

A New Thing
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Isaiah 43: 16-21
John 12:1-8

The passage from Isaiah that we heard this morning encourages us to look for a new thing. I am gaining a new appreciation for pastors who preach on the lectionary week in and week out. How **do** we find something new in these two passages that we know so well. In Isaiah, God provides water in the wilderness. In John's gospel we read about the woman who anoints Jesus' feet and then wipes them with her hair. For those of us who have grown up in the church these are common images, familiar stories. Is there anything new here?

Many of us participated in the Christian Peace Witness against war in Iraq at the Cathedral nine days ago. 3000 Christians gathered to pray for peace. And then 4000 people gathered at Lafayette Park in the dark to continue to pray and sing and surround the White House. For many this was a new experience, never having been part of a public witness like this before. For first-timers and old-timers alike it was inspiring.

This text from Isaiah seems to indicate that we did not gather in vain. God brought us out of Egypt, the horses and chariots chasing us got caught in the sand. Those who bring violence, those who pursue violently, get mired in sand and stuck in the desert heat. This God that rescued us from Egypt is now going to do something new, even though we are in exile. God is going to save us not with chariots,
not with horses,
not with armies
but with water that flows through the desert.

People may not be wise enough to see it, Not observant enough to see the change. But as we so often read in the bible if people miss the point - nature does not.

Here Isaiah tells us that God will be praised
by those desert giants the jackals and the ostriches.
They will notice this new thing.

Last weekend on the steps of the cathedral a reporter from FOX news interviewed me. She seemed perplexed that people would gather on a snowy, windy night insisting that peace is the way, that we would firmly and confidently assert that God wants the war to end.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“Don’t you think that this just adds fuel to the fire?” she asked.

Perhaps she is under the impression that the old way works, that the chariots and horses lead us to peace. Maybe she hasn’t noticed that the chariots and horses are mired in sand up to their bellies. As Isaiah says:

*they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.*

We do not wish for warriors from any country to be extinguished. They are sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers just as we are. Yet we know that they are stuck in sand.

They lie down and cannot rise.

In this desert of death, in this land where it seems nothing can grow we hear the voice of God:

*Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing.*

A new thing. What could it be? Are we ready for it?

In anointing Jesus, Mary is doing a new thing. Her action certainly takes the disciples by surprise. Judas is deeply offended by it or so it is reported. This costly nard could have been sold for a whole years wages and the money given to someone, several someones, who were truly needy. Jesus taught widely about the rich and poor, about taking care of the widow and the fatherless. Jesus has always had the utmost concern for those who did not have enough.

But he seems to set that aside to defend Mary and says,
“She has done a good thing in preparing for my burial.”

The oil is so fragrant that its smell wafts throughout the house, covering over the smell of death that lingers from Lazarus so recently raised from the dead. The scent reminds the disciples of their own poverty of spirit precisely as they see the generosity of Mary.

Mary gives this gift in a way that makes an ordinary dinner into an event.

She could have saved this to anoint Jesus at the Passover meal. But anytime is the right time when one shares this generously.

Mary’s action in anointing Jesus’ feet is so new, so surprising, that even Jesus is moved. According to John it is only days later that Jesus too bends down to touch the feet of his disciples, to wash them with water. In that action does he

remember how Mary so lovingly caressed and anointed his own feet with her hands and her hair?

Jesus imbues his own time on his knees with a new meaning. This time it is not about preparing for death but about becoming a follower. True disciples will do as he (and Mary) have done, stoop to help, bend to nurture, kneel at the feet of poor and rich alike. The generosity that Mary showed days earlier is part of Jesus' teaching that endures.

Was it truly a new thing to wash the feet of a guest? No, to be a good host meant that your guests' feet were washed - by the servants. With Mary, Jesus experiences a new kind of hospitality: the hostess herself kneels at the feet of the guest to wash and anoint him. This is the new thing that Jesus experiences and adopts for himself. It becomes a sign of what it means to be a disciple and one of his followers.

Clearly Jesus' followers often missed what he considered the new thing. It is not easy to see the new work of God. Often we are so absorbed in our own small realm that we are not observant enough to see what God is doing. Isaiah writes to people in exile, clearly a people with problems, with preoccupations. But for him that is no excuse for missing what is right in front of them. God is going to do a new thing. *"do you not perceive it?"*

Sometimes it takes using all of our senses, even paying attention to the distractions, to see the wonder that is present. One sunny morning this past week I tried hard to concentrate in my office in the church house. Right outside the window a bird would not stop chirping its spring song.

This bright cardinal looked like a rock star with its eyes blacked, its red tuft blown high by the breeze. It chirruped and then waited for a response from its potential companion. The response was all but drowned out by the traffic on East West Highway but still it sang on. And the choreography – with each call it gave a toss of its tail. It started on a low branch and after a few calls on the low branch it flitted to the next higher branch. A few more tail flips and chirrups and there were no more branches left; he had sung his way to the top. Not to be stopped he flew across the street to a much taller tree where I lost sight and could no longer hear the song. This small show delighted me.

This was a new thing, though I admit I am not quite sure what its deeper meaning might be. Maybe sometimes just becoming aware of the new work of God is enough. In honoring that work we stand with the jackals and ostriches of Isaiah 43.

Other times it is we who are part of the new work. We have a part to play. In Mary we see a woman ready to join in with a new thing, to become part of the

story. Perhaps Mary bought this oil for Lazarus' death and then happily didn't use it. Instead she used it to honor Jesus. Jesus couldn't help but notice this new thing and in commenting on it, gave it even more meaning for those gathered, then and now.

God can surely find ways to do new work without us. Of course we can choose to say no. But if we open our eyes, and ears and take a big whiff we perceive the persistent invitation to become part of God's surprise.

Do we see any new work of God in our life together here at Hyattsville Mennonite Church? There are some who might say that we are in exile, living in the city, being under conference discipline. But signs of running water, rivers in the desert, are all around us if we look for them.

For a few years we have had quite a number of "young adults" as part of our worshipping congregation. Recently some of these folks decided to be more deliberate about meeting together, to build friendships, to see how they can be more supportive of one another. This is so new there is no name for the group, not much more to report. It is exciting to watch this new thing unfolding.

For more than a dozen years we have shared Sunday School with the University Park Church of the Brethren at their location. Now we are beginning conversations to see if there are other ways we might collaborate as well. Just last Sunday evening at the congregational meeting the 50 or so people gathered affirmed that we will worship with the COB on 5th Sundays this year. The first of those will be April 29 at UPCOB, when they will plan the worship service and I will preach. I hope we will all make an effort to be part of this exploration by worshipping together on these fifth Sundays. The friendships we have developed over the years, the children who know each other as classmates, our common commitments to peace, these are resources to be explored more deeply, to take seriously as a new thing from God.

These are but two examples. We could go on. What do you see as new work of the Spirit among us? Where do you see the river of God flowing? This is an invitation to share - with the congregation or with me or Pat - the new things that you see God doing in your life, in the life of this gathered community. In our speaking may these new things be seen as signs of God in our midst. May we, with the jackals and ostriches, honor the new work of God.