

Expect the Unexpected

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 6, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*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. (Isaiah 43:14-21, NRSV)*

It had been a long time. Only a small handful could remember the days when Jerusalem was secure, with its mighty temple at the center of its life. Everyone knew that there were outside threats, but hardly anyone seemed very concerned about them.

But then the end came, like a swift and terrible storm. The Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, toppled its walls, destroyed its temple, and took the bulk of the people into captivity, back to Babylon, the greatest city the world had ever seen. In a flash, the chosen people found themselves in a strange, unfamiliar world.

From the point of view of our scripture text this morning, that great trial had happened over 40 years ago. And life had gone on. Most of that first generation had passed, and second, third,

and fourth generations now lived on, with Babylon as the “new normal.” Stories of the old days were still told and re-told, but many had no idea what Jerusalem had even looked like, and most had given up all hope of ever returning to the land of their ancestors.

It is to such a people in such a time and place that a prophet comes with a new word – a word of comfort and hope:

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.* (Isaiah 40:1-2, NRSV)

Those words are from the 40th chapter of the book of Isaiah, marking a new beginning, a new era in the life of God's people. Scholars tell us that the first 39 chapters of the book date from the 8th century B.C., at a time when the Kingdom of Judah was threatened by the Assyrian Empire. But with *these* words, from the fortieth chapter and to the end, there is a *new* voice, speaking to a very different time, but nevertheless speaking in the authority and power of his predecessor. And his word is one of *freedom*. The Babylonian captivity is soon coming to an end!

This, of course, isn't the *first* time God's people had been liberated from captivity. A thousand years before, God's people had been slaves in Egypt, and God delivered them with ten plagues and a great escape. It all made for great TV! I was probably 10 years old when I first saw the classic Cecil B. De Mille production “The Ten Commandments.” It has stayed with me ever since. The movie brought to life, in vivid color, this story – the central story of the Old Testament. I'm sure that for many of us, Moses will *always* be Charlton Heston! And Pharaoh will *always* be the incomparable Yul Brynner.

But what's most memorable, of course, is the climactic scene in which the Israelites have the Egyptian army on their tail and they come to a dead end on the shore of the Red Sea. They are trapped ... they have nowhere to go ... and as the Bible itself renders it, the people cry out against Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” and Moses responds, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again.”

You know what happens next: Moses raises his staff and the sea splits in two and the people walk on dry land, as they cross to the other side, with the waters forming a wall on their right and left. Pharaoh's army pursues, but Moses stretches out his hand once more and the waters come crashing down on the Egyptian oppressors. Israel is saved.

What a story! It is only natural that now, a thousand years later, in his *own* time, this second Isaiah would now recall it:

*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: (Isaiah 43:16-17, NRSV)*

The great biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann imagined God as saying, "You remember the old story of faith, the one you love to tell. You remember the Exodus, the miracles of liberation. I made a way for you in the sea, a path in the mighty waters. I took Pharaoh's horses and chariots and drowned them. I eliminated the power of slavery. I ended the hated empire of Egypt. Do you remember that I did this at the beginning of your life?"

Oh yes, the exiles remember! They think about it all the time. Those were the good old days of miracles, back when things like that really did happen. How they wish they were back there in simpler days, when miracles *could* happen. Yes, they remember; they would like to get back there, because *There* is so much better than this *Here*. Here, there is this Babylonian mess, the power of *their* empire, and that power has no end, and from it, there is no relief.

Of course, God remembers those Exodus events vividly. *God was there!* And Israel recalls the story gratefully. And those strongest in their faith might hope against hope – on the basis of a now legendary past – that God might rise up again and act as in those days of old. The prophet's words lead Israel back into this precious, storied memory, but then comes the turn: God interrupts the memory with the shocking exhortation to "*not* remember the former things or consider the things of old"! Forget what you have remembered. Forget old miracles. *Don't* dwell on the past, however wonderful, for "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Expect God to act, yes, because that is what God does and who God is, but don't for a second think the Spirit is limited to how things were done before, or still less that you somehow have a grasp on it. Expect, yes, but expect the unexpected!

In fact, in the prophet's time, God will accomplish the same act of deliverance through a wacky *reversal* of the *means* of deliverance. In the first exodus, God made a path through the sea and brought the dry land out of the depth of the waters. But now, in this new Exodus, God will make a path through dry land and make water spring forth in the desert. Faced with an impossible 900-mile trek back to their homeland, through inhospitable terrain – not just wilderness, but waterless desert – God promises to meet the people's needs once again, only this time it will be accomplished not by turning the sea into dry land, but by turning *dry* land into rivers!

And as with God's people of old, so with God's people today. So often in the scriptures we are encouraged to look back and *remember* – to remember what God has done in the past. In the

midst of a present without very many signs of hope, looking back and remembering can be a much-needed source of strength.

But there is a danger – and the people whose story is told in the Bible knew this all too well – that we may get so focused on the past that we *live* there, and box God in, and lose all sense of the Spirit's new possibilities in the Now.

In the scripture, the prophet declares that God is not limited to acting in the same old ways to accomplish new acts of salvation, and that God's people will again be joyfully surprised at the power of God. And the same is true of *us*, here and now, if only we are attentive. And so, Isaiah encourages *us*: Pay attention in the present ... Notice the present ... Live in the present ... Read the present with eyes of faith. Use your memory to see the present differently. Remember what God has done so that you can see what God is now doing. "Behold I am doing a new thing," now, here, before your eyes. *It's happening ... It's breaking out!* Can't you see?

Over the last 15 months, we have faced a lot together. We have borne together one of the great challenges of our generation and have faced the challenges of *being* a church in the midst of it. We have come this far by faith, and by faith we journey on. We don't know the future, but we have seen enough in the past to know that God is full of surprises in the present, and therefore we walk with eyes and ears open and hands ready to serve.

Whatever God wills to do among us, whatever the direction of the winds of the Spirit, of this I am certain: that something is happening in our midst that is new, and right, and life-giving. We are rightly grateful for the past and for the practices that have sustained us in the past, but in the restlessness that is the Spirit of God we are also not limited by it.

New ideas, new energy, new conversations, new partnerships are in the works, all pregnant with possibilities of birthing new ministries – ministries of worship ... music ... congregational care and connection ... mission ... education – all supported by faithful prayers and bathed from start to finish in Love.

What this "new thing" will look like in its fullness here at Friendship, I cannot say for sure. I just believe with all my heart that in days to come, and we look back, that we will hold these days in our hearts with great affection, because they were days in which we let go enough to expect the unexpected, and to know a strength not our own.

To the Glory of God! Amen.