, most loving motivation.

The stage is set, oh Church. The journey is before us. The next time we gather as a worshipping community is the beginning of Holy Week, where we enter again into the account of Jesus’ last

days. We look back toward the foundation of our faith...in order that we may perceive the new thing that is springing forth out of the abundance and resilience of God.

The soil of our souls is broken open, troweled, laid bare and ready. Ready to receive the promise of a way where there is no way; ready to be watered by streams yet to flow – streams in what may seem only like arid and threatening wilderness.

This way of troubling the soul, of excavating all that distracts and all that disconnects us, this way of waiting, empty and open, on the precipice of death...is the way new life springs forth. Do you not perceive it?

Amen.