

June 25th, 2017: God is Doing a New Thing



Remembering – the collective knowledge of an institution and a people is part of what makes them who they are. When families migrate to a new country, the story of their native land is told over and over, so that it is not lost for the future generations, even in this new land. There's something about remembering who we were and what we've been through that helps define who we are and influence who we will become.

The Old Testament is full of storytelling – the collective remembering of an oppressed people – stories of where they came from, the development of their relationship and covenant with God, their struggles through slavery, exodus, rise to power, exile, restoration, and even destruction. For the Jewish people, remembering the journey of the past helps define who they are! How God has been with them through the good and the bad, the blessings and the curses, bondage and freedom alike.

The beginning of our Isaiah text this morning is a summary of some of this history, a remembrance of the way God had acted to bring them salvation. Verses 16&17 evoke the Exodus, the Story that Jews for centuries had passed down from generation to generation. God had made a way when there seemed to be no way of escape. Instead of suffering destruction at the hand of Pharaoh, God acted. The Hebrews passed on dry land between the parted waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:22), crossing before God brought the waters crashing down upon Egyptian chariots, horses, and warriors. This is a big story for the people to remember – one that recalls how far God will go to save them.

But there is more to life, to faith, than simply remembering, recalling what has been. The past is incomplete without both the present circumstances, and our hope for the future. In one of his many memorable clinical pieces, neurologist Oliver Sacks tells us about Jimmie, a man whose memory somehow became a sieve. Jimmie remains forever stuck thinking it's 1945. Harry Truman is president, the war just ended, and this ex-sailor believes he has his whole future to look forward to. Sacks reports that Jimmie is a very nice, pleasant fellow with whom you can have a good conversation about a number of things. But if you leave the room after visiting with him for two hours and then return a short while later, he will greet you as if for the first time.

While that alone is heartbreaking, sadder yet is Dr. Sacks' observation about the overall effect that this time-based vacuum has on Jimmie: he has no joy. Jimmie is joyless in that he is confined to an ever changing, yet finally meaningless, present moment. With nothing new ever to look back on, and nothing new ever to look forward to, joy is simply impossible. We need more than the memory of our past to thrive, leading faithful, joy-filled lives.

It is fascinating that the prophet, having gone to so much effort to invoke the past, continues in verse 18 with the words: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old!" The command is surprising and gets our attention, lest we get stuck

waxing nostalgic about the “good old days.” Through this recollection and intertwined call to the future, the author aims to create an imaginative space in the minds of the people so that their conception of the past can transform their understanding of the present and, thus, the future: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” We are compelled to view our experience of God’s grace in the past as a springboard so that we view neither present nor future with fear but with expectation, wondering what God is up to next!

This is a wonderful and very necessary word for our church to hear today as we prepare for the launch of a new service. The character of our God has not changed. God’s grace and power have sustained us in the past, and will see us through the present and guide us into the future. God’s great love will lead us through, filling us with peace and hope for the future unfolding before us.

None of this makes remembering bad. Memories of the good old days in our church are a treasure to recall and share. Of when the Sanctuary was full every Sunday morning, when the weekly Bible study couldn’t fit in the lounge because there were too many people, when the Sunday school attendance (both children and adult) was busting at the seams and even spilled over into the parsonage we now rent out. The good old days when we hosted international organ concerts, inviting musicians from all over the world to come play our wonderful organ.

Remembering how God has been working in our church for generations, helping people to mature in faith and calling us to faith in action, is important in that it calls us to hope and trust that God will continue use our church to transform hearts and lives in the future! We remember not simply for nostalgia, for the warm fuzzy feeling we get from thinking of the good old days, but we remember to bolster hope and faith in what God is doing still today!

The God who has done such great things in our past, is also doing amazing things now and will continue to do so in the future. That could look like a new worship service in a new style, designed to reach out to people in our communities who haven’t connected to a church home yet. That could look like various small group offerings or mission & service opportunities that we have yet to even dream of. What the future holds is yet unknown, but based on what we know, what we have experienced of God’s love and faithfulness, we will be blessed to be blessing to others, sharing the love of God we know and hold dear. As our church continues to walk this road of transition, preparing to launch a new worship service, know that God is about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”