

Main Idea: We must be alert to the new work of God, bringing life to our desperate situation.

Ah, the prophets. You have the major ones like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and our prophet for today Isaiah. You have a multitude of minor one like Amos, Hosea, Joe, or Micah. Perhaps the least read parts of the Bible these prophets are and quite possibly the least preached. It provides some of the most challenging and rewarding preparation a preacher can tackle. It is not the great narratives like we heard last week about the healing of Naaman, nor the more didactic theology that Paul provides through much of the New Testament. Its beauty is certainly more subtle than the psalms and its message more textured than Wisdom literature like Proverbs for example.

One the burdens, if you want to call it that, is that to interpret the prophetic message correctly, the context has to be understood and for most of us the occasion for its message explained. But oh the rewards! Hopefully you will get far share of prophetic witness if you spend some time here at Fellowship of the Valley. Today, that prophetic witness is our scripture lesson for this morning, which is found in Isaiah 43.

Let's get our little background taken care of before consider what it has to teach us. First, Isaiah is generally considered to be made up of three parts, which is almost universally conceded even by the most conservative of scholars. The first part contains the first 39 chapters is considered to from the time in Israel's history now referred to as pre-exilic, whereas chapters 40-55 are considered exilic, and the last chapter 56-66 are post-exilic. Exile is a critical watermark in the history of Israel and a one of the fundamental keys to interpreting many Old Testament texts. So what is exile? Exile is the enforced removal from one's native country. The condition or a period of living away from one's native country. Exile can be expulsion or voluntary.<sup>1</sup> For Israel, exile was forced, the result of being overtaken and it was devastating.

Remember that for Israel, the locus of God's activity was Jerusalem. The temple was there, God lived there. So when Jerusalem is overthrown, it wasn't just the end of their kingdom it was in many way the defeat of God. So you couple this defeat, with the fact that they had to be removed from their homes, live in a foreign land as a minority with little if any rights, the exile was a defining period. Bad enough right? But they also

---

<sup>1</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary as presented on [www.answers.com](http://www.answers.com)

had to reflect on prophets who had warned that such a day was coming, these would be pre-exilic prophets, and messages like those found in the first part of Isaiah, and prophets who even during exile sometimes would remind them, that their sin had led to this exile, we get glimpses of that today in our lesson. So that reflection led to all kinds of feelings of guilt, anger, resentment and or frustration. It bad enough to be in a crummy situation, but to have to deal with the fact that you are responsible for being there, well that tough.

Our scripture lesson this morning is from Isaiah 43 which would be in the exilic period. In other words, the message found in this section of Isaiah are intended for an audience that in currently in exile. So when you think about what this folks are dealing with and going through it truly helps us interpret the prophetic message. So with that being said, what is our message saying? Someone that has a bible, read verse 18 out loud for me.

“Remember not the former things....” Okay, let me first tell you, that verse 16, which we did not read clues us in to as to who is talking. This is called divine speech, and it is God who is speaking. So God is speaking to people in exile. Now, because of the superb history lesson that you received this morning, you can start to make more sense of what is being said and why. God is telling to that they need to let go of some stuff.

Exilic people, much like most of us when we don't get our way, can be grumpy. The people dealing with harsh conditions in an unknown land, would sometimes, imagine this, blame God for their situation. They would gather at a local watering hole, enjoy themselves, and start remembering stories from the good old days of Israel. After enjoying themselves too much, I can imagine, that fond memories became to too fond in light of present realities and as we are prone to do sometimes, we blame God for our predicament. It is a rare thing for people to take responsibility for their actions. These Israelite exiles had found it to be a salve for their conscious if they could just complain about and point their finger towards God. Not that we would ever do such.

And so here comes the word of the Lord in verse 18. “Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past.” Quit your grumbling! Quit always looking over your shoulder towards the past. Quit blaming God for everything that has gone wrong here. Forget it!

And then God goes on and says in verse 19, Here is how the NIV records it, “*See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*” God is going to do something new. The new thing will be returning them home from exile, God is at work, and he is putting things into motion that will end their period of exile. But they may miss it. Why? Because they are always looking back at the past, consumed with nostalgia they have lost any ability to be hopeful for the future. Indeed, one of the tasks of the exilic prophet was to instill some hope into the Israelites without exonerating them of their responsibility in causing the exile. In fact our text today does both of those things.

So what God has said to Israel in the first two verses is that they need to let go of their grumblings and blame games about who to blame for the current situation, quit glamorizing the past, stop looking over their shoulder. God is warning them about missing out on his work in the future because they are always looking back at the past. And folks, and while I have some questions in my mind about how the boundaries of God’s instruction to them, I believe it is a word that Christians need to embrace.

