

Have you ever gone on a journey not knowing where exactly you would end up?

Part of my call/our call is itineracy...

For the people of God in Isaiah 43,
Israel was presently in captivity in Babylon,
but there was a new horizon before them.
God promises that God's people will be released
from exile through a new exodus.
As glorious as the exodus from Egypt was,
a new journey was before them even greater than before.

The scripture reading for this week from the prophet Isaiah,

comes to us from a section of the text
most commonly called Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55).
Where there are many words of encouragement for us too.
What makes this section of Isaiah different
from the others is the experience of exile.
These 15 chapters are written as a reminder
that God is still bringing new beginnings
even when (especially when) life is at its
darkest and it seems like hope is lost.

43:16 Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,

43:17 who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they
are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

In the context of Isaiah 43, this description
is obviously related to the Israelites
exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea.
But it is not so much the events themselves
we are invited to reflect on as it is the power,
the love, and the dependability that
the Lord demonstrated in those events.

And that these words from the prophet were a reminder
that when the people of Israel were tempted
to go back into slavery because the wilderness
seemed too challenging and endless,
God made a way from that death into new promise
and will do it again (and again and again).

And so Isaiah's words remind us that
life is filled with transitions-
some welcomed and some unexpected.
We can become so fixated on our past experiences
whether victories or failures, that we struggle to move forward.
But God instead calls us to do something different.
To change our focus.
And that is a reminder for us, too, as leaders in the church.
And that often FAIL in church ministry simply means
first attempt in learning, as we have talked about before.
And as one of our five Annual Conference priorities
Our conference is committed to doing something new
as we focus on developing spiritual leaders.

Our Conference priority is that we will allocate time and resources to cultivate, develop, educate faithful disciples to offer excellent leadership for current and future generations.

And Isaiah gives us a great reminder as followers and leaders in Christ to first

Forget the Former Things

It seems strange that the prophet writes,
43:18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
when 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.

Remember, Isaiah is speaking to the Israelites who were exiled in Babylon.
They had seen God perform wonders in the past,
particularly in delivering their ancestors from Egypt.
But God says, "Forget all that—it is nothing compared to what I am going to do."
The Hebrew word for "forget" here means to no longer
be influenced by or controlled by something.

God is not saying to erase history but to stop
allowing the past to dictate the future.
Israel's focus was on past miracles like the parting of the Red Sea,
Often we are focused more on the past too.
The past should help us to know who we are and whose we are.
Not a weight that wears us down from doing anything different.
That is the cracker barrel battle right now.
but God wanted them to expect greater things.

And for them to have one thing that spiritual leaders must have too: **Humility**
In times of uncertainty, what we thought we knew
And how we used to do things is no longer useful. (COVID)
Many of us are great as problem-solving leaders,
but the future of the church sometimes is not a problem to be solved.
Instead, the church's future can feel a bit mysterious to us.
And how do we embrace mystery?
One way is to let go of our need for immediate answers.
No single one of us has the answer
and we have to develop skills for inviting
the wisdom of the other leaders around the table.

And trust that God has greater plans ahead (**Jeremiah 29:11**).
We did that here at NFUMC when we began to imagine
How might we do something new that is different than the past?
To imagine what an Associate Pastor position might do
to enhance and expand ministry here?
And now, as Stephen Ministry has begun its training
after more than a year of dreaming about what that ministry
could be like and how it could help care for our congregation.
In both ministries, we were never sure exactly
how it would all work out as we stepped into the promises of God.
And soon fully restarting our Men's Ministry.
It means doing something new and leaving the old behind.

As followers every one of us experiences dark times that are hard to get over –
grief, shame, despair, death, disappointment, anger, depression,
and addiction can keep us from practicing resurrection.
What holds you in your wilderness?
What past failures or successes are you clinging to
that prevent you from seeing God's new work and the call on your life?
These shadows can even make us forget that

Something new is possible and natural
for the people who claim the name of Christian
and know the power of Resurrection.

