

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2016
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Isaiah 43:16-21 (NIV)

This is what the LORD says-- 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 wilderness and streams in the wasteland. 20) The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness 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.

Dear people of God:

You are enjoying a wonderful home cooked meal with all the trimmings together with family and friends. "This is all so tasty," you say as you begin to reach for a second helping. "Be sure to save room for desert," the hostess says. "The best is yet to come."

As God led his OT people ever closer to the time when the Savior of the world would arrive he allowed them to see and enjoy some amazing things. Sadly they didn't always appreciate everything the Lord had done for them and at times like that he would discipline them in some way – leading them to acknowledge their need for him.

One of the ways that the Lord would get the attention of the unfaithful nation of Israel was to allow them to be defeated by their enemies. At times like that the people would remember the Lord's past faithfulness to them and turn to him again. Isaiah had warned the people that they would be taken captive by the Babylonians for a time. However, in our text he is assuring them that the Lord will also graciously provide a delivery for them. He began by recalling the mighty deliverance that the Lord provided for his people from their slavery in Egypt and then he shared these words from the Lord with them **"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. 19) See, I am doing a new thing!** In other words, the Lord was telling them – the best is yet to come. These words provide a reminder to us:

People of God, You Haven't Seen Anything Yet

1. Yes, God's past deeds were great
2. But the new things he does are even greater

For a moment let's put ourselves in the place of the people of God who living at the time of Isaiah. If you were among the few who had remained faithful to the Lord – the warning of the Babylonian captivity might have made you wonder what would happen to the promises the Lord had made to provide a blessing from Israel for all nations of the earth. You might have been filled with grief and sadness as you contemplated the effects of this warning on your life and on the lives of those you loved.

One of the things that we do when things get a bit difficult in our lives is to look back to better times. In our text Isaiah does that very same thing.

This is what the LORD says-- 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:

Isaiah began, “This is what the LORD says” – and then he paused to say; just in case you’ve forgotten what the Lord is capable of doing – he’s the one who made a way through the sea. The miracle Isaiah had in mind took place after the Lord lifted his mighty hand against the Egyptians at the time of Moses. Moses and the Israelites – a nation a million plus strong found themselves between a rock and a hard spot so to speak. In front of them lay the Red Sea and from behind Pharaoh and his armies with their mighty chariots and horses were closing in on them.

With a mighty miracle, the Lord parted the waters of the Red Sea and the Israelites were able to cross between the walls of water on dry ground. With reckless abandon the Egyptians followed in hot pursuit but **(Exodus 14:24-29) During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. 25) He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt." 26) Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." 27) Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. 28) The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen--the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived. 29) But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.**

Surely the people at Isaiah’s time must have thought, “Those were the days, the good ol’ days when the Lord acted on behalf of his people.” That miracle had an effect on the Israelites who saw it. Moses wrote; **(Exodus 14:31) And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.**

The recollection of that miracle ought to serve as comfort for us! God always provides his faithful people with an escape no matter what the trouble may be. When Satan and his evil allies, the world and even our own sinful flesh gang up against us – they are doomed to failure because the Lord overcame them for us. And so we can be convinced that with God’s help our earthly struggles and spiritual dilemmas can be conquered as well.

God provided the WAY for this delivery. Jesus declared, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”

God’s people in Isaiah’s day needed to look ahead to this wonderful victory. And so the Lord told them: **FORGET THE FORMER THINGS; DO NOT DWELL ON THE PAST.** Now it’s not that the Lord wants us to forget about his past mercies to us – he wants us to remember them and to take heart from them so that we might look to the future with hope.

It must have been hard for the Israelites to imagine anything greater than their exodus out of Egypt and the great miracles they had seen or heard about. And yet God is telling them, **You haven’t seen anything yet! I’m going to give you a foretaste of an even greater deliverance.**

Israel’s immediate concern would have been deliverance from the Babylonian captivity. Through the words of Isaiah, the Lord promised that deliverance. But ultimately the Lord was promising them an even greater victory – a spiritual victory.

