

LENT 5 – March 21, 2010 – Isaiah 43: 14-25; Philippians 3: 4b-14; John 12: 1-8

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation. I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King." 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: "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? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor 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. Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel! You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings, or honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, or wearied you with frankincense. You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."

NOW IT SPRINGS FORTH!

Do you ever wonder what God is thinking? What God is up to? What God is doing? Jesus promised that although we will not always have him in physical presence, he will not leave us orphaned but will be with us to the end of the age – to accompany us as we witness to the gospel, as we minister to others in Christ's name, as we journey in love with one another. Many would say that uncertainty is a word that could be used to characterize the current age, to describe our context. Not uncertainty about God's love for us, not uncertainty about God with us in Jesus Christ, but perhaps uncertainty about the state of the planet, uncertainty about the actions of nations in the world, uncertainty about the future of education or health care or our own mortality, uncertainty about the economy, uncertainty about how we can best live out God's love for the world, in the world.

Martin Buber, a theologian of note, says that the true person of faith lives in a state of *holy insecurity* and that is the uncertainty that challenges us in the Christian experience. We are relatively confident of all the *holy* stuff: that God loves us; that God has done miraculous things; that Jesus teaches and heals us; that the power of God's spirit is always with us. We are however, insecure about many concerns: what does God's love mean? What about miracles today? Do I truly understand the teachings of Christ? What does it mean to be healed? Where is the evidence of God's spirit? These things are not concrete, they are uncertain because we cannot touch and taste and smell and hear and see them. Insecurity and uncertainty are all about what we cannot know for sure, what we cannot see and do not perceive. We know that God is with us in Christ Jesus because our *holy insecurity*, our faith, tells us so, but we have difficulty seeing what God is thinking, what God is up to, what God is doing – we do not perceive it.

Today's message from Isaiah reminds the Babylonian exiles that God is with them and that God is doing *something*. "Thus says the LORD," intones the poet-prophet, relating God's words to the people, as he names God: *Redeemer, Creator, and King. The Redeemer* who brought the Israelite people out of slavery in Egypt, redeeming them from their captors. *The Creator* who formed Israel as a people through the act of

redemption; a people whose purpose is to declare God's praise. *The King* who demonstrates power by ruling the waters of the Reed Sea and crushing the empire of Egypt. The mighty actions of God in the past are called upon and remembered as the basis for the people's confidence in God's new promise. The people are reminded of their ongoing relationship with God. God is constantly acting on their behalf. God speaks words and does deeds and brings about events – active all the time. The people can be secure in knowing that God is with them and they can be certain that God is doing something among them.

The titles that the poet-prophet in the book of Isaiah uses are ones we use as well. Jesus is our *Redeemer* – the one who delivers us from our slavery to sin and death. God is our *Creator*, not only because we are made by God, but also because we are a new creation in Christ and become Christ's church through his redemption of us. We also name Christ as our *King*, not an ordinary king, but one who seeks relationship with us, who reaches out, who is more interested in saving others than in saving himself. Jesus Christ is a king who changes everything.

We remember the amazing actions of God in the past – actions of redemption and justification in the lives of the people of Israel as they escaped from Egyptian slavery and Babylonian exile. We remember the life of Jesus – the teaching, the healing, the forgiveness. We remember the sacrifice of Jesus and the Easter morning victory of resurrection. We need to remember these foundational acts of God as the basis of our faith. Without the past to assure us, the future would seem uncertain indeed! Yet the words of the prophet ring out: "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old."

That can't be right, can it? What is the prophet talking about? What can God mean in delivering those words through his servant, Isaiah? What former things are to be forgotten? Should the people interpret the former things as those horrifying events before the destruction of Jerusalem and the time at the beginning of the exile? Can they forget the preaching of judgment that was spoken? Should they instead think farther back and seek to wipe from memory the great salvation events of their past – the Exodus from Egypt? Surely no one could expect them to forget such a central feature in Israel's symbolic world. Yet the words hang in the air – confusing, forceful, disturbing.

The same words ring in our ears this morning causing just as much confusion. We remember fondly what we know of the history of this community of faith – a humble beginning on Stanley Street – Church School classes in the basement of the manse – the building of the church hall – the arsonists fire that, while frightening and destructive, also became an opportunity for rallying together – and memories continue to be formed. We cannot live in the past. We are not only a church with history. God is not static or stuck in some moment in time. We are disturbed perhaps because one thing we often feel safe about is *the past* – the former things give us confidence, but they can also hold us back – replacing our *holy insecurity* of faith with a false sense of control and privilege. Dwelling on the things of old can be paralyzing and destructive. The words remind us to turn around and look in another direction. In fact, the words that follow God's message about the former things tell us to look at today, since God is doing a new thing even now.

I think this reminds us that the glory days of the past were not really our accomplishment but God's. Recalling the history of the church is not recalling our action but reminds us of how we have been privileged to participate in God's work in the world. Don't look to the past with longing because nothing we do can bring that time back – God demands our participation in this time – in this place. "God is doing a new thing, now it springs forth..."

For the people in exile, God promises a new act of deliverance. God is now announcing that something new is happening, perhaps more amazing than the mighty deeds of the past. God proclaims release from captivity that will also involve a new wandering through the wilderness – a wilderness that will be transformed into a place of abundance because of God's presence with the people. All of this will be done by God, not because of the faithfulness of the people – on the contrary, the people have forgotten to pray – have failed to participate in appropriate rituals to acknowledge God's power and importance in their lives. They have come to God with their problems until God is overwhelmed with their despair. Yet God promises that a new thing springs forth in their midst.

What new thing is God promising in our midst? How can we continue to invite and encourage the community around Knox to come among this community of faith for nurture and support? How can we participate in God's hopeful actions among the poor in Victoria – in Haiti – in Malawi? What vision of the future of the church will we be asked to cultivate and cherish as much as we love the church of our memory? As I look around me I continually see new things springing forth – I don't always know exactly what fruit they will bear – how to proceed – how it all works for good in the kingdom of God, but they spring forth none the less!

Much of our experience in the world is uncertain and our faith is perhaps aptly described as *holy insecurity* since we do not know all that God is and often fail to perceive what God does and is doing. We can however, be securely confident that God is with us and that God is acting in the world among us. Today's message from Isaiah encourages us to confidently move away from the former things, knowing that God is doing a new thing. Despite our uncertainty, let us hear and perceive the good news that God, our Redeemer, Creator and King, is *doing a new thing; now it springs forth...*

Amen