

God Is Doing A New Thing

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29, 1998. Scripture lessons: Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philipians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Is God past tense, or is God, *also*, present and future tense? Is God alive today - living, working, acting, shaping history and reforming lives? Or is God confined to the distant, mythic past? Some people say, "If I only lived back in the days of Bible when God worked miracles. It would be so easy to believe." I believe that God is the God of the present and of the future. God is alive! God is at work today in the world? We need to take off the filtered glasses that we wear - the glasses that filter out our ability to see what God is doing among us. Look at this community and our lives and our world in the light of the Word of God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

God's people have always had a tendency to relegate God to the past and ban him from the present. For example, listen to a conversation that took place nearly 2,500 years ago - 550 years before the birth of Jesus. The place - the Middle East. The Babylonian Empire has conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. The defeated Jewish aristocracy is living in exile in Babylon. Imagine a group of about twenty exiles talking about their glorious past. "Remember how God raised up Moses long ago?" "Remember how Moses went right up to Pharaoh and demanded to let God's people go?" "Remember how God sent plagues over Egypt?" "Remember how the Angel of Death passed over Egypt killing all the first born sons of the Egyptians but sparing our children?" "Remember how Pharaoh finally let God's people go?" "And remember how Moses lifted his staff before the Red Sea and made a way in the sea and a path in the mighty?" "And remember how Pharaoh's chariots and horses, army and warriors were extinguished, quenched like a wick?" "Ah, those were the good old days."

One old exile is strangely silent as his friends remember the mighty acts of God in the past. Finally, he speaks up, "Thus says the Lord, 'Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. I'm raising up my servant, Cyrus of

Persia, to destroy the Babylonian Empire. I'm going to tell Cyrus to let you return to the Promised Land. I'm going to lead you through the wilderness again to the Promised Land. Don't worry about the wild animals. Don't worry about water in the wilderness. I will protect you. I will provide for you." God is about to do a new thing. Open your eyes. "Do you not perceive?" The God who comes to us in Jesus Christ is always doing new things? Morning by morning *new* mercies I see.

I love history. I was a history major. I enjoy reading history. Ignorance of history can destroy the Church, can destroy the nation. And yet, constantly looking back can be a kind of escapism. We can't return to the past. We live in the present. We look to the future. And the Good News is that God is alive and present and active in the present and in the future. God is always about to surprise us with something new. And the task of the church is perceive what new thing God is doing - and then jump on the bandwagon and get with God's program.

God still does new things, unexpected things - even in the lives of the most dysfunctional families. ^{Angela Ash} Francis McCourt grew up during the Great Depression in the worst imaginable poverty. When he was 11 years old Frank almost died of typhoid. Confined to a hospital for weeks, his dad comes to visit; his dad, the drunk; his dad, who spends all his pay check on booze and lets his wife and kids starve; his dad who has never hugged or kiss his son. Frank's dad comes to visit him in the hospital.

Frank describes the visit:

"I fall asleep and when I wake it's dark and Dad is sitting by the bed with his hand on mine.

"Son, are you awake?"

"I try to talk but I'm dry, nothing will come out and I point to my mouth. He holds a glass of water to my lips and it's sweet and cool. He presses my hand and says I'm a great old soldier.

"Sister Rita comes in and tells Dad he has to go. I don't want him to go because he looks sad. When he looks sad it's the worst thing in the world and I start crying. Now what's this?"

says Sister Rita. Crying? Your father will be back in a day or two, won't you, Mr. McCourt? Dad nods and puts his hand on mine again. He looks at me, steps away, stops, comes back, *kisses me on the forehead for the first time in my life and I'm so happy I feel like floating out of the bed.*"

God is doing a new thing. It's not much. A kiss from an alcoholic father who has never been able to tell his boy how much he loves him. But something new is springing forth. It's never happened before. And it comes from God. God is working in the life of a drunk father. God is doing a new thing.

In the 1940s and 50s Memorial Presbyterian Church in Lancaster was one of the largest and wealthiest churches in our Presbytery. They have a grand history. Stained glass windows memorialize faithful Christian workers of the past who followed Christ and built the church. But those visionary leaders died. The community changed. Members moved out of town. Black and Hispanic families moved in. Attendance at Memorial Church dwindled. The church almost closed. ~~But God spoke to the congregation--~~ "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?" The dwindling white, Anglo congregation believed the Word of God. They called a new minister, the Rev. Walter Chuquimia, an Hispanic Presbyterian. The church is now reaching out and drawing in the Hispanic community. The church is growing once again. The gospel is reaching out into the neighborhood. God is doing a new thing at Memorial Presbyterian Church in Lancaster.

In the year 2004, less the six years away, Oxford Presbyterian Church will celebrate our 250th anniversary. We were here before the Revolutionary War. We have a glorious history. One former pastor was the Moderator of the General Assembly. One hundred years after our church was organized, John Miller Dickey founded Lincoln University. One hundred years ago Casper Wistar Hodge left the pastorate of this church to go to Princeton Seminary where he became one of the nations leading theologians. Nearly thirty years ago members of this congregation organized the Neighborhood Service Center. Members of this church started the

Oxford Senior. We started the first preschool in Oxford. More recently we rebuilt our church to minister, not just to our needs, but to the needs of the entire community.

Now - as our 250th anniversary approaches God is doing a new thing. Do not dwell on the past. Don't try to recapture the glory of the past. God is doing a new thing. The Hispanic community is the fastest growing ethnic group in the Oxford Area. New middle class housing developments are springing up all over the place. What worked in the past, may not work in the future. But God is alive. God can't be relegated to the past. God is present tense. God is future tense. God is doing a new thing. Will we have the eyes to see what God is doing? Will we have the courage to climb on God's bandwagon?

On Good Friday Jesus was flogged with a cat of nine tails. He was crowned with thorns. They forced him to carry the cross to the place of execution. He was stripped of his clothing. Roman soldiers drove spikes through his wrists and ankles. He was hoisted up on the cross. He was jeered. He was mocked. Soldiers gambled for his clothing. A lance pierced his side. Hours later he breathed his last breath. He died. He was taken from the cross and placed in a tomb.

His disciples remembered how he healed the sick, fed the hungry, raised the dead and ate, blessed the children and ate and drank with sinners. Now Jesus was dead. Their hopes were dashed. They had only memories of the past. But God was about to do a new thing.

Let us pray: God of all the living,
in the resurrection of Christ Jesus
you have given us the promise of life
which death itself cannot destroy.
In the strength of this unshakable promise
give us a new heart to live, even now, as your new creation.
We ask this through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever. Amen.