

A NEW THING

TEXT: Isaiah 43:16-19

The verses we just heard from the Prophet Isaiah are some of my favorites. They are especially meaningful as we approach the end of 2018 and look ahead to what the future holds for the world, for our nation, and for our little corner of Grays Harbor County.

One of the realities of the last night of the year is that we face it with the baggage of the previous year. Many New Years are simply a repeat of our old years, because we carry both distant history and recent memory of pain and struggles. In the midst of our trials and tribulations, we have too often hung our harps of faith on weeping willows of self-pity and defeat and allowed daily survival issues to dim our vision as we peer into the future through a glass darkly. As we have waged war against the devil, who in various nefarious and sometimes unexpected ways has come against our families, our aspirations, and us, we often approach the New Year with dimmed hope rather than the conviction that real turn around can happen in our lives.

The message from Isaiah was spoken at a time when the people of God were re-establishing their identity as a free people. Their recent history had been one of slavery and servitude as they had spent the last seventy years as captives in Babylon. During that time, they struggled to keep their faith strong and their hopes alive. However, their season of suffering that was so onerous and nightmarish to live through had come to an end. With the demise of the Babylonian empire and the rise of the Persians as the preeminent leaders on the world's stage of history under the leadership of Cyrus, an invitation had been extended to the displaced people of God to return to their ancestral homeland and rebuild their torn down cities, culture and, yes, their faith. A faithful remnant of the covenant people of God had returned to Palestine to pick up the broken pieces of their history and build a new future for the coming generations. Yet, how were they to build for the future when so much of their recent past had been filled with so much pain, despair and disappointment? The baggage of both the distant as well as the

recent past can be a major stumbling block and an impediment to the development and implementation of a wholesome vision and healed life for the future.

Isaiah was telling these folks that they were at a turning point in their life. They were not to dwell on past pain and they would not have to rely on their past remembrance of the miracles of God. Their God was a very present help in their times of trouble, and their God was about to do something new in their lives that would make their faith not simply a history lesson but a living record of the power and the presence of God. They would see God work miracles in their own lives and circumstances that would give them their own testimonies and experiences with God whose power and presence is from everlasting to everlasting.

For too many of us, this past year was just like the year before, and if we are not careful the next year will be just like the one we have come through. But today it is time to proclaim a word of hope and change for the New Year. The God whom Isaiah proclaimed is our God. This year can be more than one for making great resolutions, with weak follow through. This year can be more than one that begins with good intentions but ends in abysmal failure. If we are willing to let go of some things in our past, this year can be turn around time for real and for good.

In the Book of Job, the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. Job was restored and given double his losses not simply because he endured his trials without breaking. Job received double for his trouble when he was able to let go of any animosity he felt towards those who had falsely accused him when he was undergoing his season of suffering and pray for them. He shook off the pain of the past so that he could receive the promise of the future.

In the same way, the word of the Lord says to us what he said to the people of the Covenant so long ago. “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old”. Whatever has happened is history. Whatever problems or disappointments we

encountered this past year, we made it through; we have survived. Instead of allowing the past to cloud our vision and steal our joy, we are invited to hear this word from the Lord, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

Yes, new things can be scary. We are creatures of habit. We like things to remain stable, predictable, under control. Unfortunately, life doesn't work that way. It's anything but predictable. And those who have tried to control the events and circumstances of their life can tell you that it's a prescription for insanity! One of the ways that we deal with the ever-changing quality of life is by living life in the past tense. By that I mean we look back to a time when everything was just like we wanted it (or at least that's how we remember it). We hold onto that ideal image as a comfort when life in the present gets overwhelming. Of course, if we really went back to that time, we'd realize that not everything was just like we wanted it.

Tradition is important. It proclaims our past and defines our roots. But tradition for tradition's sake is as problematic as change for change's sake. Faith demands that we cling to the wisdom of tradition, while being open to possibilities that change brings.

To the people that defined themselves by the events of the Exodus, God called Israel to a new openness. “Forget the past”, God chided the people. “Look what I am about to do.”

As we begin a new year, we need to hear the words of Isaiah, declaring to us that God is still doing new things. As we look at our nation and the world as we come to the end of a turbulent time, I believe God will do new things. But the people have to be God's catalysts here and stand for the kind of world that God created.

I believe that God is calling us, the Hoquiam United Methodist Church, to a new openness and a new way of serving God, our community and our church family. This church has a grand history – and yes tradition – spanning over one hundred years. But

we are being called to something new. “Behold,” says Isaiah, “I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?”

I believe God’s words are relevant to us, today. As we look ahead to 2019 we ask ourselves “what’s next for us?” Without doubt, we face many challenges, many unknowns, but I believe God has plans for us. But we have a part to play in this. We have the ability to direct our future, if we will face the issues of the future with prayer and confidence that God will lead us. We need to take our faith in God from the past and bring it into the present. And I think that may be one of the most difficult lessons to learn when it comes to trusting God. For most of us, it’s relatively easy to believe in a God who worked in the past. But when it comes to trusting God to do something new in our present circumstances, that can be a completely different matter. That seems to be one of the hardest challenges when it comes to faith – bringing it into the present, with all its frightening changes and uncertainties. But that’s where the water hits the wheel when it comes to faith. We have to trust not only in the God who “has done great things” in the past but also in the God who always promises to do “a new thing” in our lives. We have to learn to trust in God right here and right now.

This year can be our turn around time because we serve a God who continually does new things in our lives when we are willing to let go of the past and lay hold upon the future with faith in God who continues to do all things well. I would submit to you that the word spoken so long ago by the prophet to another people in another time and at another place in history is still a viable, fresh, living and relevant word as we face another year.

On January 5th at 11 am we will gather as a congregation for our first Visioning meeting in a long time. This is a change from my original date of January 12, as I will need to be away that day. This is an important time for us to hear each other and to listen to what God might have in store for our community. I urge everyone to come and listen, respond, offer ideas. Bring your hopes and concerns, your joys and your frustrations, your creative thoughts and I suppose even a negative thought or two (but no more than

two). Most of all bring your faith in our God who has led us for over a hundred years, and has promised to be our guide into the future.

Hear again God's words spoken through the Prophet Isaiah: "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. 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, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise." I give praise unto God for this past year and for the mighty things of the new year that God will bring. Amen.