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Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in 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:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I 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. The 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, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Sometimes we need reminding that God is, in fact, alive, still creating, still speaking, still moving in, around, over, under, through us.

Now, the Bible was written long ago, over a long period of time, by many different people. According to the International Bible Society, the Old Testament dates from around 1400 BC (when Moses lived) to around 450 BC, for the book of the prophet Malachi. The New Testament was written in the second half of the first century CE, so that's over 1900 years ago.

But we need to keep remembering that God didn't stop when the Bible stopped being written. There is an ongoing relationship between God and God's people. Just think of how the Christian church grew and changed over the centuries, and still is growing and changing. Through persecutions, the establishment of Christianity as the official faith of the Roman Empire, the separation of the Eastern church, the Protestant Reformation, into our own era. The story of Christianity continues.

Isaiah reminds us that God can and does "new things". This portion of the book of Isaiah was written during the exile of the Israelites in Babylon. Isaiah was telling them they would return to Jerusalem, which they did, once the Persian king Cyrus defeated Babylon in 539 BCE.

Isaiah is writing, not using the past tense, but using participles, that is, describing God as continuing to save God's people. God "makes", "brings", and "gives", and "will make" a way in the wilderness. There is no conditional speaking here, this is what God is doing and will be doing.

Though Isaiah refers to Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt and passage through the Red Sea, and deliverance from the Egyptian army, he tells his hearers to shift their focus to the future. God is continuing God's saving work, as sovereign over the world, bringing life and growth to God's people.

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Life and growth. In mainline Protestant Christian churches in our country these days, life and growth seem to have gone away. According to the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Survey,

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- “In 2007, 78.4% of U.S. adults identified with Christian groups, such as Protestants, Catholics, Mormons and others; seven years later, that percentage has fallen to 70.6%. ...
- Mainline Protestants represented 14.7% of U.S. adults in 2014, down from 18.1% in 2007, while the Catholic share of the population fell to 20.8% from 23.9% over the same period.
- By comparison, evangelical Protestants have been more stable, declining only about 1 percentage point between 2007 and 2014 (from 26.3% to 25.4%). ...
- People who self-identify as atheists or agnostics (about 7% of all U.S. adults), as well as those who say their religion is “nothing in particular,” now account for a combined 22.8% of U.S. adults – up from 16.1% in 2007. ...

And here at Church of the Spirit, we have seen our average numbers on a Sunday fall, most recently from 36 per Sunday to an average of just 30 people. We have confidence in what we are offering. What are we doing or not doing to keep our community from shrinking, and instead growing and thriving?

Again, we are not alone in asking these questions. Our American culture of church-going is shifting in a big way, and lots of people just don't think religious worship on a Sunday morning is important in their lives.

But this doesn't mean that they have no need for community, or no need for God. In my observations, and I think most people agree, human beings all have a longing for community, a longing for their lives to connect to something larger than themselves, and a longing to do their part to make the world a better place for themselves and other people.

So what should we do? Can we be encouraged, or even get excited, by Isaiah's assurance that God says, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

Can we take hold of this assurance, reminding ourselves of the great “new things” that God has done in world history and in the history of COTS, and commit ourselves to listening for and taking part in whatever God has in mind?

I think we can, and I think we should. We need to grasp, however, that taking part in God's new thing, whatever it is, means letting go of whatever it is that keeps change from happening. Because God will change us. Are we afraid of change? Can we let go of our need for security and familiarity, step out of the boat and say, “Jesus, I'm all in!”?

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I 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. The 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, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.”

Jesus, I'm all in. Amen.