

A New Thing – even here, even now

A Sermon preached in Glebe Road United Church

Toronto, Ontario

Fifth Sunday of Lent; March 21, 2010

Isaiah 43: 16-21

One of the challenges that the church has to deal with is the idea that what we do here is all about the distant past. We read this ancient collection of books and writings, tales of long ago that don't seem to have much relevance in our day and age. The big events of our faith happened thousands of years ago and are hard to understand: "Christ died for our sins" – what on earth does that mean to a modern person? Jesus Christ was the Son of God – again, very hard to understand even if we are very sympathetic to what the church is doing in the world.

This short passage in Isaiah was written for people for whom the religion of their parents and grandparents didn't mean very much anymore. Isaiah wrote to the Jewish exiles in Babylon about 500 years before Jesus was born. The Babylonian armies had swept through the Holy Land, defeated the Israelite army and the great fortress of Jerusalem, which no one had been able to do for centuries. The Babylonian victors decided to destroy the country, and they did it by forcing all the useful members of the society to move to Babylon – so the educated class, farmers, skilled tradespeople – everyone who was anyone in Israel was hauled off to this foreign country that none of them had ever seen. By the time Isaiah wrote these words, the first generation of exiles had all died, and no one remembered their homeland. And of course they had never practiced their religion. All they had were a few stories told to them by their parents – like the story about Moses telling Pharaoh to "Let my people go", all the plagues in Egypt to force Pharaoh's hand, and then the escape of the Israelites from the Egyptian army when God dried up the Red Sea so God's people could cross in safety and then closed the passage when the Egyptians tried to follow so they were all drowned in the sea.

For these ancient people in Babylon, religion was also something that dealt with the distant past, something that have meant something to their parents and grandparents but not to them. So they were like us in many ways.

It was to these people that Isaiah wrote. And his message was astonishing. This prophet of God told the exiles to forget about these ancient stories. Even the great story of Israel's redemption from the Egyptian pharaoh was not important anymore: "Do not remember these former things or consider the things of old." (verse 18). It would be like the leaders of the United Church telling us to forget about the stories of Jesus, don't worry about these claims that he died for our sins or was the Son of God – that's not important anymore because God is about to do a new thing that you will be able to see – right here, right now! Isaiah was telling the people that our God is not a God only of the distant past; our God was more than a collection of stories in an ancient book. No, our God is a God of our present and a God of our future. Stay awake, keep alert because our God is about to do a new thing, it is growing in our midst right now, do you not perceive it? If you just focus on the ancient stories and the complicated theology you might miss the works of God right under your nose. So forget about those stories and look for new evidence of God's presence among us even here in exile, even now in our day.

Isaiah is telling the exiles of his day and of our day as well that our God is still alive and active in the world. All we have to do is have the eyes to see what is happening. The Israelites *did* get to go home again, where they once again worshipped our God as their ancestors had done before them. Later, in the fullness of time Jesus was born, a descendant of those exiles, and those of his day who had eyes to see could tell that God was alive and acting in him. And so it is in every age. God is not confined to the pages of a book or even the stories of a people. God continues to act, to do a new thing, even here in exile, even now in our day.

Thanks be to God..

Amen