

God's New Thing

Isaiah 43:18-35

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?

2 Corinthians 1:18-22

For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes."

Mark 2:1-12

...so that they were amazed and glorified God, saying,

"We have never seen anything like this!"

The three readings for this morning can be like bells ringing to wake us up. Wake up from our attachments to the past, from our attachments to negative thinking and living, and from our attachments to religion as opposed to faith and faithful living. Waking up means beginning to perceive and be part of the new things God is doing in and around us.

First, we are to wake up from our attachments to the past. In the reading from Isaiah, God announces a new thing, a new movement of God's power of life. Let go of the former things. Let go of the past. I am doing something new right now, right in front of your eyes. Don't you see it? We cling to the past—memories, good or bad, that we hold onto, hurts or guilt that we continue to nurse, persons to whom we attached ourselves in some way so that we are not living our own lives. There are many ways that we live in the past, unaware of the stirrings of new life around us and in us in the present moment. That's where God is and is working.

God says to Israel, Look, you haven't been calling on me and you seem to have forgotten me or gotten tired of me. You no longer make offerings to honor me. But I have never required offerings and sacrifices. What really bothers me is that you keep burdening me with your sins, the ways you treat each other, the injustice and violence, the greed and disrespect for life. I am worn out by your unfaithfulness. You seem proud of being my people and invoke my name all over the place. But you aren't living the way I made you to live. You are not with me in the new things I'm trying to do.

But then God says, I am the One who blots out your sins for my sake, because that is who I am. It's what I do. I will not remember your sins; I've already forgotten them. The slate is clean. I'm ready for a new start if you are. Throughout the scriptures, God is known as the God of steadfast love and mercy, or forgiveness. The God of the new start, the God

who did new things in the past and is doing them in the present. Our work is to become awake in the present moment, living fully in the now of God's new things. It is God's forgiveness that makes this possible, cutting the cords that bind us to the past, cords of guilt or fear or nostalgia. It is as though God is saying, Look, I've forgotten it already. Now it's up to you--forget it, and let's get on with something new.

Our inward journey includes this work of letting go of the past and its hold on us so that we can be part of what God is doing now, today. We are not to be constantly preoccupied with our sins, bemoaning how awful we think we have been or think we are. God wants us fully alive in the present, being part of what God wants to do in and for the world. So our inward journey work is each day to touch this forgiveness that enables us to let go of yesterday, let go of the past and its hold on us—pleasant or unpleasant—and be awake and alive this moment, this day, ready to perceive the movements of God's spirit and love in us and the world.

We are to wake up from our attachments to negative thinking and living. I'm not talking about a Norman Vincent Peale "power of positive thinking." I find that kind of thing superficial and too much a product of white middle class affluence and comfortableness. No, I'm trying to hear what Paul is getting at when he says that in Jesus every one of God's promises is a Yes. God's word to us and the world is Yes, a Yes that speaks new life into being. God's surprising, unconditional love is embodied for us in Jesus, a love that, as John's gospel says, came to the world not counting sins and trespasses, not keeping score, but so that we could have new life.

Many of us suffer from a negative approach to life, expecting little that is good or new. We drown our spirits in the mainstream media that dwells on what is morbid or corrupt or violent. It's not that we are to ignore or deny the evil that is happening, but there is a lot more going on in our society and the world that is toward life, toward goodness, toward self-giving instead of self-interest. We do the same in our personal spiritual lives. We become obsessed with what we see as our, or other people's, shortcomings and failures, weaknesses and inabilities. So we waste a lot of precious time and energy bemoaning what we see as our deficiencies, instead of discerning our gifts and using them without restraint so that we experience joy and touch the world with life.

Paul says that in Jesus God says Yes to us and the world. And God invites us to join in that Yes with our lives, to live as Yes People. This is a Yes that is aware of our limitations and inabilities and so forth; it just doesn't attach to them. God's Yes to us in Jesus embraces all of who we are, our limitations and our potentialities, and calls us to invest ourselves in life. It is a call to live these unique lives God has given us to the full. That's how we join in the new things God wants to do.

Finally, **we are to wake up from our attachments to religion so that we can live the life of faith.** Religion and the life of faith are two

different things. Religion is only structure, a framework that can lead us to and help us sustain the life of faith. But religion is not an end in itself.

