

A New Thing

Lent 5

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Isaiah 43:16-21

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are the people of the New. As we heard last week, “the old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” The old which has passed away includes our Old Adam, but also God’s old way of dealing with us.

The writer of Hebrews puts it this way: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” In other words, God used to speak to people directly, especially the prophets. He led us by cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. He led us through seas on dry ground, and drowned or defeated our enemies.

But now He has done a new thing. God told us beforehand that when the new came, we should “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.” So, what does that mean? According to our Lutheran Study Bibles, it “Does not mean God’s people should forget the former things by which He revealed Himself” as even God calls us to recall the former things in just a couple chapters. There are things, then, to be left behind, and there are things to be recalled.

Just from the fact that we are hearing from the Old Testament lesson should demonstrate that we do not forget our heritage. Our youth catechism students have been engaged in a year of learning about the Old Testament accounts of our God’s action with the Israelites. So we do recall the ways in which God dealt with us, but with the understanding that that way is done. It has been completed.

Passive voice. It has been completed—by who? By our Lord Jesus Christ. The very Lord Christ we find on His way to the cross of Calvary this Lenten season. It is to reflect on the new thing which Jesus would accomplish that Isaiah wrote we should focus.

1

Verse

“Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ‘Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.’”

Here again we hear a reference to God’s making a path through the Red Sea for His people of Israel and the drowning of Pharaoh and his armies. This one time is impressive enough of itself, yet it is not the only time that God made a “way in the sea.” Once the leadership of the people of Israel had been passed to Joshua, the people were brought through the Jordan on dry ground. In chapter three of the account of Joshua, we find that “as soon as those bearing the ark had come...and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water...the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away...and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.”

And again, when the mantle of prophesy was passed from Elijah to Elisha, the sign which demonstrated this power was that as they went to where Elijah would be taken up into heaven, Elijah struck the water of the Jordan with his robe and they crossed on dry ground, and on his return, Elisha also struck the water and crossed back over on dry ground.

In this time of Lent, we might consider these actions of God in the Old Testament, and we might even consider the mighty signs which Jesus did as the Christ, the Messiah who Isaiah proclaimed would come. But if we do consider them, we should realize that they were nothing compared to the new thing that God was going to do through Him.

2
Verse

“Behold, I am doing 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 beasts will honor 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...”

God is preparing us to see this new thing He is about to do; but unlike some other passages in Isaiah, He isn't referring to both the release from bondage under King Cyrus and the one we have in Jesus. No, Luther wrote that this one alludes only to the one we have in our Lord Jesus. While King Cyrus was most certainly going to appear to deliver the Israelites from their captivity, God would only begin His new way of dealing with humanity in His Son. This new way would put aside all God's previous ways of dealing with humanity forever.

But again, some things will be similar to the old. While the old law has been replaced by the new, it is the same God who issued them both. And so long as we wander the earth, we are in a desert like one the Israelites had been in. Instead of sand, lack of food and water, and unbearable heat, we find ourselves in the world, where God's Word doesn't always take root, there is only one place to find the things we need, and sin all around us. That same sin is not only circling around us, but in each of us. Our enemies sin, death, and the devil camp around us and in us so that we cannot bear them of our own power. We starve for food and dehydrate, and without God's Word, we imagine that we don't need them from the mirages of sin.

Nevertheless, there is still one place the food and drink we need may be found: the Church. It's only in the Church that we get the things that we so desperately crave, even if unknowingly. Yet once we've had a taste for it, we pant for God's Word all the more. We have tasted and we have seen that the Lord is good.

This is what the psalmists wrote when they wrote “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the the living God.” By using the imagery of “flowing streams,” they refer to worship in God's house; and yet, they still ask next: “When shall I come and appear before God?” That is, when would they be able to worship again next? Their souls so panted for God's Word they eagerly desired to hear it as they lived in the literal deserts of this world.

3
Verse

“...for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I have formed for myself that they might declare my praise.”

Even in the midst of the desert of this life, God has given you all the provisions—all the things you need for this body and life, and for the one to come. As Moses opened the rock for the water to flow for the life of the Israelites, God will open His Son on the cross of Calvary, so that the blood and water which came pouring out would be a river of life for all people, including you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

This leads us then to “declare (God’s) praise.” As Luther once put it, we are like beggars who have found food. Now that we have found some, we celebrate by pointing it out to our brothers and sisters who need it. “Here, there is food here! Here in the Church!” And unlike the manna and water from the rock of old which only fed the Israelites and a few others, the food and drink we receive now is food and drink for all the world for all time. That is the new thing which God had been preparing to do, even since before time itself.

So come; feast on the Word from this lectern, devour the Word from this pulpit, gather at the table of this altar, and receive the gifts which God has given for you, to strengthen you in the wilderness of this life. Come and get your fill, so that you might sing to the Lord a new song because He has done a new thing: namely, the salvation of your soul. In the Name of Jesus, through whom our God will work this great new thing, and through whom He already has. Amen.