

Sermon 4-7-19
Paul Purdue preaching

Making a Way in the Wilderness - April 7, 2019

When you pass through the waters....When you swim through the river to the last station.....When the Lord, makes a way through the sea, cutting a path through the mighty waters.....Don't remember that- don't ponder ancient history. Look! Right now! I Am is doing a new thing; it sprouts up; don't you recognize it? I'm making a way in the desert, new paths in the wilderness.

Forget God's glorious past? Forget who we are? Forget our story? Do not remember the Passover? Forget how we were enslaved in its own way Egypt and escaped with the P to krnjharaoh's treasures as reparations! How, after all the plagues, Pharaoh's heart hardened again? Forget that Ramses pursued our ancestors, coming up behind us to wipe us out. How the Red Sea stood there blocking our escape. Hedged in. The sun set. Moses prayed. God stirred up the waters. Lift up your arm, Moses. Stretch your staff out over the waters. Feel the holy wind fiercely blowing at your back. Wake up and see a miraculous dry path across the seabed. The water walled up like the Chattanooga Aquarium- dryland through the sea. Do not remember how the Egyptian colonels, seeing the hand of God, begged Pharaoh not to tempt God again. Hard hearts never see God. Forget that Pharaoh raised his hand "forward march" in pursuit of us. Forget the most advanced military hardware marching below sea level, confident that slaves with walking sticks and kitchenware could not match Pharaoh's archers, war horses, and bronze tipped chariots. Forget, how we ran to the ocean's edge as Egyptian chariots came fast after us. The wind died in unsettling calm, the sky fell dark, the thunder struck, lightning danced, and the heavens poured forth armor soaking rain. Pharaoh's chariots, sinking to their gilded axles, stuck fast in the mud. The wall of water collapsing around them. How we danced as the advanced weaponry started rusting in the sea. How can we forget the water that washed away our chains? And yet, Isaiah says do not sing Miriam's song.

Do not sing: "When Israel was in Egypt's land, let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand, let my people go!
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land, tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.
When they had reached the other shore, let my people go, they let the song of triumph soar, let my people go.
Lord, help us all from bondage flee, let my people go, and let us all in Christ be free, let my people go."

How can we we forget all that? That would be blasphemous, if it was not a metaphor. But now, says the Lord, the one who created you, don't fear, I have called you by name; you are mine. I will be with you. I Am- I AM the Lord your God, you are precious in my eyes, I love you. Don't fear, I am with you. But don't remember all that; don't ponder that ancient history. Look! I'm doing a new thing; right now it sprouts up; do you recognize it? I'm making a way in the desert, new paths in the wilderness.

Isaiah is not calling us to forget the glorious past, but to remember that the God of the past is with us today. Do not lock God up in the glorious past. I Am is

with us today. Right now, in the wilderness! Look around, see new things pushing up. God loves us. God is with us. God makes new ways even in the wilderness.

Isaiah's word of hope comes at a time of deep uncertainty. The people find themselves once again slaves, not in Egypt but in Babylon. The temple is destroyed. The publishing house burned down, scholars scattered, preacher's sweeping Persian streets, and bishops working as baristas. A free people, who once danced by the water's edge, hang their harps up by the rivers of Babylon, unable or unwilling to sing. (Psalm 137) To an Exodus people in exile, Isaiah preaches forget the glorious past or "Stop living in the past." Stop decorating the tombs of Moses and the prophets. Look around; God is still speaking. (Matthew 23). Stop living with your God chained to a glorious past. Look! "I AM" is doing a new thing; it comes up like a tender shoot, don't you recognize it?

