

January 11

Scripture: Isaiah 43:16–19; Mark 4:1–9

Series: Perceiving New Things

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This reflection begins with a story that functions as a parable in its own right.

A huge storm once passed through a small town that was not prepared for it. Rain fell steadily, and floodwaters rose quickly. A man whose home sat in an area prone to flooding climbed onto his rooftop as the water surrounded his house. Though stranded, he did not become fearful. Instead, he prayed to God for help, confident that God would save him.

A rowboat soon approached, and the person inside called out, “Jump in, I can save you.”

The man declined, explaining that he was praying and trusting God.

A motorboat followed, offering rescue, and again the man refused.

Then a helicopter arrived, assessing damage and lowering a ladder. Once more, the man waved them away, confident that God would intervene.

Eventually, the flood overtook the house, and the man drowned.

When he later confronted God, he asked why he had not been saved. God replied that a rowboat, a motorboat, and a helicopter had been sent. What more had he expected?

The story exposes the gaps in human expectation, a tension that feels especially present at the turn of the year. It raises questions about how God’s presence is imagined and how easily it can be overlooked when it does not match what is anticipated.

This struggle lies at the heart of the Christian story. The life of Jesus—God entering the world, taking on flesh, walking among humanity—reveals that God’s presence has always been near, even when people struggled to recognize it.

Throughout Scripture, a pattern emerges. The people of God believe and trust until circumstances shift—politically, socially, personally. In response, they search for certainty. They listen to voices that promise control, construct tangible substitutes for trust, or cling to routines that replace living faith with habit. Over time, expectation narrows perception.

This struggle is not about whether God shows up, but about how easily attention drifts and perception becomes strained. Seasons marked on the calendar serve as reminders—not for God, but for people—to pause and reorient.

Isaiah speaks directly into this tension.

The book spans multiple eras in Judah's history, moving from impending collapse to exile to rebuilding. It holds together warning, comfort, and the challenge of beginning again after loss.

Often read during Advent as a book of anticipation, Isaiah also addresses immediate realities. The passage from Isaiah 43 speaks to people who had become settled in how they expected God to work—or discouraged by how God seemed not to be working.

Just before verse 19, the people are reminded of what God has done. Then they are told to forget the former things and to pay attention:

“I am doing a new thing; do you not perceive it?”

This is not a dismissal of memory, but a challenge to perception. Familiarity can shape vision in ways that limit awareness, even when faith remains sincere.

The parable of the sower in Mark's Gospel deepens this theme.

Before Jesus tells the parable, Mark notes a shift in setting. Jesus moves from the synagogue into a boat by the sea, with the crowd gathered along the shore. The structured gives way to the open; the controlled to the exposed.

Only then does Jesus speak of a farmer scattering seed—some falling on the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil. The parable resists being read as a test of success or failure. Instead, it invites reflection.

The seed is scattered generously, without control over where it lands. The soil varies. Some ground is ready. Some is not. Readiness cannot be forced; it can only be prepared.

Isaiah's words echo here. God is already making a way in the wilderness. The question is not whether God is acting, but whether there is attentiveness to what is already underway.

This dynamic becomes tangible through lived experience. Preparing soil requires effort—breaking hard ground, removing rocks, clearing space. Growth begins not with planting, but with preparation. Only after the soil is tended can anything take root.

This season invites reflection on that same work. Growth is not rushed. Renewal follows rhythms. Winter, in particular, is not a season for visible fruit but for preparation beneath the surface.

Before there is fruit, before there is strength or growth, there is ground and there is seed.

In the parable, the seed is the message itself—spoken freely and scattered widely. The enduring question is not whether the seed is good, but whether the ground is receptive.

As this series on Perceiving New Things begins, three invitations emerge.

First, notice how God's new work is already taking shape.

Second, attend to where expectations may have narrowed perception.

Third, engage in the quiet work of preparing the ground.

Growth always begins somewhere. Trees add layers over time, shaped by seasons and circumstance. They do not appear fully formed.

Faith is shaped in much the same way—through attentiveness, patience, and a willingness to receive what is being nurtured out of sight.

There is always a beginning.

And this can be ours—again.