

The God of Newness: A Sermon on Isaiah 43:14-21

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We live in an age of determinism, an age when people feel that they really have no options. It hasn't always been that way. Americans in particular used to say, "The sky's the limit." The North American continent is so large that at least there was the illusion that you could leave your past behind and start over. It wasn't all just an illusion, either. Where else could someone who was doomed to be a peasant in China or a serf in Europe come, buy a pushcart and a crate of bananas, and turn it into a fortune?

Now that all seems to have changed. The frontier is gone, and there seems to be no place left where we can leave ourselves behind. The malls in Los Angeles—the Golden West—may be bigger than those in Grand Rapids, but they look just the same. So, it seems nothing ever changes, and, most especially, nothing ever changes within ourselves. We are conditioned by our backgrounds, our genes, and our cultures. Believing that we can never really be free, it is easy to fall into the hedonistic, self-serving rush that has characterized every human culture with broken illusions in history.

That's where the Judeans exiled to Babylon found themselves. They had believed they were a favored people, given special revelations, and destined to rule the world. Now, it was all over. Exile had been practiced for eight hundred years among the Assyrians and their Babylonian successors. In all that time, there is not one report of an exiled people ever returning home. Thus, we can hear the voices, "Face it—it's over. Whatever might have been—it's over. Just give up your dreams, settle down and become a part of this pagan culture." To all of this—and to us—Isaiah says, "No! No, you don't have to give up your dreams and your hopes. So no one else has ever gone home from captivity. So what? God can do a new thing! He is going to take you home, in spite of your sins and in spite of the Babylonians!"

This idea that a god could do something new was very foreign to the ancient world. Of course the gods could not do a new thing. They are simply personifications of the world system. Can the thunderstorm be anything but a thunderstorm? Can autumn ever follow spring? The answer to both questions is, "Of course not." But, that is just the point that Isaiah is making in chapters 40-48 of this book. Yahweh is *not* one of the gods! He is a different order of Being altogether. As such, he is not part of this world. He stands outside of it as its sole Creator. He is not merely a representation of its endlessly recurring cycles.

Having made the world, he can break into it and do something that has *never* happened before.

So, Isaiah (43:16 NRSV) asks his hearers to do two things, two apparently contradictory things. He tells them first to remember. Remember what?

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea,
and a path through 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.

Remember what? Remember how God broke in upon you in the past, how he delivered you from an absolutely hopeless situation.

Then Isaiah says, "Now forget all that!" What? Why? We humans hate surprises. We want everything neat and orderly so we have at least a semblance of control. That means, however, that we have a deadly tendency to put God in a box. Deliverance? Oh, yes, we know how God does that. He chooses an Israelite deliverer who has been carefully prepared by the oppressors; he sends ten plagues on the oppressors; and then he leads his people dryshod through the sea, closing it back on the enemy army. Yes, yes, that's the way God does that sort of thing. Now, God says to them and to us, "Forget that! I am the Creator who can and does do new things." Clearly, God hates doing the same thing twice. One has only to look at the myriads of flower species in the spring to know that.

The Israelite tendency was like ours: they tended to forget what they should remember and remember what they should forget. What should they remember? what the past tells us about the character and nature of God. We should remember all the evidence of his power, his faithfulness, and his love that his actions in the past have demonstrated. We should forget how he has acted in the past and believe that his power, faithfulness, and love will be applied to new situations in new ways.

What will happen if we remember rightly and forget rightly? It is clear that Isaiah is calling in this part of his book for the Judeans to have *a new perception* of themselves. Who are they? Defeated. Cogs in a machine running out of control. Failures doomed to a life of regret. "Never," Isaiah tells them, "You are the *chosen servants* of the Living God. You yourselves are the living evidence that there *is* a God beyond this world. He has predicted all this in the past, and you can testify to it. When he has done the new thing, you will be the proof!" How easily we allow ourselves to become the downtrodden, the helpless, the victims. No, we are the ones in whom God can and will do a new thing. So what if no one has ever returned home from exile before. God is no more the prisoner of history than he is the prisoner of nature. He can do a new thing, and we can be the evidence that he has done it. That's what Jesus was saying to a little band of believers on a wind-swept hillside outside of Jerusalem, "You are my witnesses, my evidence." Were they insignificant, helpless, worthless? Never! They were

the latest, newest proof that our God can do a new thing. So we can be as well, but we must see ourselves in that light if God is to be able to do his work in us. We—we are his chosen servants.

Seeing ourselves with that new perception, we can expect to manifest *a new condition*. The Judeans need not live in the consequences or the power of their sins. God says through Isaiah, “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (43:25 NRSV). Yes, their sins had mounted to the skies, so high that even God had been forced to evict them from his land. Yes, those sins were heinous and terrible, but they were also reversible! Of his own free will, “for my own sake,” God chooses to “blot out” the record and the memory of our rebellions. The plea of the Psalmist in Psalm 51:2 is realized in the work of Christ, hanging between his earth and his heaven, bleeding out the life of God to “blot out my transgressions.”

