

“Perceiving a New Thing”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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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 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 so that they might declare my praise.

Throughout this season of Lent, nineteen women, who are church members and friends, have been participating in a book discussion on Sharon Garlough Brown’s book *Sensible Shoes*. It is about four women, who meet for the first time as they embark on a sacred journey of self-exploration. This sacred walk requires them to look at where they have come from and where they are going through various spiritual practices. As the story unfolds, it is clear that they are not only getting a better understanding of themselves but this is also drawing them closer to God.

Hannah is one of the characters in the story. She is the one I probably connect with most as she is a pastor. Her whole life has been spent serving in the church. She is not married. She doesn’t have any children. Her whole identity has been focused on taking care of others. She has been very busy and very productive. Now, this is not a bad thing. Accept somewhere along the way, Hannah has forgotten that she is a child of God.

Hannah has been forced to take a 9-month sabbatical by her head pastor and her Personnel Team in the church where she serves in Chicago. She is devastated. She is lost. One of her church members has provided full use of their lake cottage in Michigan for Hannah to rest and renew herself. Hannah has no idea what to do when she finds a flyer advertising the Sacred Journey through the New Hope Center in town. She decides to go.

It is through the group’s leader Katherine that Hannah begins to unpack what is going on and has her first “a-ha” moment. She has found that she has been living her life out of her “false-self.” Her life was based on “how much she had achieved”, “how well she performed”, “what people thought of her” and “how many hours she had worked in a day.” She was not living her life as her “true self” which is simply that she was, is and will be a child of God. Her identity is based on God’s true love for her; and how God is tenderly drawing her in, wanting her to be near to her.

Hannah is similar to the Israelites who have found themselves in exile. They are caught up in the deep sorrow and loss that they feel from being torn away from their home. They are crying out to God to return to what they cherish and love. God has sent the prophet Isaiah to share a poetic message of hope.

This message comes in a form of remembering first what God has done for them. God has taken care of their ancestors as the prophet shares images of the exodus out of Egypt – God has formed a path in the sea and made a way through the mighty waters. We can

visualize Moses sticking his staff in the ground and the Red Sea parting. We hear images of warriors, chariots and horses that God has extinguished. God put out the wick of their fire.

But then we hear a twist as Isaiah instructs them to not consider the things of old. Do not remember your past! Wait a minute....didn't we just hear the good things that God had done for their ancestors? Yep, that is right! Those are the things the people of God need to hold on to and remember.

The twist lies in the exile. That is what you need to leave behind. Let go of sin that got you there. Let go of the sadness and loss. You need to give that up to God because God is about to do a new thing. If you keep holding on to those things, you will not be ready for what God has in store for you in the future.

Like Hannah, it may be hard to let go of our "false self." Like Hannah, it is hard to die to our sin. But only then can we know our true self and experience the new thing that God has for us.

Hannah recalls a retreat that she led at church where she had mirrors out for everyone to look into and see their true self. She had them look in the mirror and say, "You are God's beloved child." That is your identity, yours' and mine. And as God's beloved, we hear the prophet tell us that God will continue to provide water in our desert, quench our thirst with living water and claim us as God's own so that we can praise God's name. The one thing that Hannah forgot to do when she collected the mirrors from everyone in the group was to look at herself in the mirror.

Next week we will be waving our palms and welcoming Jesus on the donkey as he enters Jerusalem. We then turn our focus on Christ as we enter into Holy Week. During our Lenten journey you have heard Frank and I preach about the need to reflect, examine, repent and clear out all that keeps us from God. This is so we can welcome the new thing that God gives to us on Easter morning. We continue to be shown the way out of exile. We continue to find rebirth in our risen Lord. God continues to do new things in our life which impacts our faith journey and draw us closer to our creator.

How do you perceive the new things that God is placing in your life? How do they make a difference in your faith? I asked 6 church members to share their reflections (in the service this was shared on a video).

Gary Shaw – It was at a church camp that he attended when he was young. This camp was connected to a local Methodist church. It was there that he made a commitment to Christ and signed a disciple's contract. This made a deep impact on his faith as he has spent his life from that moment on living his life as Christ's disciple.

Cindy Hiday – It was in 1996 that a young couple built their home right next door to Cindy and her husband, Gary. This was the Hollis family. Cindy and Gary don't have any children. It was such a blessing when this young family started having children. They now have four children and they are an integral part of their lives. She knows that it was God that brought them together.

Kit Swigart – When her husband Darryl got sick, that was a true test of faith. God would see them through everything. It may not have been what they wanted. But God would be there every step of the way.

Judi Wistendahl – Her first son’s birth, baby Jacob, was a wonderful gift from God. It compelled her to come back to John Knox. There is where she found her church family.

John Larrick – God sent him Allyssa to be his wife. After that God has provided housing for them when they needed it. He has provided vehicles when they needed it. God has always come through for them. God has renewed my faith when I needed it.

Dawnie Barnhouse – There is a church camp song that she remembers from her childhood that has always stayed with her. It says, “Got any rivers you think are uncrossable, got any mountains you can’t tunnel through – God specializes in things thought impossible. He does the things others can’t do. This has helped me through the trials and tribulations of my life. The most challenging was when my husband got ill. It was the church that opened their arms and took care of him and us (my boys and me) as he went through his illness and death. I love this church very much!

We may not always know right away what new things God has planned for us. If you notice in the life stories shared, not things in life are happy and joyful. The new thing may be challenging. Many times “newness” involves change which is not easy for most of us. But God will be present through it all. Praise be to God for giving us new birth through our Risen Lord. Amen.