

“Making a New Thing”

Lent 2019 - “With All Your Heart” – part #5

Isaiah 43:16-21

The year was 1948. World War II had just ended, and the country of Germany was occupied. The country was in disarray, occupied by armies from three Allied powers. There were shortages of many things, but there was no shortage of anxiety.

The German people experienced their first major currency reform in June of 1948. That was the year the German Mark was introduced. However, the Soviet sector decided they wanted to have their own currency, so they affixed adhesive coupons to the bills. By 1951, East Germany officially began to print their own money, which went through two other slight reforms in 1964 and 1968.

Then came the German reunification in 1990, at which point the East German Marks had to be converted to (West) German Marks. Once again, the East Germans lined up at the banks to receive unfamiliar, new currency. Just when they thought they had it worked out, Germany joined the European Union, and in 1999, and they had to convert to Euros. Starting in 2002, all the old German currency was no longer accepted.

Although I’ve played a few different versions of Monopoly before, I simply can’t imagine going through three currency changes in one lifetime. All of us have only known one legal tender in this country: the dollar. I am not surprised that many Germans were confused, anxious, and none-too-happy.

Change makes us anxious. My friend, Corey, has joked that the only time Christians like change is when the offering plate is passing by! Change causes anxiety because we enter into a phase of the unknown. The practices and

routines which were familiar are now disrupted, and it takes energy and patience to find our way again.

My family has hiked the Lake Michigan Trail at Sleeping Bear Sand Dunes several times. It's a 1.5 out-and-back trail that goes up and down and up and down and up and down some very large sand dunes, some of them close to 400 feet high. Last week when we hiked, however, something surprised me. The trail had changed significantly. The same blue markers were still there, but some portions were so different, I literally asked Katja, “Do you remember this? I don't!”

Sand dunes can move up to 3 feet laterally every year. Remember the blizzard we had in February? It moved a lot of sand! But the National Park Service agents didn't go back to the trail with shovels and attempt to restore the trail exactly like it was. Change at the dunes is natural. It caused us to marvel at the beautiful landscape. Our appreciation was elevated by the new look.

The sand dunes are the closest thing to a desert landscape I can imagine in Michigan. It is the forces of wind and water that constantly change and enhance the beauty of the land. I find no small coincidence that God promises in Isaiah 43 to make “streams in the desert.” (verse 20) Water changes things, especially by making them grow.

Many times our lives feel like a war-torn or desert landscape. Change leaves us feeling dry, lifeless, and hopeless, like a forest after a fire. In Isaiah's time, God's people felt the same way. How could they survive after such a long exile? How could God do a new thing with them?

Rev. Todd Pick at Discipleship Ministries offers us this insight on today's passage:

It seems strange that the prophet writes, “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old” (Isaiah 43:18). Traditionally, every time that Israel forgot their history, dreadful things happened to them. Without being rooted in memory, the people of God were easily led astray and would neglect all the things that made them God’s people in the first place. The prophet here, however, is talking about past trauma, haunts, and hurts that tended to keep the people of God bound in graveclothes rather than memory that propels them forward toward a future with hope.¹

The Israelites did have a lot to be thankful for. God brought them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, destroying the chariots and horses that were pursuing them (Isaiah 43:16-17.) God’s power and might were on display that day! But that’s not what Israel remembered. They remembered being slaves. Not having freedom. Not having a temple, a home, an identity. They remembered battles they had lost, loved ones they had lost, learning foreign languages and new currency and new customs. The “good old days” were not so good for them. They had become blind to God. They needed their sight restored.

These are the words of comfort God spoke to them. Read them with me. “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.” (Isaiah 43:19)

God wants to provide for his people, but sometimes, we have to lift up our gaze and actually look. Through Isaiah, God promises to restore his people, to care for their needs. God says, “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, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.” (Isaiah 43:20-21)

¹ www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2019-worship-planning-series/april-7-fifth-sunday-in-lent-year-c/fifth-sunday-in-lent-2019-year-c-preaching-notes

God provides for us in the most unexpected places. Even the animals who honor God are unexpected. Jackals and owls? Really? I'd rather picture deer, flamingos, swans, and bluebirds. But Isaiah is trying to tell us that all creatures praise God for the unexpected goodness God provides. Pay special attention to the last part of that verse. “I...give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.”

