

# Sermon

## Tradition & Imagination

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, October 2, 2022

17th Sunday After Pentecost

World Communion

### Prayer for Illumination:

**We are told so often in your Word, faithful Lord, that our task is to “remember.”**

**We are to remember in *gratitude* —**

† **your grace,**

† **and your fidelity,**

† **and your abundant generosity in the face of an amnesia which leads us to forget that we are creatures living by the depth of your philanthropy. Help us, Lord, to remember in gratitude.**

**And we are to remember in *honesty* —**

† **With memories unclouded by nostalgia**

† **Unencumbered by wistful imagination about how it used to be**

† **Remembering that while our walk with you is a holy vocation, it has never been an easy matter.**

**Speak to us today, Lord, as we listen to your Word to us. Open us to move beyond our amnesia and our nostalgia to an imagination pregnant with hope and possibility. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**A quick word about the context for Isaiah 43.**

† **End of “first Isaiah” in chapter 39 is Isaiah telling Hezekiah that Babylon is coming to destroy his kingdom, take his possessions, turn his sons into eunuchs and end the dynasty.**

† **There is a 160 year gap of history between the last verse of 39 and the first verse of 40. What did they do?**

### **LAMENTATIONS**

† **Isaiah 40 begins “Comfort, O Comfort my people...”**

† **Today’s text is just a couple of pages later and is a salvation oracle about how God is going to bring them home from their exile in Babylon and Assyria.**

*Is. 43:1-21 But now thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
3 For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.  
4 Because you are precious in my sight,  
and honored, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.  
5 Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you;  
6 I will say to the north, “Give them up,”*

*and to the south, “Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth—  
7 everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.”*

*Is. 43:8 Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes,  
who are deaf, yet have ears!  
9 Let all the nations gather together,  
and let the peoples assemble.  
Who among them declared this,  
and foretold to us the former things?  
Let them bring their witnesses to justify them,  
and let them hear and say, “It is true.”  
10 You are my witnesses, says the LORD,  
and my servant whom I have chosen,  
so that you may know and believe me  
and understand that I am he.  
Before me no god was formed,  
nor shall there be any after me.  
11 I, I am the LORD,  
and besides me there is no savior.  
12 I declared and saved and proclaimed,  
when there was no strange god among you;  
and you are my witnesses, says the LORD.  
13 I am God, and also henceforth I am He;  
there is no one who can deliver from my hand;  
I work and who can hinder it?*

*Is. 43:14 Thus says the LORD,  
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:  
For your sake I will send to Babylon  
and break down all the bars,  
and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation.  
15 I am the LORD, your Holy One,  
the Creator of Israel, your King.  
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.*

- I. Perhaps you will recall that in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew — Jesus teaches using many parables:**
- A. About Sowers sowing seeds**
  - B. About Wheat and Tares growing side by side**
  - C. About mustard seeds analogous to faith**
  - D. About yeast in the bread flour**
  - E. About the ways the kingdom of heaven was like:**
    - † **A hidden treasure**
    - † **A pearl of great price**
    - † **A fisherman’s net cast into the sea.**
  - F. And then Jesus turns to his disciples as asks**

**Matt. 13:51** “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” **52** And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

**II. Our text from Isaiah this week is a curious moment too**

**A. Begins with a long and patient listing of God’s work. The list serves to bring to memory that our God:**

† creates

† Forms

† Redeems

† Calls

† rescues (in the flood waters)

† protects (in the fiery furnace)

† Who ransoms

† and exchanges

† and comforts

† and soothes (do not fear)

† And ultimately who gathers in the exiles

**B. These many verses are patient in delineating in careful detail the memory of God’s work of redemption.**

**C. How surprising, then, in verse 18 to be given the imperative:**

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?*

- III. It is a bewildering time for people of faith**
- A. Perhaps we should not be surprised that the Word of God is bewildering too.**
  - B. Jesus in Matthew and God in Isaiah both seem to be pointing to a “both and” solution.**
    - 1. “every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”**
    - 2. Here is a list of my former rescues, now I am about to do a new thing...**
  - C. Traditionally, people of faith have not done particularly well with the idea of holding in balance tradition on the one hand, and imagination on the other.**
    - 1. Some of us cannot imagine that we or God could do anything particularly new and we have been the preservers of tradition even when it is clear that the tradition is no longer helpful.**
    - 2. Others of us have found the particularities of our story and tradition so troubling and vexing that we have wanted to ignore everything old in pursuit of general commitments of being “nice people.”**
- IV. But how might we be fit for the kingdom by becoming masters of “bringing out of our treasure what is old and what is new?”**
- A. That is**

- † to honor the old without practicing nostalgia for a past that never existed and
- † without practicing an amnesia which forgets that this relationship with God has never been easy.

**B. How do we embrace the newness which is trying to emerge around us without abandoning the particularities of our story.**

1. To remain moored to our narrative, while employing poetic license to explore our story in words that unsettle our settled assumptions and break-open our neurotic impulses of denial.

**V. The poetry of Isaiah describes God as the one who**  
*make[s] a way in the wilderness*  
*and rivers in the desert.*

**A. God routinely offers us a new life — an escape from the ways of living which are slowly suffocating us.**

**BUT**

**B. Characteristically — the new life being offered *begins* with an invitation to follow God *into the wilderness*.**

“I will make a way *in the wilderness...*”

**C. As has *always* been the case, the meals provided by God for our sustenance on the journey seem rather sparse and ordinary.**

1. When we left Egypt - manna and water

2. When we returned to Jerusalem in Isaiah we returned to a city in devastation.
- D. This Table of grace is *also* set with what may appear to be meager fare.
1. Ordinary bread — simple grape juice.
- E. But we communion this day with fellow followers of Christ world-wide.
1. And with all the saints of *every time and place...*
  2. And with Christ himself.
- F. Come. Come from whatever “wilderness” you are experiencing and receive from the hand of God gifts for the journey.