

"I AM ABOUT TO DO A NEW THING"

Isaiah 43:1-7, 14-21 Luke 1:46-55

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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"But now." Two little words with big meaning in the text from Isaiah and in the world of God. When you hear those two words you know that something is about to change. For the Hebrew exiles living under the thumb of the Babylonian empire, **"But now,"** is the key to their future; it is the proof of their future.

These words spoken by God through the prophet known as Second Isaiah, is the promise of a new beginning for people who thought they had used up all of their chances with God. In chapter 42 we read the reasons for their desolation. *"God gave up the people. God poured out on God's chosen people the heat of divine judgment, burning them with fire of war. Forsaken, brutalized, and conquered, God's people became prisoners in foreign lands, where no one, not even God, would claim them.*

No one would speak for them and say, 'They are mine, give them back to me, free my people.' (Anathea Portier-Young)

"But now" breaks the devastating silence that haunted God's people through generations in exile. The new word announces an end to the judgment and proclaims the promise of life in the midst of captivity and death. Earlier in the book of Isaiah we see the reason for their defeat. The people of God had made a mockery of God by perverting their call to witness on behalf of justice and mercy. Instead of caring for the poor and oppressed, they became self-indulgent and arrogant. They became the oppressors. They turned their backs on the ethics of God.

"One of the harshest descriptions of divine judgment in the Bible immediately precedes and leads into one of Scripture's purest descriptions of divine love." (Paul Hanson) The long night of exile is coming to an end. God is intervening because the people of Israel were still God's beloved people.

They knew their ingratitude and disobedience caused their calamity. Now they needed a word of assurance, the promise of a future with hope. Finally, a repentant people were open to hear God's new word. Those words renewed an ancient promise. They were reminded of God's love and God's faithfulness from the beginning when their ancestors were enslaved and hopeless in Egypt with no future ahead of them but serving their oppressors. God sends Moses to lead them to safety and to a new homeland. God tells them, "No matter what happens, no matter where you go, I will be with you."

In verse four, we hear the reason why God has once again secured the release of this beleaguered people. *"Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."* That is the foundation upon which one can build a life. We see in verse seven that there is one criterion for choosing who will be free: *"Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."* So basically, everyone.

After God reminds them of the time their ancestors were freed from Egypt and how God brought them safely through the waters, God says a strange thing: "Don't remember the past."

Didn't God just remind them to remember the past? Yes, and for good reason, but now God is saying, "Don't be stuck in the past. If you stay in the past, you cannot move forward. Don't cling to your former sins. God said, "Remember when I freed your ancestors from Egypt? Well, it's going to be like that, only better!"

God's people are standing on a threshold- they had to make a choice. Some were actually prospering in Babylon and wanted to stay where they were. Some knew no other home. Others were reluctant to return to a devastated homeland. They all knew they would have to travel through dangerous land to get back to Judah. It was too much to ask.

But God doesn't take no for an answer and said, "Wake up and pay attention! You cannot stay where you are." They were confronted with a daring invitation to the future. God promises, "I will make a way- a procession leading from political bondage to the dignity of rebuilding the holy community in your homeland. Do you not see it?"

God probably could have just "beamed them back" to Jerusalem but that isn't how God works. God demands action from us. We must be open to change and to be a partner in making all things new. Throughout the history of God's relationship with humankind, God has reminded us not to be lulled into a false sense of complacency, whining, "This is good enough. It is easier to just stay where we are." When you think you have seen everything God can do, that is the moment when God calls us to wake up because something unbelievably new is coming and it has God's fingerprints all over it.

Isaiah shows us that God is the God of the future- and not just any future, but a future full of hope and promise. God is the one who brings hope out of desperation, day out of night, joy out of sorrow. God makes a way where there is no way. And leads us into a bright future that we cannot see nor to create for ourselves.

The one who keeps bringing people home is the one who made them in the first place, God is the beginning of their- and our- journey and God is the end: their- and our- true home. God is forever calling ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

God's most preposterous word came from the mouth of a very young woman, who had agreed to smuggle God into the world inside of her own body. Mary, who sang in preparation for her son's birth, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." The most outrageous act of God yet, coming to be with us as one of us, wearing our flesh, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

God could have entered our world in such a spectacular way that no one could have denied the holy arrival. But instead, God asked Mary to partner with the Divine in an absurd plan called incarnation.

So, Mary sings, and it is not the sweet lullaby of a shy, soon-to-be mother. It is a subversive song of revolution that promises to turn the world right side up. She gives voice to a song for the ages, inviting us to look beyond our logical expectations and our numb imaginations. She is amazed and she wants everyone else to be amazed too. She knows that the birth of her son will have global implications. She sings ahead of time, naming God's future as if it has already happened.

