

Doing A New Thing

"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Isaiah 43:19

Isaiah 43:16-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 21, 2010

One of the most popular greetings in this country, after "how are you?" is "what's new?" If you're like me, the most common response is, "Oh, not much, what's new with you?" I would suspect that for many of us this response is most likely true. Life is often pretty much routine week in and week out. Sometimes it really is hard to see just what is new. But as part of your Lenten journey this year, I hope that you have been spending (or will spend) some time reflecting on just **what has changed in your life over the past year**. For when we take the time to look back on all that has happened we will most likely notice that a lot has indeed changed. Certainly that includes a mix of both good and bad. That's a reality called life.

As part of this reflective process, it is important for us as people of faith to engage in the spiritual discipline of asking: Where and how, in my understanding, has God been present in my life in the midst of these changes?

This question can be asked of our church life as well. **How has God been working in and through the life of this congregation over the past year? And how do we perceive God is preparing us for ministry in the future?**

I want to address these very important questions in just a moment. First, I think it's important to clarify that what lies ahead in your life and mine, and in the life of this congregation is, of course, uncertain. Christianity has no claims of being able to predict the future like some sort of fortune-teller. Sometimes that can make things a bit unsettling for us, perhaps even threatening or frightening.

One temptation, therefore, is to cling to the way things are – whether good or bad – for at least that often provides a certain sense of security and stability. But in the midst of our human tendency to resist change comes the declaration from God, **"I am about to do a new thing."** And we know that Jesus himself was always challenging tradition and the status quo. **Jesus, in fact, becomes a model of how we can approach life with a radical openness to the future.**

Our Old Testament text from Isaiah also invites us to that same radical openness to the new things that God is doing. This scripture passage challenges us to release our grip on the past enough to take in the signs of something new - a future that is about to be open before us.

The biblical context for the passage in Isaiah 43 is that Israel, while in exile in Babylon, had come to believe that the best was behind them. The result was that past tradition came to embody their "lost golden age." It's the 'good-old-days' syndrome, for which churches have always been particularly susceptible.

Yet notice something very important. The prophesy that Isaiah makes begins with a deep grounding in tradition by recounting God's saving work in the Exodus - delivering the Israelites out of slavery and bondage in Egypt. The prophet, therefore, does not deny the significance of their past. Applying that to us as a church, we must

never forget to reflect upon, honor and give thanks for the significance of the past of this congregation.

The prophet goes on, however, to proclaim a new salvation that is to come. He is concerned that Israel, in its exile, **not be burdened by the framework of the past, but rather to use it to see a new vision of God's salvation in the present.** That mindset, I believe, is a major task before any congregation that seeks to continue to be relevant in its current time and place.

In our biblical text, unforeseen things are about to occur (and in fact have already begun), yet these saving events will be an *extension* of the past and not a complete departure from it. The same is true for us in this congregation. It would be impossible not to notice that God is doing a new thing here with us. Yet, does it not appear that where we think we are heading is an extension of our past, and not a complete departure from it? For throughout College Hill's history, God has worked in and through this congregation to do a lot of remarkable new things, most of which seem to fall under the category of **"the next logical and reasonable thing to do."**

In other words, just as Israel's new life was an extension of its past traditions and not a departure from it, the same is true for College Hill. Traditions here abound and will be maintained, including this congregation's commitments to:

- open, theological exploration
- great music
- genuine hospitality and relationship building
- social justice and acts of compassion –in this neighborhood, this city, and beyond
- being an open, caring, and inclusive congregation, including the opportunity for all people to serve in the ministry and leadership of this church

One of the primary responsibilities of a pastor, along with the church elders that serve on the session, and each ministry team, is to try to discern where and how God is guiding that congregation into the future. **The Bible indicates that God is working behind the scenes to bring about new things, things that have already begun to happen.** Therefore, the prophet asks, **"Do you not perceive it?"**

Let me share just a couple of things that I currently perceive. Just a couple of weeks ago we held a Saturday All-Church Retreat at Camp Loughridge. Seventy members and friends of this congregation attended – an absolutely remarkable turnout. I'll go into more detail at another time, but suffice it to say that most of us experienced a dynamic breakthrough in the development of our relationships with our Spanish-speaking members and friends. That was made possible by the intentional mixing together when we broke into small groups, with the help of those who were able to translate.

I left with a much deeper understanding that **we are indeed heading in the right direction in our Hispanic Ministry efforts.** It is a ministry that I fully embrace, and admittedly with a bit of fear and trembling, and with caution, look forward to see where God is leading us. And I can't say the same was true when I arrived here two years ago. I think part of the discernment process then was, "Is this really where God is leading us? Is this really what we feel called to do? Should we let go of this ministry? Or should we pursue it?" I guess what I am saying is that what I am perceiving is that we move forward.

The other area that I would like to mention this morning deals with our commitment to theological exploration. It must be noted that **being an inclusive, socially progressive congregation doesn't necessarily mean being theologically progressive**. Right here in Tulsa, for example, there are a few predominately gay-friendly congregations (hence inclusive) that are otherwise fairly theologically conservative. **And while I recognize and affirm that we are open to people with a wide-range of theological perspectives, I perceive that it is time that I continue to step out further onto that progressive theological gangplank. For it is among the leading edges of where I perceive that God is continuing to do a new thing here with us.**

I also acknowledge, however, that this causes a bit of anxiety to some. Concerning this entire issue of change, anxiety, and doing a new thing, I want to share with you something from the brilliant 20th century theologian, **Paul Tillich**. He wrote a book in 1955 called *The Shaking of the Foundations*. He devotes an entire chapter to this topic of change, which he entitles (quoting from Isaiah 44:3), "Behold, I Am Doing a New Thing."

"The first thing about the new," he writes, "is that we cannot force it and cannot calculate it. All we can do is to be ready for it." And he is aware that there are both personal and social dimensions to all of this. Concerning the personal, which we can easily project into a congregational setting, Tillich writes:

The new being is born in us, just when we least believe in it. It appears in remote corners of our souls which we have neglected for a long time. It opens up deep levels of our personality which had been shut out by old decisions and old exclusions. It shows a way where there was no way before. It liberates us from the tragedy of having to decide and having to exclude, because it is given before any decision. Suddenly we notice it within us!

The new which we sought and longed for comes to us in the moment in which we lose hope of ever finding it. That is the first thing we must say about the new: it appears when and where it chooses. We cannot force it, and we cannot calculate it. Readiness is the only condition for it.

So here are a few questions for you to ponder this week.

- **How ready are you for the new things God is doing, and about to do in your life?**
- **How ready are we as a congregation for the new things God is doing, and about to do in our church life?**

We may not always want to accept it, but it is important to believe the ancient prophet: God is indeed doing a new thing - in your life, in my life, and in the life of this congregation.

So let us keep our eyes and ears and hearts and minds open – so that we may indeed perceive it – and then, with courage, act upon it.

Amen.