But Isaiah promises to those Judeans caught in their sins that their new condition will not merely be one of forgiveness but of a new spirit as well. In 44:1-5, he promises them his own Spirit, who would change a rebellious heart into one that would delight to call itself the Lord’s—that would be happy to be branded with the mark of the Lord’s ownership. How easily we Christians—new creatures—fail to live in the newness of that condition. Oh, let us be free! Not free of the restraints of righteousness but free of the constraints of an old nature that so easily entrap us in the patterns of guilt and condemnation. Let us stop justifying our damnable behavior with a whining, “Well, that’s just the way I am.” God can do a new thing in our behavior.

A former student of mine, whom we shall call Jonathon, was finishing his Ph.D. dissertation at a prominent eastern university. He had spent two years on it and had written nearly two hundred pages. Then the chair of his committee was denied tenure and was dismissed from the faculty. Jonathon took his project in hand and visited the rest of the faculty, looking for someone who would take him on. None would. Finally one professor relented and agreed to take him, but with a completely new project. So, as Jonathon said, “I put two hundred pages and two years of my life on the shelf, and started over.” One day, after about a year on the new project, the new chair gave Jonathon a ride home. When they stopped outside the house and Jon was about ready to get out, the professor said, “Oh, Jonathon, I’ve been meaning to ask you something. I’ve been watching you. If I were in your shoes I would be an angry man. I would be angry at the university; I would be angry at the faculty; I would be angry at my new advisor; I would be angry at the world. But you’re not. Tell me, does that have anything to do with your Christian faith?” So for the next hour and a half they talked about a God who can bring a new condition into a human heart.

However, along with a new perception of oneself as chosen servant and a new condition, in which sin no longer dominates, the newness of God gives *a new anticipation*. How easily we get locked into the past and the wonderful things God has done there. Pastors know that the seven last words of the church are, “We’ve never done it that way before.” God calls us to learn the lessons of

the past, to learn who he is in the light of his past activity, but then to look with anticipation at what he is going to do in new settings and new challenges. He calls us to sing a new song. I will always remember a veteran missionary, then well up into his eighties, coming to a Wednesday night prayer meeting during the 1970s in great excitement. That week *Time* magazine had published a major article on the Jesus Movement and in connection with the article had printed a picture of a very well-endowed young woman wearing a very small bathing suit being baptized into the Christian faith in the Pacific surf. During the praise time, this old saint said, "Did you see *Time* this week? Isn't it wonderful what God can do? There was this little girl getting baptized in her bikini! What will God do next!" Well, he may have had the accent wrong on the name of the swimsuit, but he had the right accent in his heart. God puts a new song, a song of anticipation, a song of the unimaginable future, in the hearts of those whom he has freed from the boxes of the past. Is that unimaginable future a little frightening for those of us who so desperately need to manage confusion? Undoubtedly! But the poet says it well:

Be like the bird,
 that feeling the branch
 give way beneath it,
 yet sings,
 knowing it has wings to fly.

If we remember the love, the power and the faithfulness that God has shown in the past, then we know that whatever lies ahead we are in Paul's words, "more than conquerors." We will know that the One who knows no limits except the limits of his own character will do things in us and through us and in spite of us that we could not have even dreamed of once.

With a new perception of ourselves as chosen servants, a new condition of victory over sin, and a new anticipation of what God will do next, we need never settle for the only salvation the world can offer: mere self-actualization, where we recognize who we are and through self-assertion seek to realize it fully. For the God of newness, salvation means transformation, where the amorphous self that once filled the horizon and warped every ray of the sun passing by it can be made over into the beautiful vessel it was meant to be, where a Jacob can become an Israel and a Saul a Paul.

A theological faculty of which I was once a member met on Monday mornings for prayer. One Monday one of our colleagues brought a request. Some twenty years earlier his daughter had married an unbeliever against his and his wife's wishes and had been estranged from them and from God ever since. Recently, however, she had called her parents to tell them that her husband had been diagnosed with cancer and to ask them to pray. So he asked us to join him in what frankly looked to be a hopeless cause. About three months later, that colleague came to prayer meeting on a Monday morning with tears in his eyes. He said, "Let me tell you what happened to me yesterday." He had been preaching in a local church and was well into his sermon when his eyes focused on the

faces of his daughter and son-in-law in the congregation. They did not live near this church and to his knowledge they had not been inside a church since their wedding twenty years earlier. When the service was over and he was greeting people, his daughter came up with a shy smile, stretched up on tiptoe and whispered in his ear, "Daddy, I am on my way home." God can do a new thing.

We are not children of this world, locked into endless, hopeless cycles of being where the only real hope is to become nothing. We are children of the King—the King who began the earth as a new thing, the King who redeemed the earth in a new way, the King who throws open the doors of an unimaginable future and calls us to come and see. Will the new thing he does be consistent with his holiness, his love and his purpose in creation? Of course! Will it be predictable? Never! He is the God of newness!



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