Hers is bold and daring speech. She declares the politically, religiously, and socially subversive character of her baby's arrival. It is joyful good news to people like her- the poor and the oppressed- but it will threaten those in power.

Here is how *The Message* says it: "*God showed strength and scattered the bluffing braggarts. God knocked tyrants off their high horses and pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.*"

In her time, Mary's words were outrageous and dangerous. She was taking on everyone in power- the Roman empire and the religious hierarchy. She is acknowledging that when God moves into the neighborhood, everything changes- and we must change as well. The old has gone, the new has come, and nothing will ever be the same.

How does Mary know that she can trust the One who has pulled her into this crazy plan and has changed her life forever? Because she knows this God. She knows the God she has learned of through her Jewish faith. She knows the history of God and God's people, her people. She knows of God's love, faithfulness, and promise.

She knows of the covenant of blessing God made with her people generations ago. And that is the God she trusts with her life even when she doesn't fully understand what is happening.

Do you see how God's new thing in the world comes to fruition only with the participation of probably the most unreliable and self-centered of all of God's creatures? Us. Human beings. Time and time again throughout scripture we find God calling the people to become more than they are; to move forward in their faith and in their relationships with God and with one another. God never leaves us where we are, even though it would probably be easier for God, and for us, if God did.

God is forever calling ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Perhaps God calls us to be partners because, as Joan Baez said, *"Action is the antidote to despair."* That is something the saints of the Civil Rights movement took to heart.

As we celebrate the birthday of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. this weekend- we remember not only his work but also the thousands of others who laid their lives on the line for God's justice, equality, and inclusion.

Black children, women, and men who had everything to lose answered God's call to create a new world- a just world. They, like Isaiah and like Mary, believed that a new future was being born and they were willing to do the hard, dangerous work to make it happen. I am in awe of what these children of God went through to receive their rights as citizens of this nation. I am horrified by what White leaders did to try to stop them. And sadly, it continues still to this day. How **did** they not lose hope? How **do** they not lose hope?

Nelson Mandela said, *"Our human compassion binds us the one to the other- not in pity or patronizingly- but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future."*

That future was God's new thing, God's new future. It was the end of apartheid in South Africa. And, sadly, too many White Christians did everything they could to make sure it wouldn't become a reality.

Civil Rights icon, Fannie Lou Hamer, who once said, *"I am sick and tired of being sick and tired,"* was not one to shy away from saying what she believed. She called her people to action when she said, *"You can pray until you faint, but unless you get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it in your lap."* She believed that *"nobody's free until everybody's free."*

She believed God's new future was being born and that Christians should be doing all they can to make it happen.

She once said, "Christianity is being concerned about [others], not building a million-dollar church while people are starving right around the corner. Christ was a revolutionary person, out there where it was happening. That's what God is all about, and that's where I get my strength."

When you think you have seen everything that God can do- wake up! - because something new is coming.

"God is doing a new thing!" is the theme for the 2023 National Older Adult Conference. This is what I wrote for the theme statement: "A lot has happened in the world since we last gathered at Lake Junaluska for NOAC in 2019. We never could have imagined that a pandemic would keep us apart for so long. We mourn the loss of time together. We mourn the loss of life.

In 2021 we were forced to take NOAC online and participate in a virtual conference. We were pleasantly surprised to find that even on our computer screens we could develop a sense of community. During the past three years we have had to make many changes in our home congregations and in our denomination as we continue to minister to one another through a time of uncertainty.

So, now what? Perhaps we are feeling some apprehension and fear. How do we move forward into an unknown future when we aren't quite sure where we are heading? We find a word of hope from God through the prophet, Isaiah. "I am going to do something brand new!"

God has continued to work in and through our lives and our congregations during this pandemic. As we look to the future, we trust that God is leading us to places we never thought we wanted to go. Together, we will share the gospel of Jesus Christ as we live as his disciples. God is doing something brand new, let's welcome it with open hearts!"

Although this theme statement speaks to the experience of NOAC, it speaks to us as a congregation as well. The pandemic was hard enough but we also had to deal with the experience of my injury and absence for almost eight months last year.

So, now what? Perhaps we are feeling some apprehension and fear. How do we move forward into an unknown future when we aren't quite sure where we are heading? We do that by opening our eyes to the new thing God is doing. We don't know what that is yet-

but we are called to have the courage to be partners with *God* in birthing our new future. So let us follow the examples of *Isaiah* and *Mary*, of *Fannie Lou Hamer* and *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, and be willing participants in *God's* outrageous plan for us, in this place.

But now! I have a feeling, we ain't seen nothin' yet!

May it be so. Amen.