

### **Isaiah 43:16-21**

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our text this morning is from the prophet Isaiah, “Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing 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. The wild beasts 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, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.”

Our text this morning cannot be understood without seeing it in light of Israel’s history, particularly the Exodus. I have often said before and you will undoubtedly hear me say many more times; The Exodus is the greatest Gospel event in the Old Testament. God saved his people from slavery under Pharaoh and brought them into the land that he had promised their fathers. God made a way for the people through the Red Sea, bringing them safely out of Egypt. He used the same waters to destroy Pharaoh’s army, quenching them like a wick.

After the people went into the Promised Land, they immediately forgot all that they had seen and heard from the Lord while they were in the wilderness and instead began to chase after and worship the false gods of their neighbors. Through it all, the prophets called the people to remember the Lord their God and to turn away from their sin, but the people of Israel would not relent. Instead, they claimed that they had never forgotten the former things that God had done. They remembered those things, but also were expanding their religious horizons. They were being inclusive and multicultural. Through it all, the things that they had been given were

enshrined, calcified, and emptied of their meaning. This dead history made the people blind to God's continued presence in Israel and his guiding hand throughout history. Not only in their own personal history, but the history of the world that had been shaped for the benefit of God's people.

In truth, we are also in danger of the same problem afflicting us as well. This is the danger that is present for us as Christians who believe and worship in the way that has been handed down to us from our forbearers in the faith. This is even the critique that we hear often from the more "progressive" strain of Christianity. I've been told by someone that my faith is dead because I maintain the truth that we've been given.

But we must not be too quick to simply dismiss this critique of us. We can very easily become exactly what we are characterized as being. There is a reason that there is the joke; How many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb? None. We don't like change. Too often congregations just like ours become set in their ways to the point where nothing can change. The same events are held on the same days every year. The same people do the same jobs all the time. The same food is at every potluck.

But more troubling is when the liturgy becomes simply a prerecorded set of words that we mumble out on a Sunday morning. Or when the hymns become the music that we sit and listen to rather than engaging. Worse still, the message of the cross and Gospel can become clichéd in the face of the mysticism that many are tempted to. The other ways that a congregation can get set in their ways are simply eccentricities compared to a faith that becomes hard and calcified, held up and kept as simply little more than a display piece. That was the problem of the Israelites, and it is something that can happen to us today.

This kind of religion becomes hard and sharp, ready to cut down anyone who doesn't equally hold it in the same esteem. It is the kind of faith that is quick to judge and slow to forgive. It is the kind of faith that drives out sinners rather than bringing them in and showing them the love of God that is rightly theirs in Christ.

Yes, the people of Israel didn't forget about the Exodus, but it was so far removed from them in history that it became largely irrelevant. That is why in our text today God tells them to forget the things of the past and that he is going to do something new. They needed to quit worrying about those other things from the past that had become largely meaningless and instead pay attention to what God was about to do. They needed to turn their attention to God's promises rather than the history books.

Now, before you start ripping up your hymnal and coming up here to tear down the altar since God wants us to forget the previous things, know that only a few chapters later in Isaiah, God again tells his people to remember the past. This text is not a call to reject everything that has come before us. It is a call to look back but also look forward. The people of Israel needed to look forward to the day that God would restore them.

Their exile in Babylon wouldn't last forever. God promised early on that he would restore the righteous remnant. They would return to the land. There would be a kind of second Exodus, where God would save his people from bondage and captivity in Babylon and have them return home. And that is exactly what happened. The Babylonians were defeated and the people of Israel were allowed to return home.

But when they returned home and rebuilt the temple, God's presence wasn't there like it had been before. Nothing was the same. The people were set on a course of waiting. They

waited for the day when they would be restored before God. They waited for the day when the Messiah would reestablish David's righteous kingdom.

And this happened with the birth, life, and death of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Remember on Transfiguration Sunday we talked about John describing Jesus talking to Moses and Elijah, discussing the Exodus that he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem? He did accomplish that Exodus. He saved the people of God. More than that, he died to save the whole world. Jesus died for every single person. He died for those who want to have a faith that's defined by constantly being in flux and shifting with the winds of the world and the culture. He died for the ones whose love has grown cold and who are slowly solidifying more and more in their ways.

Jesus died to give us life. He gives to us eternal life. He gives us the life that comes only through the forgiveness of sins. But just as God saved his people by bringing them through the waters of the Red Sea, we are saved by going through the waters of Baptism. Through Baptism, we are made alive. We are given life in Jesus, a life that no one can take away.

The life that we have is one that should be characterized by love for our neighbors and for one another. Jesus says, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." And by love I don't mean the empty, vapid kind of love of the world that may flare quickly but doesn't last. I mean a deep, sacrificial love. A love that only can be expressed through living faith. We see what love is when we look there; to the cross. It is at the cross that our God showed his love for mankind when he hung his own son on the cross to shed his blood and pay for your sins and mine.

We may not bleed for people, but we certainly understand that truly loving our neighbors means not putting ourselves first. We seek the welfare of our brothers and sisters in Christ first

before seeking to get what we want. I know this is radical. I know this sounds insane. I also know that I am not a perfect example of this, and neither are you. But nonetheless, we continue living out our vocations and seeking to serve our God who has led us in an Exodus not from the hand of Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar, but out of the hand of the devil himself. We have been redeemed from life and servitude in hell to becoming co-heirs with Christ himself.

Jesus is the new thing that the Father was preparing for. Never before and never since has God bled and died for us. He didn't do it before, because the Messiah came only in the fullness of time, and he hasn't done it since because he died once for all, Scripture tells us. This is the new thing that God has done. He has shown us the true depth and sincerity of his love at the cross.

And so today, we live as the people of Israel did, looking back at the great things that God has done for us. We seek to see and recognize the hand of God in history, shaping things for the betterment of his Church and for the sake of the Gospel. And we do this by remembering and honoring what has come before us. Our challenge is to be vigilant that we do not treat this lightly or disregard the truth of God as irrelevant because it happened so long ago. Rather, we understand as Scripture tells us that the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword.

We also look forward to the day when the last part of our text will be finally fulfilled, "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts 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, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise." On the day of our Lord Jesus' return, creation will be restored. The jackals and ostriches will be returned to their rightful place, rather than their ruins that they formerly occupied. We will also

see all creation rejoice and praising God. On that day, we will drink deeply the water that is living water, the water of faith that gives eternal life. May we keep watch over ourselves so as to remain steadfast not only in the faith, but also in the true, living love of our neighbor. Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting. Amen.