

“God Moves...To Do a New Thing”

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Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church

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*Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
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.
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,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.*

You have heard me before, talk about my affection for one of my mentors, John Claypool. Dr. Claypool and I taught together at the McAfee School of Theology. He, of course, taught preaching for the last three years of his remarkable life. Since I was also working at the School of Theology, I would sometimes audit classes and during John’s tenure, I audited, I think, three of his. The first class of his that I took was, Preaching Genesis. The class was great, but it had virtually nothing to do with preaching. Instead, the class consisted of John interacting with the pages of the Genesis story while we took furious notes. We were really just watching him be brilliantly Claypool with a Bible in his hand. One of my favorite of his insights in that course was his interaction with Genesis 1, the Creation Story. In Genesis 1, the dangerous waters of chaos are spread over the earth and God speaks, and order is created. God’s activity, God’s speech made order where once there was only chaos. Dr. Claypool said, “*From that day until this day,*

God can be found where chaos is moving to order". "Evil", he said, "is always at work reversing creation, undoing creation; evil always moves things from order to chaos – but goodness always moves from chaos to order." I just love that guy.

And, as you know from earlier sermons and Bible studies, the sea is often a symbol of danger and chaos for the Hebrew listener. Before airplanes and bridges and scuba diving, the sea was this deep unfathomable mystery that when it got angry would swallow up boats and destroy structures along the coastline. Waves and salt water and darkness and creatures that live beneath... and some people go out there and do not return. It is a great and dangerous mystery. There was even a myth that a giant sea monster, Leviathan, lived under those waters. Some sailors would see the backs of giant fish, they knew that some sailors go out and never come home, so, Leviathan must have taken them under.

So, literally the sea is dangerous and chaotic, but the mighty waters of chaos and danger are also used as a literary symbol, like in the opening of today's passage.

*Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,*

God is the one who makes a way in the danger, Isaiah is saying. God is the one who makes a path in the mighty chaos.

And look, these people needed a dose of hope. They could use a visit from the God who makes a way in the chaos. In the exile, the people of God had lost everything. They lost hope of ever seeing their home again. Some were separated from family. We've been watching on TV lately, seeing families in Missouri after the floods, looking at the newly formed lake where their house used to be – everything gone. It is that kind of desperation that the Israelites have endured plus the banishment from the land they loved. Nothing has gone their way for a very long time and the prophet declares that God will bring a way in the danger; God will set a safe path over the mighty waters of chaos.

No wonder the great Hebrew scholar, Abraham Heschel says of today's passage that, *"No words have ever gone further in offering comfort when the sick world cries."*¹

This is a passage of hope for those who cry. And, I happen to know, that every well-dressed person in the pew is crying. We have not lost our homes to flood, our people have not been exiled from the homeland, but some of you have been exiled from other things dear to you - family members, health, friendships, and hope. We all cry privately about something.

A few weeks ago, I sat in a hospital waiting room, holding a friend's head on my chest while her make-up and tears ran down my dress shirt. The news from the operating room was not good. There are

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, p.145

obvious stories that need God's hope, but all of us have hollow places, scary places, lonely places, shameful places that fill our eyes with tears. My friend was asking, like the people of Israel were asking, "*Where is God in the midst of all of this pain?*"

God declares to not only bring paths over the waters, but chariots and horses and armies and warriors to come and fight the fight on our behalf until God's brigade is just too worn out to go anymore.

*who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick*

Then, in an odd passage, God commands us not to remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I say, "odd" because usually the scriptures are calling on us to remember. The word "remember" seems to turn up on every page. The Psalmist says, "*I will remember the deeds of the Lord; Surely I will remember your wonders of old.*"² Jesus says, "*Do this in remembrance of me.*"³ Remembering is a way to draw strength from God's long history of delivering, God's unblemished history of keeping covenant.

But sometimes we need to be commanded to not remember. When remembering just reminds us of how bad it has been, when remembering is just a way to lick old wounds, to recall ancient hurts, to pull away scabs just to be reminded again of how we were harmed, to replay the tapes of us done wrong. When remembering gets stuck in woe and regret and anger or shame, it can sometimes keep us from seeing what new thing God wants to realize in us.

And that is exactly the promise of God to the people who feel neck deep in danger and chaos – "*I am about to do a new thing.*"

So, today's sermon is only for those of you who might could use some victory over your chaos, those of you who want to see God do a new thing – others of you can be excused.