If you learn nothing else today, remember this one fact: you were created to proclaim God's praise. You know, there's only two letters difference between “proclaim” and “complain”. Do not ever forget the fact that you have been created to proclaim praise, not complain. We were created to declare God's praise. That is our goal. And we cannot accomplish it if we complain about the past.

With my upcoming move, it is tempting to enter “lame-duck mode.” It is tempting to think after five years, “What possibly could God accomplish in me and in this church?” Friends, I ask you this morning, what will you choose?

I choose what the apostle Paul chose in Philippians 3:13-14: “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” That can be our choice this morning – forget what is past and strive for the goal of loving Jesus.

We all know that moving pastors creates anxiety. Some people are not happy that the bishop decided to move me. Some people are probably relieved! I'm not sure myself how I feel. I grieve to have to leave Bellaire, yet I am excited about the new thing God can do for my family, my ministry, and even for this

church. We know nothing lasts forever. Some of you have lived in Bellaire for generations, but that was never my calling.

You may not even know how the appointment system works: First, the Michigan Area cabinet – the bishops and the nine district superintendents – look at all of the pastor and church profiles, year-end reports, and needs. They consult annually with every church’s Staff-Parish Relations Team. They look at who is retiring and who is graduating from seminary and local pastor school. Bellaire Community UMC has the incredible possibility to receive almost anyone, especially new pastors. Think about that. The reason for the delay is that they really want to send the right person here.

When the decision is made, Anita will call the prospective pastor and give them 24 hours to pray about it. Then Anita will contact me and Sue Knight, the SPR chair, to set up an introductory meeting – at which point, we will still not know who is coming. The new pastor will meet only with the Lead Team and tour the parsonage. If no red flags are raised, the next Sunday morning, the announcement will be made verbally in worship and simultaneously via email and Facebook. Do you want to know the best way to know who is coming? Come to church every Sunday!

Please, do your leaders a favor; don’t pester them. Don’t ask them to betray the confidence that they have been asked to keep during the brief time between the introductory and Sunday worship. If you see something, don’t gossip. Two things that could happen – first, that person, for reasons we do not know, may not be able to accept the appointment – for example, my family, if this church had refused to buy a parsonage to meet our needs. No church wants to know who didn’t come here. Second, if that person is serving a church

somewhere now, how awful would it be for that congregation to find out by the grapevine that they were losing their pastor? How would you have felt if members of St. Ignace had shown up unannounced on Feb. 3rd to “meet” their new pastor, and none of you knew? Awful. So don’t ask. Pray. Don’t worry. Pray. Don’t be anxious. Pray. Memorize Philippians 4:6-7.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

So let me be honest with you this morning. What can we do to help in this anxious time? I have three ideas.

First, as God commanded in Isaiah, let go of the past. It is so tempting to bring up past hurts, what former pastors, what congregants did. Don’t do this. I promise you I will not, either. My friend Tamara Williams made this analogy: when you only focus on the past, it’s like giving someone directions to the church by saying, “Turn left after where Glen’s used to be, then turn right where Moka’s used to be.” This is not helpful, for us, and especially for new people who have no relationship to our past.

Second, trust the leaders established by God, and trust the process that will provide you with a new pastor. Please stop coming in and asking our office manager, Pam Whynot, if they have announced the new pastor yet. They have not! Instead of directing your disappointment at Bishop David Bard, DS Anita Hahn and the rest of the cabinet, pray for them. This is the hardest appointment season they have ever had. They have had to deal with the General Conference,

the Michigan Conference merger, new districts, new rules, new committees, and new people. They need every bit of support and help we can give them.

Let go of the past. Trust the process and pray for the leadership. And third, dream. Dream. What can God do with us? Remember, God used Gideon – the smallest man in the least of the clans of tiny Israel. (Judges 6:15) Now is not the time to rest and wait and see what happens.

Are there changes in store for the ministries of Bellaire Community UMC? Of course. You will see changes in the obvious things, like Sunday School and worship. But in this time, would you rather be inactive or proactive? Would you rather wait for a new pastor to ask, “What should we do?” or be ready to say, “Hey, Pastor, we’ve got this idea, and we’d love to have you on board!”?

Remember God’s promise in Joel 2:28:

“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your old men will dream dreams,

your young men will see visions.”

Dream. Dream big. See this new opportunity that God is giving us, and let it compel you to increase your vision of what can be done in this place.

If God can lead the Hebrews through the desert for 40 years, God can take care of us. If God can lead the Israelites through exile for 70 years, God can lead us through the next 70 days and beyond. Never forget that.