

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
April 3, 2022
Lent 5

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah this morning.

In that reading from the Prophet Isaiah, we hear God say these words, "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."

So what is God referring to?

What is this new thing?

What is this WAY in the wilderness?

Well, if we remember God had once led the people Israel from bondage to freedom.

If we remember God had once liberated the people Israel from enslavement in Egypt.

God had once brought out the people of Israel from Pharaoh's minions by means of the Ten Plagues and by the parting of the Red Sea.

Yes, the people of God, those ancient Israelites, had been led out of Egypt when God's power working through Moses parted the Red Sea, and the people walked across on dry land.

It is one of the greatest miracle stories in our Bible.

Indeed, in the Jewish faith it is THE celebratory story of independence.

Passover, which commemorates the events in Exodus, is equivalent of our nation's July 4th celebration.

God divides the waters of the Red Sea and Moses and the Israelites cross safely through to the other side.

And it is this story, Isaiah recounts in this passage we just read.

“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.”

The Egyptian army, with their mighty warriors, and their chariots and horses...

The Egyptian army, which had been pursuing the Israelites, are swallowed up the Red Sea, once the people of Israel have safely arrived ahead of them on the other side.

This is the story of which Isaiah reminds us in our reading today.

But then Isaiah declares God’s word which says, “I am about to do a new thing. I will make a way NOT in the waters, like I did before, but in the wilderness.”

So what is this new thing?

What is this WAY in the wilderness?

It is the liberation of the Jewish people who had since been in exile in Babylon.

Yes, the Jewish people had once been enslaved in Egypt.

They were liberated by Moses. And they crossed the Red Sea on their way to the Promised Land.

Later in Jewish history, God’s people, the Israelites, had been conquered, and they were taken out of their land, they were exiled to Babylon, which on a contemporary map would be located in modern day Iraq.

So, the people of ancient Israel had been exiled to Babylon, and this would have been many centuries after their liberation in Egypt.

But then, God acted again on Israel’s behalf, so that while the ancient Jews were in exile, Babylon was defeated by the Persians, and King Cyrus of Persia, when he came to rule over Babylon, he freed the Jewish people so that they could return to their homeland.

And it is this event, this return of the Jewish exiles that is being alluded to in our reading from Isaiah.

“I am about to do a new thing. I will make a WAY in the wilderness from Babylon to the Holy Land, and you will return to your home.”

“I am about to do a new thing,” says our God.

“I am about to do a new thing.”

Now there is no doubt that the reason this passage appears in our lectionary today is because the Christian Church understands these words in relation to Jesus and his suffering, death and resurrection.

We are a week out from Palm Sunday.

We are a week out from Holy Week, the single most important week in the church.

We are a week out from that week the church sets apart from all other weeks, during which we remember the great mystery of our faith—God in Jesus Christ dies on a cross and raised again on the third day.

We are only a week out from Holy Week, when God does a new thing, when Jesus goes the WAY of salvation.

And so, it is most appropriate for us to have this reading from Isaiah today.

“I am about to do a new thing,” says God.

God is about to do a new thing on Good Friday and Easter.

Long ago, God freed his people slavery in Egypt, so they could enter the Promised Land.

Long ago, God released his people from their exile in Babylon, so that they could return to the Promised Land.

And now, God has conquered the powers of sin and death that overshadowed all people that all people might come to the Promised Land, that is, is the salvation of God.

“I am about to do a new thing. I will lead you in a new WAY.”

This is the message of Isaiah, and why we hear it today is because we are on the cusp of Holy Week.

PAUSE

But sisters and brothers in Christ, let’s consider how this phrase “I am about to do a new thing, leading God’s people in a new WAY” might speak to us still today, in our world, in our lives.

How, for instance, might the people in Ukraine hear these words?

How might the millions of Ukrainian refugees hear these words, “I will make a WAY in wilderness for you, that you might return to your home”?

How might young Afghan girls hear these words in light of being banned from school, “I will make a WAY for you, that you might return to school”?

How might the world hear these words in light of the pandemic, “I will make a WAY for you, that you might return to a sense of normalcy”?

How might we all hear these words as we navigate in our own lives whatever it is we are struggling with, “I will make a WAY for you. I am about to do something new”?