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? What is the new thing that the Lord is doing for his people? You might call it a restoration project. The prophet Jeremiah told these people – the captives in Babylon – **I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers.** For the captives who longed for home this was a wonderful promise – it was music to their ears. The new thing the Lord was

doing included a physical deliverance from their captivity. Cyrus the Persian would bring about Babylon's fall and the Lord would restore Judah and Jerusalem.

But the Lord had a more important restoration project in mind as he spoke about the new things he would do. The new thing he was doing included their spiritual restoration. That restoration was accomplished when Christ died on the cross on Calvary. Christ's work was the conquest of pain, death, and sorrow. The apostle Paul reminds us: (2 Corinthians 5:17) **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!**

Through baptism you and I have been connected to Christ. Our sinful nature has been set aside. We have been given a new man created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:24) We look forward to life in the new heavens and the new earth.

Our text uses an earthly picture to describe the new life which is ours through Christ. **I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. 20) The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen.**

Isaiah had spoken about the way the Lord was preparing in the desert earlier in his book. (Isaiah 40:3-5) **A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4) Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. 5) And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."**

The Gospel writers used this passage to describe the ministry of John the Baptist who pointed to Jesus as the one who came to reveal the glory of the Lord and to pave the way to heaven for us with his holy life and his innocent sufferings and death on the cross. By undoing the curse of sin Jesus makes it possible for the Lord's creation to be restored to its original state of perfection in the life to come. Isaiah wrote about the joy that the wild animals and the desert creatures would experience as a result of the new thing the Lord was doing for his people. The creation would enjoy the water and streams which were intended for the benefit of the Lord's people.

Perhaps Paul's words in Romans 8 can help us to understand the correlation between the salvation the Lord promises his people and the rejoicing which is found in nature because of that salvation. (Romans 8:19-21) **For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. 20) For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21) that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.**

Adam's sin and the curse it brought not only affected human life – it affected all of God's creation. However, in the life to come everything will be perfect again. That includes the things God created. As an example, there will be no more pollution of air or water in the world to come.

Our text for today pictures God's people as journeying through a lifeless desert – this is a picture of our own helplessness. Life and salvation are only possible by God's gracious intervention. God's people were helpless to rescue themselves from their captivity in Babylon. Their gracious God would intervene and provide their rescue. God's people are also helpless to rescue themselves from their bondage to sin, death and the devil. Once again, our rescue is secured by divine intervention – providing us with streams of living water which quench our thirsty souls.

In the uphill battles of our lives – we can draw hope from these words. Jesus has already given us that life-giving water to satisfy our thirst. He offers it to all who are spiritually thirsty-- **whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.** (John 4:14)

The Lord said that the promise spoken by Isaiah was for **21) the people He formed for himself that they may proclaim his praise.**

People of God – by his grace that is what we are. He created us as the crown of his creation. He formed us in our mother's womb and knit us together. People of God – that is what we are because in his grace **Jesus Christ... gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.** (Titus 2:14)

People of God – the best is yet to come. You haven't seen anything yet. It's true that as we consider the Lord's past blessings to us including the sending of his Son and all of the many ways he has helped us in our lives up to this point in time – including his loving discipline when we have wander from him – we have ample reason to sing his praise to eagerly serve him.

We have every reason to praise his name and to proclaim his marvelous deeds even as we look forward to wonderful joys that await us in eternity because the best is yet to come.

Our text began by reminding us of the deliverance the Lord provided for the Israelites as they fled the Egyptian armies. There was no way on their own that they could escape the wrath and death threatened by Pharaoh's armies. There was no way they could resist the chariots, armor and weapons of Egypt's finest. There's no way that you and I could escape God's wrath and eternal death which are the consequences of our sins. There's nothing we can do to save ourselves. But just as the Lord miraculously delivered the Israelites, the nation chosen to give birth to the Savior of all men, so God has delivered us. That's the message of Lent and the passion of our Lord. Cling to the cross of Christ. There you are saved, there you are forgiven, there you are assured that you are a child of God. There you have been set free to proclaim his praises for time and for eternity. Because of what happened there, the best is yet to come! Amen.