

Isaiah 43:16-23
March 13, 2016

"let it go"

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How do you know that carrots are good for your eyesight? Because you never see a rabbit wearing glasses.

Today, we hear Isaiah addressing people whose lives have been turned upside down, he is writing to tell them God is doing a new thing. And you can imagine their response, "New? Really? Show me!"

I want to begin this morning admitting this message from Isaiah is difficult to believe. God is doing a new thing? Really? Show me because my current pain and sorrow looks just like yesterday, or worse.

That is exactly the response of God's people when, from the bondage of Babylonian exile, they hear Isaiah say, "God is doing a new thing." They rolled their eyes and doubted every word. What made this exile difficult wasn't the hard physical labor their ancestors were required to do in Egypt. There were no bricks to make, no whips, no prison walls. Babylonian exile was an attack on the very identity of God's people.

In the 50 years during Babylonian exile the people of Israel became familiar with Babylonian ways. And they weren't that bad. They assimilated to the lifestyle of their captors and came to appreciate some of their new ways. Along the way they forgot who and whose they were which caused a deep, unsettling alienation. Alienation from themselves, their homeland, and their religion. During the 50 years, all the values which had provided them identity and security for centuries, all the ancient symbols and rituals which gave power to their faith slowly slipped away. The Empire of Babylon didn't want their muscle, it wanted their soul and spirit.

Exile is a common experience among humankind. We all experience powers and principalities pressuring us to move off our foundation. We all know profound loss, shame and grief which prevent us from seeing anything but hopelessness and despair. We experience displacement when a loved one dies unexpectedly, or a relationship is broken, or we experience humanity's insensitivity to humanity.

Rev. Jesse Jackson reminds us of the faith-work we have in such times, "Our dreams must be stronger than our memories. We must be pulled by our dreams, rather than pushed by our memories." And that is what the prophet Isaiah is saying.

Isaiah sounds the call in Babylon, "God IS doing a new thing." God will make a 600 mile road in the desert for the exiles so they can return home. Isaiah sees this so clearly he asks, "Do You not perceive it?" It's going to be better than your ancestors had it with Moses. You won't wonder in the wilderness for 40 years, you won't have to worry about water and food. The prophet Isaiah is singing a new song, "Anything God can do, God can do better."

As a child I thought prophets were fortune tellers with their hands hovering over lighted crystal balls which told them what joy and suffering lie ahead. I even had one, a toy magic 8 ball where a message floated into the tiny window so I could tell my friends their fortune. But biblical prophets are different. They are more like contemporary social critics. They used their analytical abilities to study a community's patterns of living, the values they practice, and their social interactions and then made conclusions about the consequences of living that way. In the bible they spoke with a word of caution like, "If you continue living this way, you are paving your road to destruction." And to try to gain credibility the prophets would pronounce that their prophecy came from God.

But why should we trust that God is doing a new thing? Aren't these prophet's wrong all the time. The world did not end in 2012. Computers did not explode in Jan. 1st, 2000. Haley's comet did not wipe out everything in 1910. The rapture was not in 1988. On and on the list goes of failed prophecies.

First of all, the people had reason to trust Isaiah because of his prophetic resume. We may not agree with all the details, but Isaiah spends the first 40 chapters of this prophecy warning the people that something bad would happen if they continued their patterns and values. And he was right. He had been correct about lots of other things too.

So when this prophet with a track record speaks to people in exile saying, "God is doing a new thing," they have one reason to trust him, even though all the signs suggest this time Isaiah has to be wrong.

A second reason to trust Isaiah's message is God's track record. God is the one who makes a way where there is no way. God gives life in the face of death. God carries us when we can no longer continue on our own. God suffers with us, watches over us, and plants seeds of redemption which might bloom in due season.

But in the end, I don't think trusting is ultimately an intellectual exercise. If we come to trust God offers hope in despair, joy in sorrow, and life in death it likely comes from the difficult spiritual work of letting go of our need to control.

I remember being at the Minnesota state fair a few years ago. Ann and I walked by this big screen facing lots of microphones. At the mics were people of all ages, male and female, and diverse cultures. It was a "sing along Karaoke" game.

We passed this game several times and each time all the mics were filled with people standing and singing. But one time we passed by and the song, and I know this is overkill parents, the song "let it go." Was playing. This time people weren't just singing. They were singing, dancing, moving, laughing, twirling, jumping, you name it.

“let it goooo. Let it goooo.” They just couldn’t contain themselves. I think this is what the prophet is saying. We have to let go of some of the past, the ugly past, the painful past, the sorrowful past. To embrace a new day, to actually perceive the new thing that God is doing sometimes we have to, like the bumper sticker says, “let go and let God.”

In conclusion this morning I share some words from one of my favorite pastoral prayers in the UCC book of worship...

Mighty and most gracious God, whose very nature it is to be present in good times and in bad;... in laughter and in pain, in joy and in despair... Turn back, O God, the outer layers of ourselves and look beneath the surface to our hidden inner depths. Many of us hide behind polite dreams and wooden responses—not daring to admit to others or even to ourselves that we are vulnerable...

Turn back, O God, the outer layers of our apparent confidence and find our worries and our anxieties. Address them in us. How wonderful it would be to stand in the presence of your perfect love that calms fears, storms and worries, yet we pray at least to know that you are present with us in our struggle...

Turn back, O God, the outer layers of our certainty and find our doubts. Help us acknowledge our doubts without shame. Do not rid us of our doubts, for we would not want to forfeit the growth that comes... Make our doubts building blocks to a finer and firmer faith...

By turning back our layers, God open sup within us a place where we can see the new thing God is doing. If we just let go, and let God.

Amen