It's in times like these that the muscle memory
of walking from death into new life is crucial.
There is so much that can hold our hearts in death.
There is only one thing that can compel
those same hearts to open to new life.

Then, the second thing Isaiah tells us is to **Recognize the New Thing**

43:19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

God is constantly at work, but we must be spiritually sensitive to perceive it.
The word "new" here means fresh, unprecedented,
something never seen before.
God's new work often looks different from past experiences.
It requires us to have something else besides humility. **Curiosity**
It is when we ask as leaders "What if?"
Always with the belief that God had some role for each of us
to play in pursuing God's dream for our community.
Seeking to be curious from a place of humility,
to be open to following God's answer and go wherever God leads.

When we respond to the "What if?" of God
then we began to perceive, to see that God
is wanting to do a new thing either with or without us.
And that same new curiosity is what God wants for us as followers, too.
2 Corinthians 5:17 (NLT): **"This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"**
God renews our hearts, our minds, and our circumstances.
Often, we don't recognize the new thing
because we expect it to look like the old thing.

Mustang...

Or imagine a caterpillar expecting to crawl forever,
unaware it is being transformed into a butterfly.
God's new thing in your life may require you
to break out of a cocoon of comfort and step into uncharted territory.

And to pray for discernment to see the new thing God is doing in your life.
To be willing to step out in faith even when the new
thing seems unfamiliar or uncomfortable.

And to remember as Isaiah last tells us that **God Provides in the Wilderness.**

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

God is doing a new thing by making
a way in the sea (the sea was a symbol of chaos);
a path in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, or dry wastelands;
A wilderness is a place of uncertainty, dryness, and difficulty.
But God is not limited by your situation—
God makes a way where there seems to be no way.

A missionary once got lost in the jungle, unable to find a clear path.
A local guide said, "Follow me. I am the way."
Jesus is our guide through life's wilderness.
Trust God's provision even in dry seasons.
Seek God's direction rather than relying on your own understanding
We must perceive the new things that are always springing forth.
And before we can fully embrace that one thing,
we must let go of all that holds us back.
And step into the new with faith.

Throughout the Bible we see this..
Joshua and the Israelites faced an impossible barrier—the Jordan River.
But God told them to step into the water before it parted (Joshua 3:15-17).
Sometimes, we must move forward in faith
before we see God's provision.
In Hebrews 11, we heard last year
"Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see."
In Matthew 14:29: Peter walked on water when he fixed his eyes on Jesus.
And even just before this in Isaiah we hear 41:10 : "Don't be afraid, for I am with you."

Time and time again God's people are told to
take bold steps in obedience, knowing God goes before you.
Let go of fear and trust God's promises.
In Isaiah, God promises that the new thing
that is springing up will make gardens out of deserted places.
This newness is about transformation.

Rivers will not run through deserts
without fundamentally changing them,
just as God's love cannot flow
through our hearts without transforming us.
And when we know and believe that God will provide,
then we can be a part of that new thing fully and faithfully.

And as spiritual leaders, we can discover impactful
community ministry in collaboration with others –
like we are doing with the Community Concert/ Event series
or in collaboration with other smaller UM churches
around us who want to do ministry but often can't do it alone.
Or a greater partnership with the Nolensville Food Pantry.
We can collaborate with partners to bless
our community with all our resources.

And those words in Philippians from Paul
Paul tells us in Philippians 3:13-14 (NLT): **"I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead..."**

Paul says we cannot praise the risen Christ,
let alone rise ourselves,
if we are still mired in the old, former things.
We have to make a new thing.

How have you experienced God working newness in your life?
Where is God still calling you to experience newness now?

As followers of Jesus our biggest bedrock belief is that death is not an ending.
That we don't remain in our past but live into the future with more joy
And that we dare to dream because we know that
God is doing new things all the time and God will provide.
And that we have to make a new thing
with all our heart as followers and leaders.

God is calling you to let go of the past and step into God's new thing.
Will you trust God to lead you through the wilderness?
Will you allow God to create rivers in your desert places?
Will you change your focus and take the next most faithful step?