Let me confessionally say at this point that I have a curmudgeonly streak in me. And let me add, that I like it. I am not embarrassed by it nor hide it. I revel in satire and sarcasm (though I acknowledge that both can be abused and harmful. I can grumble with the best of them, I love Andy Rooney on *Sixty Minutes*. But that being said, I fear that Christians having sensed that the world does not just bow down to their every whim and interest, Christians feeling like they are losing some power in society, some influence in the marketplace, are starting to sound an awful lot like grumbling exiles. And when we are grumbling exiles, the tendency is to glorify the past and to blame everyone but themselves for the current situation. And the problem we taking that stance is that are in danger of missing out on what God is doing in now and in the future. “*Don’t you see it?*,” God says. Well the reality is you can’t look forward when you are always looking backward.

Now I don’t think this text is teaching that nothing in the past is worth remembering, nor do I think that you can extrapolate from this text that everything new is better. Because I think we all know that we do rightly cherish and remember some things and we need to be wary of embracing everything just because it is new. For instance, we wouldn’t stop having communion, which is an act of remembrance, right? Of course not!

And we need to think and discern carefully before we embrace everything new, which is one of the purposes I think, of say, science fiction, for example. To make those claims is to go beyond our text. But if we stay true to the context and faithful to the message, I think we Christians today can hear a very relevant message.

How many of you have heard the term culture wars? One way of viewing this debate, which unfortunately is already burdened with the language of war, is conservative Christian culture versus this kind of liberal secular culture. Well, I am not real certain of the motives behind this so called war, but my guess is that it has to do with power, control and probably economics far more than it has to do with any kind of real sense of morality. After all, I don't expect a non-Christian to live like a Christian. I don't expect them to have my value system or hold true to my set of beliefs. I also don't think that any kind of compulsory belief does much in the way of truly changing someone. I do believe that Christ can transform a value systems, or disrupt a belief system, but folks we are kidding ourselves if we think folks should just buy into our presuppositions and approaches to life without the very presence of God's spirit within them. I find the culture wars stuff to be tiresome and dangerous.

It is dangerous because it impacts the way we look at life and the future. If churches, for instance spend all their time reminiscing about the glory day of the 1950's, they will have two things happen that I think are both problematic. First, they will miss out of future improvement and progress and risk becoming irrelevant and backwards looking to the rest of the world. Many of us know that first hand by churches we may have been associated with in the past. Second, it causes an unhealthy suspicion of the future. Again, if you are looking back you can be looking forward. I believe that what we are seeing now is a dangerous pessimism about the future with regards to many Christians. You can see in the popular eschatology, where people just want to be "raptured out of here" and let the earth be destroyed.

Again let me say. I am not nor do I advocate an all embracing optimism of everything new, but I certainly don't buy into this constant and incessant cry that comes from too many Christian circles, saying the "world is going to hell in a hand basket and it should." Hear the word of the Lord, "*Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing!*"

We have framed this study during Epiphany as a season of discovery and what our text today is calling us to is the discovery of God's new work. God is always working in the world, but we too often do not perceive it, like those exilic Israelites. God has not given up on this world or on us.

Now I don't know why God doesn't give up on us. I have been reading Russell Dilday's accounts<sup>2</sup> of what happened at the seminary that granted me by Master of Divinity, and I marvel that God would put up with such nonsense from acting like they acted all in his name. I listen to a radio preacher or I hear the latest vitriolic pronouncement from some Christian leader and wonder what happened to grace in the Christian message. I think of my own shortcomings and wonder if maybe God should just quit and give up on the newness business. But when I read on, I find out that Israel was the same. They didn't call on God, they didn't represent God in the world. They didn't worship, give, or serve. They in fact, the Bible tells us in verse 24 wearied God with their sin. Israel was God's chosen people<sup>3</sup> and we of course sometime refer to the church as the people of God, yet too often all we do is weary God with our sin and misrepresent God to a world that does not know Him. And yet what does God do? He forgives! Because we deserve it? NO! Because He is God and it is His nature to forgive.

What is the message for today? It is that God will forgive you. God is willing to start over right now with you. God is willing to put away the former things in our life and created a new life. Right now. Can you make that discovery today? The discovery of God's grace and work to those of us that don't deserve it. It is can be the reward of hearing the prophetic message. To quote Walter Bruggemann, The gospel is the gospel even in the Old Testament!<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Referencing the Book *Columns: Glimpses of a Seminary Under Attack*, Smyth and Helwys Press

<sup>3</sup> Cf. verse 20

<sup>4</sup> Bruggemann, Walter, *Texts that Preach Year B*, p. 106