Michelle Vann wrote a book titled, *Stop the Merry-go-Round; I Want to Get Off* – we've all felt that way at times. A pastor friend of mine left his church, for another church, in a move that confused most of us who are his friends. He did not go to a bigger church or a more prominent church. He was not forced out of his other church. It just seemed odd that by his own choice he would make a professional move down the ladder at the height of his career. One day at lunch, one of our friends asked him about the move and he said, "*I was just exhausted, and I needed to erase everything on the chalk board and start over.*"

² Psalm 77:11 NASB

³ I Cor. 11:24 NRSV

Is there some place where you wish God would do a new thing? I've known people who have done much more dramatic, more desperate things to erase the chalk board and start over. A friend, younger than I am, was in the finance industry. He worked in tall glass and steel buildings and lived on the fast Dow Jones roller coaster. He was apparently good at it because at about age 45, he just quit, moved to North Carolina, bought land, grew a beard down to his navel and planted a community garden. He erased the board and started over. He was ready for a new thing.

My grandfather, my mother's father, wanted a new thing in his life, so he just left one day. My mother was grown but he left my grandmother when he was about 50. He took golf clubs, a suitcase, and a secretary. With no warning he picked up and moved 25 miles away to a nearby town.

One more story of our desire to stop the merry-go-round ...

Our scriptures tell a story about a group of people who many years ago did a desperate thing to erase the board and start over. In the Jewish exodus, homeless and wandering Jews had just had enough. No home, no stability. God provided Manna but even manna, day after day, day after day... Bickering friends, crying toddlers, more miles to walk and who knows where we are anyway. So, when the leader, Moses, goes up the mountain. Aaron says, *"Hey, why don't we just erase the board and start over. Let's worship a different god – one that shines. Give me all of your gold jewelry, we will melt it down, Hasid over there is kinda artistic, we can get him to form it into the likeness of a calf and we can bow down and give ourselves to something other than the God who keeps letting us down. Let's leave this God and start over"*.

I could tell many more stories, but you probably know all too well, the feeling of wishing the merry-go-round would stop so you can get off. We so desperately want God to do a new thing.

In today's scripture of hope, after promising a bridge over troubled water, after promising horses and warriors fighting on our behalf until they drop of exhaustion, God has promised to start a new thing.

Walter Brueggemann calls this passage the *"poetry of homecoming"*. And in contrast to the waters of angry chaos, this poet says that this new thing will be like rivers in the desert. Not dark waters of danger, the new thing will be like fresh, clean, clear water that gives life, refreshment, food and drink and delight. God is doing a new thing in your life and it will be as welcome and as renewing as a river in the desert. *"It is provided for my people, so that they might stand up and give me praise"*.

Could you use a new thing?

My dad said to me, in one of my darkest periods. I was a young father of toddler twins. The financial waters of chaos were splashing over the hull of my boat. I was in a horrible season of career and my dad said to me, in his simple wisdom – *"This is going to get better. The only alternative to this getting better is that it never gets better. The worst always gets better."*

As simplistic as that sounds, he is right. The dark seasons are never permanent. God has always done a new thing and I have danced again.

Are you up for two Claypool stories in one sermon? He and I were working together when the 9/11 attacks happened. It was arguably the darkest time in our nation's story in my lifetime. The attacks happened on a Tuesday and John was scheduled to preach that Sunday, just down the street at First Presbyterian Church. My friend, George Wirth, who has preached here, was pastor at the time. After the attacks, John called George and said, *"Surely you want me to step aside this Sunday and reschedule, right? Surely you want to address your congregation this week?"* George said, *"No, I'm needing what the rest of my congregation needs right now; I need a sermon from you this Sunday."* So, John honored the invitation to preach. He started his sermon with a quote from a 14th Century mystic who said, *"All the wickedness in the world that man might do or say was no more to the mercy of God than a live coal dropped in the sea."*⁴ Then, he went on to preach from the life of Jacob, who's life went like a roller coaster into deep dives and slow ascensions, who's life often looked like a tragedy that could never rebound, hopeless situations that seemed impossible - and the refrain of that post- 9/11 sermon was this, *"In the economy of God, the worst things are never the last things."*

That is the sermon that Isaiah is preaching to the tired and exiled, chosen people of God - *"In the economy of God, the worst things are never the last things."* God will make a path over the chaos. God will send armies to fight on your behalf. God will do a new thing. God will put a fresh spring in your desert. Hold on, *"In the economy of God, the worst things are never the last things."*

I'm jumping the gun a little on this Lenten season, but the best evidence that the worst things are never the last things happened on a Friday that we are soon to commemorate. Blood dripped from a cross, the skies went dark, the veil of the temple ripped, all of creation cried. It looked like the waters of chaos had won. But God declared – in history's darkest moment, *"I am about to do a new thing...I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."*

However bleak it is for you right now - whatever it is that you think make take you under, hold on. Pray and trust in the God who never breaks covenant – because, *"In the economy of God, the worst things are never the last things."*

⁴ William Langland, *Piers Plowman*