

April 3, 2022
Fifth Sunday of Lent

Meditation: "The Good New Days"

Are you familiar with the saying 'the good old days?' It's interesting that we look back in order to gauge how blessed we were. Is our sense of past blessing partly due to the fact that we often conveniently forget the past struggles that went with the blessings? And why do we look back to discover the blessings of the past, instead of focusing on the present to discover the blessings of the present? Or are we too caught up in the current struggles to see the current blessings?

When I lost my job with IBM, it did not feel like a blessing at the time. I could no longer pay my debts, and so I had to sell my car to pay the outstanding loan. I wondered about how I would survive without an income. I wondered about where I would work, what I would do. It is only in hindsight that I can see that it was an opportunity to rebuild my life... to return to school and train to do something new and different.

It's funny, so often we are only aware of God's presence and action in our lives in hindsight. Now I can recognize that back then God was leading and clearing the way for my present life, but then I couldn't, just like now I have a difficult time discerning God's action and leading in the present.

By the time this part of Isaiah was recorded, the Jews were nearing the end of their time in Babylonian captivity, only they didn't know it. As they longed for liberation from bondage in Babylon, they looked back on the days of their liberation from Egypt. They remembered the stories of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, of the pursuit by the Egyptian army on foot and in their chariots, of the chariots becoming stuck in the mud and silt of the sea floor, of the water returning to cover the Egyptian army and drowning them after the last Jew was on high ground. Listen again:

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:

And then, God announces, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Only, the Jews are so caught up in their misery as captives of Babylon that they do not perceive it. They can't see what is about to happen. They can't imagine that the new king, Cyrus, will allow them to return to the land that their parents and grandparents were taken from by a previous king. They can't imagine that God will work through a Babylonian king; that a Babylonian king could possibly be God's anointed one. Or, maybe they preferred the current situation to a new life, because a new life involved change and change is frightening because it involves uncertainty and risk. No matter how bad life in Babylon was, at least the people had food and shelter. Returning to the land of their ancestors was, for this generation, to go there for the first time. They didn't know what they would find, or where they would live, or how they would feed themselves, or how they would govern themselves, for up until then they had been ruled over, with no responsibility to govern their own affairs.

The Jews are in a liminal time, a time between the old and the new, a time between captivity and freedom, just as Jesus, in the gospel, is in a liminal time – between the end of his ministry and his crucifixion. In Lent, we too are in a liminal time – between the glory of Jesus' transfiguration on the mount, and his crucifixion, which is followed, shortly thereafter, by the incomprehensibility of his resurrection.

The other day I watched "The Nature of Things". It was about the science of success. It was fascinating. Sociologists were intrigued by two artists who were of similar talent, and who lived at the same time and in the same city, yet one became wildly successful, after his sudden death, and the other did not. They wondered, in a subjective field of endeavour, like art, what makes one person successful and another not? Eventually they came up with a mathematical formula that could predict whether a given artist would become successful, or not. I wondered, if you knew what made a person or organization successful, could you take a struggling person or organization, say, like a pastoral charge, and make them successful? And if you could, what would a successful pastoral charge look like? And then I started thinking more deeply about it. In whose eyes would said pastoral charge be successful – the eyes of the community, the eyes of other churches, the eyes of the denomination, or, here's a humbling thought, the eyes of God? How would

God define a successful pastoral charge? What would it look like? What do you think?
(ask for thoughts)

I have some thoughts, but I know I don't have all the answers about how we get there. I think the job of the church is to make the full realization of the 'Kingdom of God' a reality – to make this world look and act as though God were king over all peoples. Is that what a successful pastoral charge looks like – a pastoral charge that worked itself out of a need to exist? The good news is, we aren't there yet. God still needs us, at least as long as we keep working towards the goal. The bad news is, we aren't there yet. There is still so much injustice and suffering in our world.

God tells the Jews that something totally new, something that never happened that way before was about to happen. The deserts would be filled with streams of water to give drink to God's people, and even the ritually unclean animals, the ones who eat dead flesh, the jackals and the desert owls, will honour God. This is all well and good, but the Jews were so caught up in remembering their past glory, and maybe their present grievances, and so caught up in their own expectations of when and how things would change that they failed to see what was actually about to happen. Sometimes we are no different. We are so caught up in reminiscing about the good old days that we fail to notice the good new days that we find ourselves in right now. Sometimes we are so caught up in our hopes and dreams and expectations that we fail to see what is about to happen next.

The one thing in all of this that gives me hope is that God did not give up on the Jewish people. God formed them for Godself, and God was about to do a new thing, because God was not finished with them. I believe that God is not finished with us either; that God is about to do a new thing, once again. The humbling part of all of this is the thought that the new thing that God is about to accomplish, here and now, will be accomplished through me, and through you. May we be successful, in God's eyes. Amen.