

LENT 5

Year C

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Isaiah 43:16-21

¹⁶ Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down; they cannot rise;
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
¹⁸ Do not remember the former things
or consider the things of old.
¹⁹ 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.
²⁰ The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

Commentary from Milton Gilder

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” The author of Isaiah proclaims a prophetic exaltation to a weary Israelite people living in exile in Babylon. The ancient Israelites were stripped of their homelands, now residing and adapting old customs and traditions in a strange place. Isaiah attempts to make sense of this disorienting moment in Israel’s history. Isaiah directs the people to remember the past by drawing on imagery from Exodus. Can you hear and see the Exodus story in this lectionary passage: “Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior...” Collective memory, a shared memory of cultural significance for a group of people, immediately captivates the ancient Israelite listener’s senses to hear, see, touch, and smell the parting of the Red Sea, the Egyptian chariots in pursuit, and God’s deliverance in improbable circumstances.

From an improbable circumstance, Isaiah boldly proclaims God is doing a new thing. Given the circumstances, it would have been challenging for the exiled people to see this glimmer of hope rising from the wilderness of weariness. But God was giving the weary Israelites hope that God would “give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to [the] chosen people.”

For the modern reader, this is a message for us, too: to remember those stories of the past in which we encountered God and to see anew how God is in our midst doing a new thing. Can you not perceive it?

Discussion Questions

What stories and memories have shaped your faith journey?

How does this passage prompt you to pray to perceive how God is doing a new thing?

Psalm 126

- ¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, *
then were we like those who dream.
² Then was our mouth filled with laughter, *
and our tongue with shouts of joy.
³ Then they said among the nations, *
"The Lord has done great things for them."
⁴ The Lord has done great things for us, *
and we are glad indeed.
⁵ Restore our fortunes, O Lord, *
like the watercourses of the Negev.
⁶ Those who sowed with tears *
will reap with songs of joy.
⁷ Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, *
will come again with joy, shouldering their
sheaves.

Commentary from Milton Gilder

Psalm 126 is a song of ascent presumably sung by ancient pilgrims as they traveled to Jerusalem to worship God. Scholars are unable to locate when the psalm was authored; however, the psalm immediately locates itself in the Judean topography: Zion, a hill in Jerusalem, and the watercourses of the Negev, a desert in present-day Israel and Palestine. The psalm is one of hope that the Lord will restore the fortunes of Zion. Zion is the physical hill but also a place of central worship and a reference to the Land of Israel. The psalmist doesn't name the state of Zion, but it can be inferred that it has possibly been plundered, and the ancient Israelites have "sowed [many] tears." Yet the psalmist, with the return of material and spiritual wealth to the land, anticipates the people will be "filled with laughter," shouting and singing songs of joy, and the land will bear much fruit, as the people will return shouldering their sheaves.

Psalm 126 illustrates the connection between the ancient Israelites and the land of Israel – the psalmist hopes for both the restoration of the land and the restoration of the spirits of the people to joy.

If you are able, take a walk outside to observe the topography of the landscape and consider the following questions:

Discussion Questions

Where have you encountered God in land or place?

What hopes might you have for this land or place?

What has this land or place gifted to you?

Philippians 3:4b-14

^{4b} If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Commentary from Milton Gilder

What does it mean to know? In everyday English parlance, to know something or someone is a cognitive exercise of acquiring knowledge of a topic or person. In the epistle, Saint Paul the Apostle talks about his former status as a Pharisee and what he gained as a complete loss compared to “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” For Saint Paul, knowing Jesus is not merely a cerebral intellectual exercise but an experiential and bodily way of knowing. Paul wants to share Christ’s suffering and know Christ’s resurrection power. It’s not entirely clear what Paul gave up in terms of status, material wealth, and familial ties to follow Jesus, but we do know Paul was imprisoned and executed by the Roman Empire.

Paul reminds us that knowing Jesus Christ is an intellectual endeavor *and* an experiential knowing that invites us with minds, hands, and feet to follow Christ. It is no easy task to be joined in Christ’s sufferings or know Christ’s resurrection power.

Discussion Questions

How might Saint Paul’s examples invite you to experience knowing Jesus Christ anew?

What have you given up to follow Jesus?

John 12:1-8

12 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Commentary from Milton Gilder

A company of friends gather around a table to feast. Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the grave, is hosting the feast. Martha busily serves Jesus and the disciples, possibly with food and wine. Mary pours out a costly bottle of nard on Jesus' feet. Her act of devotion is the focal point of the tableau of friends.

Retellings of this gospel story rightly focus on Mary's sacrificial devotion and Jesus' sharp rebuke of Judas. There is much we can learn from Mary's devotion and Jesus' wit, but I cannot help but draw your attention to the company of friends who surround the table – what do you notice Mary, Martha, and Lazarus doing? Henri Nouwen eruditely observes that hospitality is "the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy." Mary, Martha, and Lazarus create a free and spacious space for friendships to form and deepen.

Twenty-first-century modern life, with its never-ending to-do lists and a constant barrage of electronic information, is a far cry from first-century Palestine; the relentless pace leaves little room for reflection, rest, or the practice of genuine hospitality. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus must have had concerns and worries too, but with their shared effort pitching in what they could, they created a feast overflowing with affection and love for Jesus.

Discussion Questions

What character in the story are you most drawn to?

How might God be prompting you to take up the practice of hospitality?

Where might you need to receive hospitality from God or others?