

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fifth Sunday in Lent • April 7, 2019

Isaiah 43:16-21 • Psalm 126 • Philippians 3:4b-14 • John 12:1-8

Today's reading from Isaiah was written to a group of people who felt stuck. In 587 B.C., the Jewish kingdom of Judah was sacked by the Babylonians. Jerusalem was decimated, the temple was burned. Many of Judah's citizens were deported to far-off Babylon where they were kept in captivity. Years went by in this foreign place. People died. People were born. Generations passed. And eventually, it all started to feel normal. Predictable. Maybe even comfortable.

They knew the stories about their God, the one who brought them out of Egypt. The one who, as Isaiah puts it, made a path in the waters and extinguished evil like a wick. But they are not in Egypt anymore. They are in Babylon. And the God who liberated them in the past isn't going to be able to do a lot for them now. So get used to it. Get comfortable. Drop dead.

And were it not for the prophet Isaiah, that's likely how things would have stayed. But Isaiah bursts on the scene with a startling message from God. "Behold, I am about to do a new thing." The God you worship, Isaiah declares, is not simply the God of your ancestors. That God is also the God of your descendants. God is still active. God is still involved. And God is still doing new things. So get ready.

What Isaiah promises is nothing short of a new exodus. That just as God made a way through the sea out of Egypt, God is going to make a way through the desert out of Babylon. An event so upending, so striking, that, this is my favorite part of today's reading, "the wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches." In other words, God isn't just the one who brought your ancestors out of Egypt. God is also the one who is about to do a new thing.

You could just stop the reading there and have that be the end of it. A nice uplifting story for a Sunday morning. But then Isaiah takes it a step further. "Do not remember the former things," the prophet advises, "or consider the things of old." What does Isaiah mean by that? That seems to contradict a whole bunch of stuff God says in the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish people are constantly being told to remember their escape from Egypt. There's an entire day of the week, the Sabbath, that's meant to remind you that God brought you out of slavery in Egypt. And when God speaks in the Hebrew Bible, it's often not just, "I am the LORD your God." It's, "I am the LORD your God *who brought you out of the land of Egypt.*" God won't let them forget about it. So why does Isaiah say they shouldn't they remember the former things?

The problem is not history itself, of course, but what we do with it. We make it a container where we can view God at a safe distance. An interesting idea. A nice tradition. A comforting story. But once we think that we've seen what God can do, once our language about God becomes past tense, Isaiah tells us, we're not talking about God anymore.

"Behold, I am about to do a new thing," might be intended as good news, but chances are that's not how we hear it. We're not exactly wild about God doing new things. We'd much rather consider the things of old. To relegate God to the realm of history and then cling to that history until our knuckles turn white.

But when we relegate God to the past, our entire sense of mission and purpose becomes distorted. Instead of being stewards of God's promise, we devolve into being protectors of a tradition. And if our job is to protect a tradition, anything new is going to be a threat. New music, new people, new ideas, new questions. Traditions can only be watered down. They can only be whittled away. They can only be eroded. If you are charged with protecting a tradition, put it in a box, build a mighty fortress, keep it away from anything that might change it. There in that box, it will be safe and it will be pure, but it will shrivel up and die.

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I recently had a conversation with a lay leader in the synod whose church has a very old sanctuary. During the 1980s, the church wanted to bolster its reputation as an integral part of the community. Instead of reworking how they did outreach or service or mission, they applied for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. Unless you are running the American equivalent of the Duomo or the Sistine Chapel, there is no reason to go on the National Register of Historic Places. Because once you go on the registry, it becomes almost impossible to change anything. A few decades later, this has turned into a real problem. Because the sanctuary was built long before things like wheelchair accessible pews and bathrooms were normal, the church is very difficult to navigate for people with limited mobility. The altar is still up against the wall, so the pastor has their back to the congregation when they preside. And whenever the roof gives out, which it inevitably will, it has to be replaced with the original material, no matter how expensive it is. Instead of having a building that serves the needs of the community, they've preserved it exactly as it was. And, in the process, they've turned it into a museum.

But it's not just buildings that we landmark. We landmark programs, we landmark ideas, we landmark traditions. We say that this is the truest version of the church and any departure away from this is a sign of decline. At some point, not any time in the foreseeable future, but at some point you are going to have a new pastor. And if you tell her, "You need to do program x or get involved with y or spearhead z because that's what Pastor Joseph did," then my time here will have been a colossal failure. And whatever those programs or ideas are will be failures, too. Not because they're inherently bad ideas, I certainly hope they're not, but because you cannot follow God into the future if you keep looking over your shoulder at what you've left behind.

Why do we hold on to the past so tightly? For most of us, it's fear. It could be the fear of loss. We want something in life to feel permanent when everything else is slipping away. As long as you hold onto this one thing, the loss doesn't feel real. It feels like it didn't happen. Or it's fear of being irrelevant. One of the conversations I have most frequently is with people who had kids and did everything with those kids that the church asked them to: Sunday school, confirmation, youth group. And now their kids are grown up and they don't see a lot of value in communities of faith. And now their parents feel hurt and confused and out of touch. Or it's fear of change. We have quite a few churches in our denomination that said what they wanted more than anything was to attract new members. And they did. But the new members are all Hispanic. And they showed up with their music and their instruments and their language. And for some reason, they're not super into celebrating Oktoberfest. For some of us it's even fear of mortality. You landmark the building because you want to feel like you're leaving a legacy after you're gone. You know that you're not going to be around forever, so at least a part of you will.

So the new exodus we need is not out of Egypt or Babylon but out of our fear. And this is where the connection with baptism comes in. Because baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit that binds us together and sends us in mission, is the foundation of our life together. Whenever we get anxious about the future, whenever we feel stuck, whenever we want to hold on to the past at all costs, it's usually because we've forgotten that. Instead of rooting our identity in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, something that comes completely from outside of us, we start rooting it in our own achievements or skills or plans. We try to achieve our common life instead of receiving it. How often is the primary message people hear from the church not one of grace and forgiveness and diversity and justice, but anxiety. We are anxious about the future. We are anxious about change. We are anxious about diversity. And we think you should be, too.

But when we root our identity in baptism, something changes. In his Large Catechism, Luther describes it this way. "A Christian life," he writes, "is nothing else than a daily baptism,

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begun once and continuing over and over.”¹ In other words, we can never be the church God is calling us to be. We can only become it over and over and over again.

We are not a church that is faithful to God’s call when we have good programs or effective staff or captivating ideas. We are a church that is faithful to God’s call when we remember that we are being led. That God is about to do something new.

At its heart, that’s really what the message of Holy Week and Easter is all about. When we start our Easter celebrations in two weeks and say, “Alleluia! Christ is risen,” what we’re really saying is, “God is about to do a new thing.” A new exodus. Through the water. Through the desert. Through fear. Through death. Into life.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 465.