Young persons struggle to discern their WAY in life, what their vocation should be, what they should devote their careers to?

Older persons struggle to understand their WAY in retirement, what their identity will be, how they should make use of their time?

We all struggle to grasp the WAY in our friendships and relationships, with whom do I find mutual support, with whom do I find myself blessed?

We don’t always know what is the WAY we are to go.

We don’t always know the PATH through the wilderness.

We don’t always know ROAD we are to travel.

But we are on the lookout for it.

And maybe, just maybe, the road, the way, the path, is looking for us.

PAUSE

It is interesting to note that in the very early church...

...when the church was just emerging as a movement within Judaism...

...way back when people were beginning to coalesce around the good news of Jesus Christ...

Back then, believers did not call themselves Christians.

That term came later.

No, early on, followers of Christ called themselves people of The Way.

People of The Way.

The Greek word is *hodos*, which can also be translated as "road."

The people of the way or the people of the road.

That is why, for instance, Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "I am the Way, the truth, and the Life."

The Gospel writer John refers to Jesus as the Way, because the early church movement was known as the Way.

And, it is in all likelihood that the reason why the early followers of Jesus called themselves the people of the way is because to follow Jesus was to follow in the way of the cross.

To follow Jesus was to go in his way.

To follow Jesus was to take up your cross and follow the Lord.

And so, when I say that maybe the road, the path, the way is looking for us, what I mean to say is that God is there already present in each of our lives, such that God does have a plan for us, God does have a way for us, but we get so caught up in our plans, we get so caught up in all the roads we think we should take, that we lose sight of God's way for us.

And I recognize how cliché it is to say that God has a plan for each of us.

I realize how cliché it is to say that God has a path already in mind for us to travel.

But, there is great truth in that understanding that God is leading us and guiding us, and all that we need to do is get out of our own way.

Sometimes, most times, all that we need to do to find the right path is to get out of our own way.

PAUSE

In our reading from Philippians this morning, we hear the apostle Paul talk about his path in life.

Indeed we hear Paul talk about how we put aside all the things he deemed as important, so then he gave his life over to God's plan.

He writes, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

"For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish."

"Rubbish" here is better translated from the Greek word *skubala* as "dung" or "feces."

Many Biblical scholars even say that *skubala* should be translated with an even stronger word, which I will leave to your imagination.

So Paul says, "For Jesus' sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as *skubala*..."

In other words, for Paul, all the paths of life, all the ways we take are meaningless if those ways don't pass through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

This is not to say that everyone needs to become a missionary like Paul.

This is not to say that everyone needs to become a clergy person, but what Paul is saying is that our goal in life is Christ, and the path we take then is God's path, whatever God is calling us to do, whether a teacher, a plumber, an architect, a secretary, a spouse, a parent, a single person, a retiree, you name it.

Our path is found in God's grace.

Again we read from Philippians where Paul says, "I press on to make it (the way of salvation) my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Thus, even as we try to find our path in life, God has already laid down a path for each one of us in the grace of his Son Jesus Christ, and that path is there calling out to us, calling us to be faithful to the way that leads to salvation.

PAUSE

Consider our gospel reading, where Mary is admonished by Judas for pouring expensive perfume on Jesus' feet.

But Jesus then admonishes Judas, because Mary is part of God's plan for salvation, for Mary is preparing the way of Jesus, in that she prepares his feet for the difficult way to the cross.

That passage makes us mindful then of where our feet will physically lead us in doing God's will, and in following God's way for our life.

Our feet are one of those most important instruments of the gospel proclamation.

"How beautiful are the feet that carry the good news," says Paul in Romans 10.

How beautiful are the feet that walk in the way of salvation, that do God's will, that seek after Jesus Christ first among all things.

So, yes, Friends, God is about to do a new thing. God is always about to do a new thing, in the world, and in your life.

And we are on the lookout for it.

And the best place to look for it is at our own feet, for where will God lead us physically, where will our feet take us, that the *hodos* "the road" may become apparent through our proclamation of the gospel with our lives.

"I am about to do a new thing. I will make a WAY in the wilderness for you, for me, for all people.

Thanks be to God. Amen.