

10-12-25 Sermon “Not Business as Usual” – Isaiah 43:16-21

This year’s stewardship theme is “Not Business as Usual.” And we’ve taken that from this morning’s Old Testament reading, Isaiah 43.

Well, it’s this morning’s Old Testament reading, and if you’ve got a good memory, you know it was *last* week’s Old Testament reading. And – spoiler alert! – it’s going to be *next* week’s Old Testament reading, too! Because sometimes we need to hear something more than once before we really *hear* it. Especially when it has to do with things that are *new*.

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,” God says to the Hebrew people. “Behold, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?”

Well, that’s a little scary, isn’t it? Come on, we’re church people, we are genetically predisposed not to like new things! You may have heard of the seven last words of Jesus, but did you know there’s also the seven last words of the church: “We’ve never done it that way before!”

Here we are, doing our best to be faithful, when God shows up and says, “Listen, I’m about to do something entirely new!” And our first response is about the same as it was when our Aunt Sheila told us she was going to try bangs, “Hmmm...are you *sure* that’s a good idea?”

If it makes us feel better, Isaiah’s first listeners weren’t so sure about God’s new thing, either.

If you’re in one of our Bible studies on the psalms, you’ve already heard my crash course on the history of ancient Israel. But for those who haven’t, here’s what’s going on.

Moses has led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. And after forty years in the wilderness, Joshua leads them into the Promised Land. They settle down, become a nation, crown a king. First Saul – oops, that didn’t go so well – but then King David and King Solomon; it’s the “Golden Age of Israel.” But after Solomon dies, things fall apart.

Quite literally, actually; there’s a civil war in the Promised Land, and the kingdom splits in two: Israel in the north, and Judah in the south – that’s where Jerusalem is. Evil kings and queens come to power in both kingdoms; they exploit the people and worship other gods.

Eventually a big ol’ empire called Assyria comes along and conquers the Northern Kingdom. And then, 150 years later, another empire called Babylon conquers Judah. They sack Jerusalem, destroy the Temple, and carry the Hebrew people away into exile.

This event – called the Babylonian exile – is perhaps *the* foundational event in Jewish history. It’s when they started to compile the Old Testament, to write down and codify their stories. Their connection to God shifted from the Temple to these stories, to their memories of how God saved them in ages past. And for a generation they remain exiles in Babylon, all the while calling on God to deliver them again.

Eventually God *does* deliver them. And that’s what is *just about* to happen in today’s reading. There’s a new king in town with a new empire – Cyrus of Persia. Cyrus has defeated the Babylonians, and he decides to let the Hebrew people go back home to Jerusalem.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims this good news to his people. God has heard their cry; their suffering is over. God is about to do a new thing, make a way in the wilderness, bring God’s people home.

But the people are ambivalent, unsure. They’re not yet convinced that they want to see God’s new thing because, well, *new things* have not been going so well for them recently. Bring back one of your greatest hits, God, a crowd pleaser like parting the Red Sea or toppling the walls of Jericho. Don’t threaten us with new things, we who have lost so much already.

I can understand the people's hesitancy when it comes to God's new thing. In times of upheaval, we find comfort in that which is old and familiar. A memory is solid, it doesn't change. Unlike the present moment, memories of past salvation are not vulnerable to the whims of time and circumstance and human sin. Nostalgia can be a balm to battered, weary soul.

Instead, Isaiah turns the people's attention to the present moment. Which is a much more precarious place to live. There is so much more than can go wrong, so much more that can hurt us, when we look for God's salvation and grace at work in the present tense.

This summer a friend came to town and ooh-ed and ah-ed over all the capital improvements going on at the church. And then, because this friend knows churches, she asked, with a twinkle in her eye, "What on earth are you going to do when you're done with all this construction? You're gonna have so much time and energy on your hands!"

The way she asked the question was so sincere that I resisted the snarky replies I'd given others: "Take a nap!" or "Have a baby!" Instead, I thought about her question for moment, and I finally responded, "I don't actually know what comes next. Which is a good thing, I think. Empty spaces are where the Holy Spirit tends to do her best work."

I've said many times that I really wouldn't mind a "boring" year around here sometime soon. Maybe one that *didn't* include a major mission expansion, or a major capital project, or a major fundraising effort, or a major anniversary, etc., etc. Would it be so bad to rest on our laurels, just for a minute? To take it all in and say, "Well done, us!"

And no, it's never a bad thing to rest for a minute. But I've seen how this church rolls with the Holy Spirit, and I can tell you that, even if we do sit back for a minute, it won't last long.

Because there is this force that compels us, calls us into a new thing. She is not content with business as usual. She is always just a few steps ahead of us, making us restless, inviting us to seek out God's grace and salvation in the present tense.

It was this voice that stirred us 8 years ago. We'd just moved to the single-pastor model, y'all had called me, we'd started getting to know each other. And the voice said, "Hey, I think it's time you adopted the local elementary school, Enos Garcia. It'll be fits and starts and chaos for a while; you'll have no idea what the relationship looks like for several years, But stick it out, and it will become a central part of your identity and mission. Your work together will bear fruit."

That same voice spoke to us in 2022, a few months after we completed our *last* construction project, with the roof and the back building. She said, "Do you know why you did all this work on the building? Because you're going to turn this place into a homeless shelter this winter. The least and the last of Taos will be the first to enjoy your water-tight roof and your fancy new flooring. The forgotten and forsaken will take refuge from the cold within your sturdy walls."

So no. I don't know what God has in store for us next. That's the thing about "new things" – we don't really know what they are until they are happening to us. But I know it will find us...maybe even sneak up on us and knock us off our feet a little. And I know we will be faithful and rise to the occasion.

Because when God's grace breaks into our lives in the present tense, it is unstoppable and irresistible. It flows like streams in the desert, water in the wilderness, making a way where there is no way.

So put an ear to the wind, friends, and pay attention. Let's see where God's new thing takes us next.