

**“Metanoia: The Way of Repentance”**

**Isaiah 43:16-21**

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**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

**<sup>6</sup>Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, <sup>17</sup>who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: <sup>18</sup>Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. <sup>19</sup>I am about to do 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. <sup>20</sup>The wild animals 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, <sup>21</sup>the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.**

It had been years and the people were beginning to give up. Would things ever change? Would they ever get back to normal? Everything was such a mess now. Things used to be so great.

Now, look at the situation we are in.

These could be the words of the people at many different times in history, they could even be words that we speak now after the years of the pandemic and the divisions in our society and now the invasion of Ukraine. Can't we just get back to normal? Remember when things were so much better? Remember when . . . Remember when we didn't give a second thought to sitting in a restaurant or shopping in Meijer's or Harding's? Remember when we didn't wonder whether we should get our next booster shot now or wait until the beginning of summer just in case a new variant arises? Remember when we didn't even know what the word "variant" meant? And here in the church—remember when we used the balcony for people to sit, rather than a base for all our livestreaming equipment? Remember when we used to have meetings in person and Zoom was a kid's description of how fast a rocket went, not a verb for how to meet together? Remember when we used to walk around the sanctuary and greet each other by saying "Peace be with you," and grasp each other's hand or give a hug or a kiss on the cheek, instead of using the phrase "pray for peace," knowing how almost fleeting peace has become?

As Christians, like many other faiths, we are called to remember. We are asked to remember what God has done for us in the past. When we celebrate this sacrament we are asked to do it “in remembrance” of Jesus. Often we are called to remember our identity as children of God, to remember our baptism in which God seals us and claims us and grafts us into the Body of Christ. Lately, in this congregation we are choosing to remember our heritage and those generations of believers who have gone before us, those who built this sanctuary, who installed a bell in the steeple in 1881 after the old one cracked, who built the Deacon Brown House in order to always live next door to the church, those who lived through the lean years when they couldn’t afford to pay the pastor and couldn’t heat the sanctuary in the winter and so they worshiped in the chapel behind. We remember.

And the prophet Isaiah writes these words to his people who are going through tougher times than ours—they are people in exile. Their country has been conquered by the Babylonian armies and the temple destroyed and the walls of Jerusalem broken down. They have been taken into captivity in Babylon and they have been there for a generation and the people need to remember. They need to remember how God has delivered them before out of slavery in Egypt. They remembered that when they had wandered in the wilderness that God had been with them and fed them and cared for them. When they crossed the river Jordan into the promised land, God had been with them. When they were in the land with David as their king and then Solomon in all his glory, God was with them and they remembered. They needed to remember, as we do, that in all the tough times and the good times as well, God has been with us. We need to remember.

But Isaiah reminds us that we also need to forget. “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.” Wait a minute. We are supposed to remember. Do this remembering

me, Jesus says. How can we remember and forget? Well, the problem with remembering is that we remember more than God's presence with us. We remember the way things were and we want them back. We remember what God did and we want him to do it again. We've been talking this Lent about *metanoia*, the Greek word for repentance, that it means not just being sorry for something, but turning around, taking a new direction, finding a new way. And that's so often just what we don't do. We might "repent" and turn around and expect to go back the same way. But God calls us to remember what he has done in the past, but to not expect that it will be the same in the future. "I am about to do a new thing," God says through the prophet.

Remember that God cared for us in the past, remember that God saved us in the past, remember that God was with us in the past good times and bad, and God is with us now, tough times or easy, and will be in the future—but not in the same way. Repentance is about a new way. God will still care for us, save us, and be present with us, but in ways we may not expect or yet perceive. We so often pray for change, don't we? We want God to change things, we want God to change someone, we want something outside of us to change. But what if when we pray for change, we are truly praying for *metanoia*, for us to take a new road, for something new to grow within me? When we pray for peace, perhaps we are praying not just for peace in Ukraine, but for us to become part of the peace God intends, for us to be peacemakers, for peace in our own hearts? What if when we pray for forgiveness, we discover that it begins with us—in our hearts, asking for forgiveness, granting that forgiveness by giving up an old grudge? Maybe the new thing God is doing, God is doing within us.

God delivered the people of Israel from captivity, but did not restore the kings like David. He had something different in mind. God brought the people back to Jerusalem, but not as the capital of an independent powerful nation of Israel. God had something new in mind. The last

few years we've been through have been an upheaval. Perhaps God is getting ready to do something new with our church. Maybe we'll be something different from just the cute old church on the square—a beacon of tradition. Maybe we'll be a light shining for something new—what might God be calling us to in the years ahead? What might God be calling you to do and be in the years ahead? Maybe God is calling you to something different, to a different role, a different task. “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”