

## “God Does New Things”

Based on Isaiah 43:16-21 and Philippians 3:4b-14

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Israel had been in exile in Babylon for a long time. The exile had lasted for generations. The young people only knew about Jerusalem through the stories their grandparents told them. People had begun to forget their home land. Many Jews only knew Babylon as their home. The stories of David and Solomon, the glory of Israel, the Temple where the priests offered sacrifices to God, these stories were nothing but legends of days gone by. The dream of going back to the land given to them by God was just that, a dream. Babylon was their home now. This is where they had raised their kids. The Babylonian culture was now theirs. Babylon is where they belonged.

But the prophet got a word from the Lord. God told Isaiah that the people will return to their home land. Jerusalem will be restored. The Temple will be rebuilt. The exile will come to an end. God is about to do a new thing. Babylon is not the final destination. God will deliver the people from their captivity and lead them back to the land of their ancestors.

Now it's not a totally new thing. God has delivered the people before. The children knew the story from their grandparents, how God saw their people suffering as slaves in Egypt. And God raised up Moses and Aaron to lead the people out of Egypt, and through the wilderness, to the land promised to the ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They knew this deliverance story.

But this deliverance story will be different. God will lead the people out of their captivity in Babylon and back to the land of their ancestors. But it won't be the same journey as when they went from Egypt through the wilderness. On that journey, the people wandered through the wilderness for forty years, when it should have only taken three days if they took a direct route. This time, God will make a path for them through the wilderness. The first time, the people were bitten by serpents. This time, the wild animals will give glory to God and leave

the people alone as they make their journey. The first time the people were often thirsty and crying out for water. This time, God will make rivers and streams flow through the wilderness so that the people will have plenty to drink. The deliverance from Babylon will be a new and improved deliverance. The people will return, not with grumbling and sorrow as the trip from Egypt, but with rejoicing and great gladness. They will sing their way back to Jerusalem.

Paul was a Jew among Jews. He was born of the tribe of Benjamin. He was circumcised on the eighth day. He was trained in God's Law by the best teachers. As a Pharisee he understood the Law, knew how to apply the Law, and was zealous to keep the Law. When it came to having a right relationship with God through the Law God gave to Moses, Paul had it all together. He was a righteous Jew.

But then he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He was confronted with the truth that he wasn't just persecuting the followers of Jesus, he was persecuting Jesus himself. He was called to account for his unrighteousness, his sinfulness, his need for repentance. Over time, he came to realize that God was doing a new thing. Faithfulness to God's Law was no longer the only way to having a right relationship with God. God had established a new way, a new path of deliverance from sin and broken relationships.

It's not totally new. God has always been a delivering God. Over and over, Israel would fall away from God's way and they would suffer the consequences through invasion, exile, famine. But God never forsook God's people. The people would repent and God would forgive and restore. But now, through Jesus, not only Israel was being delivered and made right with God. All people around the world, every tongue and nation, was made righteous, restored into a right relationship with God. Jesus died for all people, not just Israel. Salvation was now available for all people. The God who has always delivered Israel now delivers us. Through Jesus, God has done a new thing. The circle of salvation is wider.

Most of us here have been a part of the United Methodist Church since it existed. It's the only church I have known, having been born a few months after it started. This church has made a difference in the

lives of millions. The mission of the church has brought health care to desperate people all around the world. Millions of bed nets have protected people from contracting malaria through mosquito bites. Hundreds of thousands have been educated in United Methodist related schools and seminaries. United Methodist camps and retreat centers have been the sacred places where people have come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. God has done amazing things through the United Methodist Church over these past fifty years.

But it's becoming clear to many that the United Methodist Church is going to change. Institutions like hospitals and universities are deciding whether or not to disaffiliate because of their non-discrimination policies. The Connectional Table, which is sort of like the administrative board for the general church, is having conversations about what their role will be in the future of the church. A plan of separation or at least some kind of exit plan will surely be presented at the next General Conference in 2020. It seems to me that God is preparing to do a new thing. I know that may come across as a bit grandiose. Is the fracturing of the United Methodist Church something that God is behind or is it the result of our collective failure to stay together? Maybe the answer to that question won't be revealed until far into the future when my grandkids are studying church history.

But let me say this. Churches dividing is not new. And although these divisions have been painful and messy, God has still been present and doing everything God can to deliver the church from our brokenness and imperfections. The church has never been perfect. We read about the church having a threat to its unity in Acts 15 when the debate was over whether Gentiles had to be circumcised if they wanted to belong to the church. In another place, in the book of Acts, we read of a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas that was so deep that they decided to part ways, to end their partnership and go in different directions in their ministry. Jesus Christ is Lord of the church. The church is the body of Christ. But the church is also made up of human beings and we are fallible. We get things wrong. The church is always in need of reform. And God is always working through people to bring about the reforms

that are necessary. But the working out of those reforms take time and they are messy. We are going through one of those times.

What if God is somehow at work in the division that is taking place in the United Methodist Church? I wonder if what will emerge from this time of division is the formation of a church that is rooted in the Wesleyan tradition and is also fully inclusive of all people in every aspect of ministry, where the marginalized voices of people of color and people who are LGBTQIA and poor people and people with disabilities, young people, old people, rural folks and urban dwellers, all those voices that have been pushed to the side are brought to the center, where decisions are made and policy is established. I wonder if God is trying to help form a church that more fully reflects the diversity of God's family, a church in which not only is everyone welcome, but everyone is affirmed as a beloved child of God with gifts given to them by the Holy Spirit to be recognized, celebrated, and used for the glory of God and for the mending of creation. I wonder, in the midst of our division and brokenness, if God is doing a new thing.

As we go through this time of great upheaval, let us remember a few things about God. First of all, God is a delivering God. He delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and from exile in Babylon. God delivers us from sin and death. God delivers the church from our errors and flaws. Second, God is still saving us through Jesus Christ. While our church goes through all this upheaval, our salvation is still secure in Jesus Christ. We still have the promise of eternal life. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are still forgiven. And finally, remember that the church is the body of Christ. Jesus is the head of the church. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it. While we as the United Methodist Church go through this time of change, the Church with a big C continues. It cannot be destroyed. And by the grace of God we are members of the Church with a big C. No matter what happens to the United Methodist Church, we will always be a part of the body of Christ. We will always belong to the Church. The Lord's Table will always remain open to us. So today, as we come forward to receive Holy Communion, let us come forward with gratitude that we are and always will be brothers and sisters in the family of God.

