

“God is Doing Something New!”

It was a defining moment for God’s people, the Israelites. In front of them stood the Red Sea, blocking their way forward, too deep to cross, especially with so many people. Behind them Pharaoh’s army and chariots were gaining ground.

To a person, the Israelites who could understand knew how they had reached that point. For all of the approximately 2 million people reaching the shores of the sea, the stories of their ancestors had been important. They knew how God had chosen Abraham, out of all the people in the world, to be the father of a great nation, God’s own chosen nation. They knew how his son had received the promise in turn, and his grandson after that. They knew how Joseph and his brothers had fought with each other and ended up living in the land of Egypt.

The recent years in Egypt were even more vivid, and much more painful. For generations the Israelites, an ever-growing group of people, had been oppressed and forced into slavery. They were worked ruthlessly to undertake the building projects of the Egyptians and their king, the Pharaoh. They were treated harshly and pushed to their limits and beyond. Their children were killed to keep them from overtaking their Egyptian overlords. And they cried out in anguish to God, barely able to understand why God would have chosen them and left them in slavery.

Then God finally revealed his plan to them. He raised up Moses to be their leader and his spokesman. He sent miraculous plagues against the Egyptians. And when they still refused to listen to him, God sent one final plague that took the life of every firstborn throughout Egypt. And the Israelites went free.

But the rejoicing of the Israelites in their triumph over Egypt quieted as they reached the sea and looked back at Pharaoh’s army. Once again they cried out to the Lord. Once again they questioned whether God had really chosen them and could really keep the promises he had made to them. And once again God delivered them. He opened a path through the sea, so that the Israelites could walk through with a wall of water towering over them on each side. And when the Egyptians followed with all their soldiers and chariots, God closed the path to them. The waters came crashing down on them, destroying the Israelite enemies and leaving God’s people safe on the other side. No Israelite could possibly have questioned God’s love and care for them at that defining moment.

Hundreds of years later, God introduced a prophecy that he shared through Isaiah with a reminder of this defining moment. You heard it already in our first lesson, our sermon text for today: **“This is what the Lord says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick.”** The same God who had rescued his people hundreds of years before was the God speaking to his people at the time of Isaiah. And he was no less able to rescue and care for them than he had been before.

But God went on to say a surprising thing about this time in Israel’s history. He says “forget it.” Don’t think about it. Don’t worry about it. He says, **“See, I am doing a new thing!”** Now, it is fairly obvious that God does not mean that his people should never consider what he had done for them in the Exodus from Egypt. In fact, he still intended for them to commemorate his deliverance through the Passover festival and in other ways. But what he says through Isaiah is that something new is going to overtake these events as the defining moments in Israelite history. The new thing that God is doing and is going to do is so much greater that it completely overshadows even the amazing deeds that God had done in the past.

God describes this new thing in terms that might shock desert dwellers like us. And these same terms may have been even more shocking to the Israelites as they imagined the vast desert wasteland that lay

outside their borders. But God said, **“Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.”**

The particular value of this prophecy to the people is probably lost without the context of Isaiah’s prophetic work. During the time of Isaiah, the northern tribes of Israel had been destroyed by their enemies, the Assyrians. And following that destruction, Isaiah warned the people of Judah in the south that their enemies, the Babylonians, would soon carry them away. It would be the sins of the people, their unfaithfulness to the Lord, that caused him to allow the Babylonians to oppress them. Isaiah spoke of the need for repentance, and he spoke of God’s gracious promises.

Among those promises, God said that he would bring his people back. They would be freed to return to the Promised Land. They would resettle the land that God had given to them. Just as they had once traveled through the wilderness to get from Egypt to the Promised Land, so they would leave Babylon and return to the Promised Land. And God would see to it that his promises to them were sure and certain.

Along with his promise to bring his people back to the Promised Land, God was promising to carry out his often repeated promise to bring salvation to his people. It was in the Promised Land, in Bethlehem, where the Savior would be born. It was in the Promised Land, in Jerusalem, where he would die for the sins of the world. God’s “new thing” was not a different way of dealing with his people, but a step closer to accomplishing their eternal salvation.

And that is why these words from the prophet encourage us today. There ought to be no doubt for us that in our sinfulness we deserve God’s wrath and punishment. How many times have we, like the Israelites, failed to give God the credit he deserves for taking care of us and watching over us? How often do we stop marveling at God’s great actions as we selfishly focus on the details of our own lives and wants and desires?

And though we deserve none of it, God has done a new thing. He has sent a Savior in the person of his Son Jesus Christ, who lived the perfect life that we failed so miserably to live, and who took our sins to the cross to do away with them forever. He has made a path through the wilderness of our lives in this sinful world to deliver us safely to the eternal heavenly Promised Land. He has provided in word and sacrament the water of life to sustain us on our journey. And for all of this we ought to thank and praise and serve and obey him.

The closing words of our text stress this point, that we are unworthy of God’s grace. The very definition of grace is that God gives his love freely to those who don’t deserve it. God chose Abraham and his descendants before any of them had called on him. God rescued the Israelites out of Egypt long before they offered regular sacrifices and offerings to him. In the same way, we worship God for the love that he has freely offered to us. In the words of our second lesson, God has grafted us into the tree of his chosen people. Or in the words of today’s Gospel, Jesus has given his vineyard to others, and we have reaped the benefits.

The Exodus from Egypt and crossing the Red Sea was a defining moment for God’s people. Hundreds of years later, God did a new thing and gave his people a new defining moment: he rescued them from the land of Babylon where they had gone into exile. Within weeks we will be celebrating and commemorating even newer defining moments in the history of God’s people: Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. And we rejoice and praise God because all of these defining moments mean for us that when we face the defining moments of our lives, God is with us and will see us through. And when the final moment of our lives arrives, we will enter into the eternal Promised Land by his grace alone.

Sermon Text: Isaiah 43:16–24 (NIV84)

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he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
¹⁸ “Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert
and streams in the wasteland.
²⁰ The wild animals honor me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the desert
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
²¹ the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.
²² “Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob,
you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel.
²³ You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings,
nor honored me with your sacrifices.
I have not burdened you with grain offerings
nor wearied you with demands for incense.
²⁴ You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me,
or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices.
But you have burdened me with your sins
and wearied me with your offenses.