

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“A New Thing”

March 21, 2010

Reverend Art Ritter

Isaiah 43:16-21

¹⁶Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
¹⁸Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
¹⁹I 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.
²⁰The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

Philippians 3:8-14

⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Have you ever wondered why some things are as they are? Within the culture of the local church, that is often a good question to ask. A typical answer, especially in church might be, “because that is the way things have always been.” In some cases that line is not merely an excuse but the absolute truth. I was recently told about a church that did not have bathrooms inside the building. They perceived this to be an issue for potential growth. Throughout the years, people had been told that there was a

building code prohibition or historical building site designation that kept bathrooms from being added. Yet upon intensive investigation it was determined that there were no bathrooms because when the church was constructed, many people in the congregation believed that certain things should not be done in "The Lord's House." And so they never were. Today the members of the congregation and its visitors must use an outhouse when they attend worship.

I read something this week written by Clark Cothorn, about the standard U.S. railroad gauge of four feet, eight and one half inches. This is the distance between the two rails on the track. The distance seems like such an odd number but that is the way that railroads were built in England and American railroads were first built by people trained in Britain. Why did the English use this gauge? Four feet, eight and one half inches was chosen because the people who built the pre-railroad tramways used this distance. They in turn were locked into that gauge because that was the standard that people used for building wagons. Why were the wagons built to that scale? Because with any other size, the wheels would not match up with the ruts in the existing roads. And who built these rutted roads? The first highways in Europe were used by Roman legions and the ruts were placed by Roman chariots. Four feet, eight and one half inches was the width a chariot needed to be to accommodate the rear ends of two war horses. Thus the distance between today's modern rails wasn't set by physics or engineering or mathematical calculation. It was established by the width of the posteriors of two Roman horses.

Openness is essentially a willingness to change, to grow, to avoid the ruts of the past and to embrace eagerly something different that tomorrow might bring. Nashville comedian Grady Nutt told the story of a man who bought a new radio. He took it home, placed it on the kitchen counter, plugged it in, turned it to WSM, home of the Grand Ole Opry, and adjusted the volume. He then proceeded to pull off all of the knobs on the radio. He had already tuned in to what he wanted to hear. He wasn't interested in hearing anything new.

The prophet Isaiah knew the people to whom he was speaking very well. They were the covenant people of God, now living in exile in Babylon, forcibly removed from their homeland. They had no temple. Without a temple, how could they pray and maintain their relationship with God? They had to trust in stories and traditions of the past. They talked of how God had freed their ancestors from Egypt and they hoped God would do the same for them in Babylon. They were a long way from where they hoped they would be yet they waited for history to repeat itself. They were locked into a world of their reality, of limited expectations and diminished promise.

The people of Israel were stuck in a world of nostalgia. Nostalgia is defined as a bittersweet longing for things, persons, and situations of the past. Nostalgia is the belief that reviving the past is the key to saving the future. I tend to be a nostalgic person. I yearn for a return of the 1968 or 1984 Detroit Tigers. My girls tease me because my Ipod is loaded with songs that remind me of people and situations of my past. It helps me remember who I was and feel good about those "good old days." The girls know that they probably shouldn't even try to speak with me when I am playing my Gene Cotton or Nicolette Larson. With that music I am stuck in the late seventies and early eighties! There are enough Time-Life music infomercials and PBS fundraisers featuring The Moody Blues and Ed Sullivan's show to let me know that I am not alone in my nostalgic yearning.

But Owen Lee Pomeroy compares nostalgia to a grammar lesson. "You find the present tense, but the past perfect." The prophet Isaiah probably would have agreed. He knew that while in exile, a fond recollection of the past might help the people of God remember who they were. But nostalgia would not have any effect in helping them become who they could be. "Forget the former things. Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I am making a way

in the desert and streams in the wasteland.” The hope to restore the past was stifling God’s presence in the present and it was limiting God’s possibilities for the future. The same God who had acted in the past was about to act again, not in the same way and not through historical or sentimental recollection. No, God was about to act through the words and deeds of those who were hearing the prophet’s words that day.

These are frightening words to those comfortable yearning for a return to the good old days. Suddenly expectations are raised. Before we simply pined for things to return to past glory but now the prophet calls us to bring something different into the future. Something is required of us. We have to take a risk of faith in bringing something new to be. Remembering who you are is not enough. You must also discover who you can be.

I recall that when my daughter Maren graduated from high school, their class slogan was a familiar yet powerful phrase from Gandhi. “Be the change you want to see.” The apostle Paul writes of such a transformation. Paul speaks of disregarding the righteousness of past achievement and relationship and entitlement. He speaks of the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. He speaks of the hope of what is longed for in the future being present in him this day because of Christ’s claim upon his life. Because of this hope, he did not have to merely remember who he was through law and religious status. He needed to be that which God’s presence in Christ moved him to be.

Two people were once peddling a tandem bicycle up a steep hill. When they got to the top of the hill, the person at the front of the bike took a deep breath and said, “Wow, I am exhausted. I thought for a minute that we weren’t going to make it and would roll back down the hill. I was peddling like crazy.” The second person on the bike said, “I thought the very same thing. I thought we were going to roll back down the hill also. That is why I had my feet on the brakes all of the time!

Loss of that which is familiar and comfortable is frightening. It is easy to remember and find great peace in that which has been. It is difficult to seek mystery when we are well settled into the ruts of established conviction. “Forgetting what lies behind” and “being the change we want to see” involves a certain amount of uncertainty and anxiety. It takes faith to believe that something important is coming to be in us and to act as if that something might come to be in our very next breath.

There is an old story about a man who worked for the state highway department. He was hired to paint lines on a newly resurfaced portion of a interstate highway. On the first day of the job he painted 109 miles of the highway. His supervisor was quite impressed and he told the painter that he would recommend a promotion and pay raise if he could keep up that pace. The next day however the man was only able to paint 5 miles of road. And on the following day he painted only one single mile of highway. When he reported back at the quitting time, his disappointed supervisor immediately fired him. “But it isn’t my fault,” the man muttered to his boss. “I kept getting further and further away from the paint can.”

Like the painter, we usually don’t want to get too far away from the paint can. It helps us remember who we were. We don’t like to risk moving anything from the place where we first find it. We keep returning to our comfortable assumptions about the world, ourselves, and our God. We retrofit new ideas in the hopes that they will somehow fit into our comfortable framework. We fail to see the possibility or the responsibility that might involve us moving things up the road a mile or two.

When we speak of the power of God, we need to do more than look back to a past time and an ancestral people. We need to expect something new from God in us. We need to look beyond past blessing and embrace a coming promise. We need to look forward with expectation for this day and with hope for our future. God is doing a new thing. We must have the faith to live trusting in such divine surprise.