Remember when God revealed the divine name to Moses? Did God identify as "I WAS", or "I WILL BE ONE DAY IN HEAVEN"? No! I AM. (Exodus 3) We follow a living God. God is not locked up in a glorious past: God is still speaking. The church always struggles with this. We enshrine the past. Jesus offer a critique of his religious opponents. His critique cuts far deeper than theology (which passes away). When asked about marriage in heaven, Jesus declares there are no marriages in heaven. Our spiritual identity is not rooted in sex. Our marriages and our theologies of marriage fade into nothingness as faith, hope, and love come to rule our eternal existence. (1 Corinthians 13) But Jesus sends a double rebuke to the experts, "You are wrong because you do not know the scriptures nor God's power... haven't you read what God told you, I Am the God of Abraham, I Am the God of Isaac, and I Am the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead but of the living." (Matthew 22)

Hey listen, right now, says the Lord - don't live in fear, I have called you by name; you are mine. I Am the Lord, you are precious in my eyes, I love you. I am with you. Look! I'm doing new things!

In the wilderness God is sending up a tender shoot that will change everything. In fact, God will save the slaves in Babylon not with Moses, the Red Sea, plagues or Passovers. God will save Israel by the pen of a tolerant sharp-thinking, soft-hearted pagan king. Cyrus of Persia will decree religious tolerance. The captives, who want to, will go home and rebuild the temple with Cyrus's protection, tribute, and blessing. Many will prefer to stay in Babylon! In fact, the best Torah scholars will stay in Babylon for a good long time, as Nehemiah builds walls and fails to learn much from Cyrus, the Lord's servant, about tolerance. (Isaiah 45, Ezra)

But God was already saving Israel before Cyrus wrote the emancipation decree. The seeds of reformation lay in the temple rubble. Inside of exile, inside of Babylon, God does a new thing. Freed from the temple sacrifice, a meager shoot, the tiniest blade of a flower, will push up from the rubble. It will grow to bless us today. It begins with ten people. Synagogue means "ten". In the exile with the temple down and barista bishops, we had a crisis of faith. What to do? What to do when we can no longer make temple sacrifices for our sins? Maybe we begin to understand faith as a more deep seated ethic, born from love and grace. Maybe love of neighbor matters more than pious pageantry or

religious rules. Maybe whenever two or three or ten of us gather together in prayer, service, and study, God shows up. (Matthew 18:30) Maybe in the midst of national humiliation, denominational destruction, and exile, God stirs the waters. God sends up shoots. God calls up prophets. God spreads out a spiritual movement rooted in love for God and love for neighbor - that is scriptural holiness, after all. Isaiah writes: "The Lord says: What should I think about all your sacrifices? I'm fed up with entirely burned offerings. Stop bringing worthless offerings. Your incense repulses me. I can't stand wickedness with celebration! I hate your festivals. Your assemblies are a burden. Your hands are stained with blood. Wash up! Get clean! Remove your ugly deeds. Put an end to evil, injustice, oppression! Learn to do good: seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow. (ch 1)

God is not locked up in a glorious past... I AM longs to show us new ways: don't fear, I am with you. Look! I'm doing new things; they sprout up. Look right now, I'm making a way, water in the desert, paths in the wilderness. And the jackals and ostriches will honor me... I love that of ostriches honoring God. Those once named "unclean", jackals and ostriches, now, dance, sing, and howl in praise. Ostriches are the weirdos of their family tree - a non-binary kind of bird. An ostrich egg is bigger than most birds - the size of two dozen chicken eggs. A full grown ostrich is six feet tall and 250 pounds. It has only two toes, not three, and the biggest eyes of any land animal. It can kick like a mule, and it's kick can kill a lion. It never soars to the heavens, it wings only deploying like racing spoilers. When God does new things, birds like these sing their songs in the temple along with the shallows, sparrows, and nightingales. The jackals howling praise for a soft-hearted, forward-thinking, tolerant, pagan prince facilitates worship temple again! But the synagogue replaces the temple! Let us learn some dance moves from the ostrich and a song from the jackal. I AM always does new things.

So in exile or uncertainty, let us get with two, three, or ten. Let us live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Let us not live in the glorious past and become blind to God's work today for: Right now, says the Lord - don't fear, I have called you by name; you are mine. I AM with you; I am the Lord your God, you are precious in my eyes, I love you. Do not live in fear, I am with you. Look! I'm doing new things; right now, I'm making new ways in the desert. Amen.