

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, April 6, 2025**

**“Do You Not Perceive It?”
Isaiah 43:16-21**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

In the 6th c. BC, Babylonian invaders conquered Jerusalem: they burned the city, destroyed the temple, and forced Jews into captivity far away in exile. To the surviving exiles, this was catastrophic; as one theologian puts it: “They had lost everything: their land, their homes, their livelihood, their families; and, to some extent, they felt they had lost God as well. This crisis [...] raised [...] serious [...] theological questions: Where was God in [...] this great disaster? Why had God allowed this to happen? What kind of a future did [they] have now? (Largen)”? And how could anyone speak hope into that situation?

Yet in our Old Testament Lesson, the prophet Isaiah does just that. Isaiah was in captivity in Babylon, too—as he spoke these words to his fellow exiles. And Isaiah’s message begins by identifying the God who brings hope. Isaiah makes clear just what God he’s talking about: not the gods of the Babylonians, but the God of Israel. The God who brings hope, Isaiah declares, is the God of Moses and the Exodus, the God who redeemed God’s people from Egypt by opening a path through the sea:

“Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick” (vv. 16-17).

This is all about the story of Exodus: the escape through the sea, the destruction of Pharaoh’s army. In this way, Isaiah identifies God by pointing to the past—by pointing to God’s past actions, these ancient memories of God’s power to save. What God is Isaiah talking about? The God who—long ago, in the distant past—redeemed God’s people Israel from slavery.

Then Isaiah adds this:

“Do not remember the former things,

or consider the things of old” (v. 18).

Wait, what? Isaiah just identified God by pointing to God’s saving acts in the past...and then Isaiah says: ‘Stop thinking about the past!’ I mean, this is confusing, right? Isaiah brings up ancient history, and then says, ‘Forget about all that; stop dredging up the past!’ So what’s going on here? Why would Isaiah name God as the one who did these things long ago—then say, ‘Stop thinking about things of long ago’?

We can learn something from the way Isaiah describes God’s past actions. In the original language, in the Hebrew, the way the grammar works—Isaiah doesn’t speak about God’s past acts as if they were “completed action[s],” but rather as “ongoing action[s]” that are “still in process”: Isaiah speaks of the “the God ‘who *makes* [not *made*] a way in the sea” (Adams), “who *brings out* [not *brought out*] chariot and horse.”

When Isaiah remembers God’s actions in the past, he speaks of those actions with present, ongoing immediacy. In other words, for Isaiah, this is about God who acted in the past—and who’s not done acting now. So Isaiah continues:

“Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing” (vv. 18-19).

It seems that Isaiah wrote these words decades after the exiles had been taken captive in Babylon. And as the years passed, some exiles would’ve given up hope of ever escaping, of ever returning home. By this point, some would’ve been raised in exile, meaning it’s all they’d ever known. And so for some, their circumstances would have begun to feel “permanent,” inescapable: sure, God had rescued their ancestors “in the distant past,” but that was then and this is now—and there sure didn’t seem to be much hope of a repeat (Adam). Maybe some exiles, feeling abandoned by God, had begun to think that God rescued long ago—but only long ago. After decades in exile, who could blame them?

So when Isaiah says: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,” he isn’t asking the exiles to forget what God had done in the past; that’s not it at all. Rather, Isaiah is announcing that God is not merely the God of the past; that God is also the God of the present. Isaiah is not encouraging forgetfulness; rather, Isaiah is disputing any notion that God was stuck in the past, as though God were “antiquated” or “irrelevant” (Adams), as though God were a fossil and not a living Lord.

See, for Isaiah, the risk of thinking that God is relegated to the past—the risk is that it prevents seeing what God is doing in the present:

“Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (vv. 18-19).

Isaiah is challenging those who can’t or won’t see what God is promising to do in the present: ‘I’m about to do something brand-new. It’s bursting out!’ God says, ‘Don’t you see it?’ (Peterson).

And as Isaiah offers this hope that God is not the God of the past but the God of the present, Isaiah announces that God is about to do something new, something wonderful, as he offers this dream of divine redemption and restoration:

“I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;

for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,

to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise” (vv. 19-21).

Isaiah takes the memory of the Exodus and reimagines it as a hope for the present, as a hope for the exiles: to free God’s people from Egypt, God made a dry path through the waters; and now, Isaiah proclaims, to liberate God’s people from Babylon, God will make a watery path through the dry desert (cf. Bartlett): just as “God [...] long ago made a dry crossing [through] a raging sea,” God “can also work to turn the arid desert into a well-watered pathway” (Adams). The God of the past, Isaiah announces, is also the God of the present; the God of the Exodus is also the God of the exile; and God’s people will be redeemed, Isaiah promises, in a way that is new and surprising and yet still reflects God’s saving acts in the distant past.

Nonetheless, I do wonder if the exiles who heard Isaiah’s message may have appreciated the beautiful imagery and poetry...but then, looking around at their circumstances in Babylon, may have found little hope in all this. After decades in exile, who could blame them? ‘Wouldn’t that be nice,’ some may have thought, ‘but this is the real world, and we’re still here, and I don’t see any paths through the desert; maybe God made a difference long ago, but that was then...’ After all, Isaiah’s message was just words—just a word of hope...

And yet—and yet years later, the exiles began hearing reports, in bits and pieces, that things were changing; the geopolitical balance was shifting; and the Babylonians, who were holding them captive, had been defeated by the Persians. And then came a stunning announcement, in c. 539 BC, when the King of Persia proclaimed that the exiles were now free, that they were exiles no longer, that they could now return home freely across the desert. I wonder if it was then, with a “thrill of hope” (Dwight), that the exiles remembered Isaiah’s message—that God would one day “make [for them] a way in the wilderness.”

You know, I think that, very often, we get stuck in the mindset that God is a God of the past. We affirm and celebrate that God acted in the past—in the history of Israel; in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—but then we figure, ‘Well, that was then and this is now.’ So we remember deeds long past, but fail to recognize God working in the present. But the problem of this is the same now as it was in Isaiah’s time: if we think that God only acted in ancient history, then we miss what God is doing today.

The point is not to forget what God has done in the past—not at all, because God’s loving and redeeming acts in the past are the key to recognizing God’s loving and redeeming purposes in the present. By looking to the past, to the God who freed God’s people from slavery and exile, and who raised Jesus Christ from death to life—we know that this God brings liberation and new life. So knowing that past, we can then look to the present, and discern where God is seeking to liberate and bring new life now:

“I am about to do a new thing;” says the Lord,
“now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (v. 19).
Amen.