Jesus is in a house teaching and healing. Folks are crowding in to be healed and to listen to him. Something is happening with this guy, something we're not getting from our religious leaders, something real. Some fellows bring their friend who is paralyzed. They can't get in the door because of the crowd, so they go up to the roof. It is a kind of sod roof, and they dig their way through so they can let their friend down to Jesus. When Jesus sees this, something is touched deep within him. It's the very thing he is trying to awaken in people. He sees the faith of this band of friends who care so much that they go through all those struggles to get their friend some help. That's faith in Jesus' view. Not stuff in our heads—doctrines, theories, words—but the deep desire to come to God, to touch life, to live compassionately. Faith is specific and practical, like having a friend in need and going through difficulty to get your friend some help, to bring your friend to the source of life. Faith is action, the way we live, not ideas, the way we think or even what we think.

Your sins are forgiven, says Jesus. Forgiveness clears the way for reconnection with God the source of wholeness. Now, there are some scribes sitting over against the wall taking notes. They had made themselves into a kind of religious homeland security. This guy needs watching. He is hanging out with the wrong people—the poor and powerless, the sinners and collaborators with Rome and such, people who are hard to control. He's getting too popular and our control is threatened.

They are muttering among themselves about Jesus' forgiving this man his sins. Jesus is tuned in to their stuff. It's like he's got his own eavesdropping capacity; he can hear what is going on in their hearts. Why do you have such questions in your hearts? Why do you doubt? Why can't you see what is right in front of your eyes? Then Jesus does some grandstanding. You think it's something to forgive sins? Well, which is easier, to forgive sins or tell this fellow to get up and walk? You think forgiving sins is something. Let me really show you something. So he tells the guy to get up, take his mat and go home, which he does. This blows everyone away. We have never seen anything like this!

Now, I want to stop here to say that this is not a "miracle." God's presence in life, the presence of power and newness, is not a miracle. It isn't something out of the ordinary. Forgiving sins, liberating people from the past, and enabling us to live fully alive in the present—this is simply where and how God is involved in the life of the world God made. And it is what we experience, what we can be part of when we live by faith, open to God's presence and activity.

The scribes were attached to religion, the forms and structures. Jesus was not attached to religion but to the living God and the life of faith. When we let go our attachment to religion, that is, to the forms and structures and

ideologies of religion, we can begin living on the basis of faith, trustful following of Jesus so that our lives become channels of God's power of new life. We get out of our heads and into life itself, that's when things start happening. The formalities of religion are important, but if we get stuck in them, we never get to the life of faith. We end up becoming advocates and even defenders of a religion without manifesting in our own lives the essential truth of our religious tradition. We end up trying to build up the church rather than being Christ's community on mission in and for the world. I have come to believe that the central truth of our religious tradition is the life of compassion, what Jesus saw in that band of friends struggling to bring their friend to where he could touch the power of the living God. In fact, in my understanding of the world's major spiritual traditions, including Judaism and Christianity, the heart of all of them is the life of practice, the life of compassionate living. And yet in all of them is also the tendency to get stuck in the realm of doctrines, ideas, and structures. If Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and so forth were paying more attention to living the deepest truth of their traditions instead of promoting and defending their religions, we would find far more commonality than we ever expected.

It is so important that we keep working with our spiritual lives so that we live more and more in the present, where we perceive and then become part of the new things God is doing and wants to do in the world. By touching every day the grace and forgiveness of God, we can be aware of the past without being attached to it. We can be aware of the negative ways we have come to think and live without attaching to them. We can become aware of and use the forms of our religious tradition without becoming attached to them so that we never get to the life of faith, of compassion.

There is a Zen Buddhist teaching or practice called "starting at zero." Starting at zero means quieting ourselves, sitting solid and peaceful, letting our breathing lead us into the present moment. It means being aware of our attachments without attaching to them. It means letting go of the past and the future. It is very refreshing to our spirits when we practice this. And I think this is exactly what the forgiveness of God does for us. It enables us to start at zero, every day, even every moment, when we quiet our hearts and minds, become aware of all the things that fill us with guilt or fear or anxiousness, and we dare to let them go. Then we come into the presence of the living God and are ready to perceive what God is doing now, in us and around us. And we are ready to let our own lives be part of that new thing.