

NEW THINGS GOD DOES

Isaiah 43:18-25; Psalm 41; 2 Corinthians 1:18-22; Mark 2:1-12

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"Thus says the LORD... I am about to do a new thing." Isaiah 43:19

"They think... that I will not rise again." Psalm 41

"We have never seen anything like this!" Mark 2:12

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

"Thus says the Lord: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old."

When I read those words from Isaiah it was like the Lord was trying to pick a fight with me. I was a history major! I love history! Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it! And now the Lord says "Forget the Red Sea Exodus. Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." I can't believe what I'm hearing. I imagine the Lord laughing and saying, "How are you going to preach that, Atkinson?"

Allow me for the next couple of minutes to sound like I'm contradicting the Word of God. I do *not* think God wants us to forget history. Our history helps us to know who we are and gives direction for the future. Imagine forgetting all the stories your family told you around the dinner table over the years. Imagine forgetting our story as a nation. Forget Pearl Harbor? Forget the Great Depression? Forget the Revolutionary War? Forget the past and we don't know who we are. Like someone with amnesia, we wander around not knowing what we're supposed to be doing. Think of the value of African-American studies that came to the fore-front in the Sixties. African-Americans began to realize they had a long and marvelous history of accomplishment in literature, philosophy, religion, and art. History gives us a sense of pride and dignity. Americans need to remember our history, warts and all.

And Christians remember the saints and martyrs of past ages. Mother Theresa, Dr. Martin Luther King, John Knox, John Calvin to name only a few. After Moses led the Children of Israel across the Red Sea on dry land he said, "Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." When we take the bread and wine of Holy Communion the

Risen Christ tells us, "Do this in remembrance of me." We engrave those words on our Communion Table. I can't believe God wants us to forget the past.

But that's exactly what the Lord says. "Do *not* remember the former things, or consider the things of old." ^{A Referring to Exodus.} If there's a time to remember, there's *also* a time to forget the past. And the better part of wisdom is to know the difference. Sometimes our past paralyzes us.

Think of Northern Ireland. Two years ago we were so happy. A peace accord had been signed. The Protestant Unionists and the Irish Republican Army agreed to share in governing Northern Ireland after 450 years of conflict. I thanked God during the *Prayers of the People*. Forget 450 years of hatred and prejudice. God is doing a new thing. And now, that's all fallen apart. Northern Ireland can't forget the past yet. But I continue to believe that God, in hidden ways, is doing a new thing in Northern Ireland. Think of Kosovo...

Think of yourselves. Perhaps you haven't spoken to a loved one for years. Your marriage is falling apart. Conflict with children and parents. Ancient hurts and wounds fester and have become infected and threaten to destroy relationships. Fred Buechner writes of anger, "To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back - in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you." What if you were to forget the past and take positive steps to create a new future?

Sometimes we're paralyzed by the past. Like the former high school athlete and prom queen who don't have a life beyond their glory days? Remember the old Bruce Springsteen song from his *Born in the U.S.A.* album.

There's a girl that lives up the block; back in school she could turn all the boys' heads
Sometimes on a Friday I'll stop by and have a few drinks after she put her kids to bed
Her and her husband Bobby, well they split up
I guess it's two years gone by now
We just sit around talking about the old times, she says when she feels like crying she starts laughing
thinking about...
Glory days well they'll pass you by
Glory days in the wink of a young girl's eye

Glory days, glory days

Listen, woman, to the Word of the Lord! "Do not remember the former things... I am about to do a new thing."

Think again of your relationship to Jesus Christ. Several years ago many of us went to the *Encounter* meetings with Steve Wingfield. He talked about the necessity of making a decision for Christ and likened it to pounding a stake into the ground. He asked, "Can you remember when you first made a decision for Christ and pounded that stake into the ground?" The trouble is its the *only* stake many Christians pound into the ground. Always looking back to that emotional high, that time when you first committed your life to Christ, maybe at *The Great Escape*, maybe at *Young Life*, maybe when you were confirmed, maybe at one of the *Encounter* meetings. But God is doing a new thing in our lives. Every day by God's grace we pound a new peg in the ground. And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, new pegs, because God is doing a new thing.

The great Yale church historian, Juroslav Pelikan, said that "*Tradition* is the living faith of the dead. *Traditionalism* is the dead faith of the living." *In the nation*, tradition is squeezing into your old Marine uniform on Memorial Day and marching proudly down Third Street. Traditionalism is wearing your Marine uniform everyday of the year. Tradition remembers Civil War stories of General Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Traditionalism hoists the Confederate Flag on the South Carolina Statehouse during the height of the Civil Rights movement in the Sixties. *In the church*, tradition remembers the great Reformation slogan, "Salvation by grace, through faith." Traditionalism keeps alive anti-Catholic rhetoric. Tradition appreciates how the Bible was first translated into English. Traditionalism insists on everyone using only the King James Version. Traditionalism is what the Lord has in mind when he says, "Do not remember the former things. I am about to do a new thing."

Scholars tell us that Isaiah wrote the first 39 chapters before Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. But, they say, chapters 40-66 were written by a faithful follower of Isaiah who lived after the fall of Jerusalem. Scholars call him Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah was faithful to

the tradition but he didn't simply repeat the same old message Isaiah preached a hundred years before. Through the new Isaiah God said to his people, "Don't dwell on past mistakes or your nations past glory. I've adapted my plans to your disobedience. I will remember your sins no more. Don't remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. I'm about to lead you on a new Exodus through the wilderness back to the Promised Land."

One final word. God says, "I am about to do a new thing, *now* it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" God doesn't say, "*Let* me do a new thing." Nor does God say, "You must believe before I'm able to make it happen." Nor, "I *may* do this if you're good enough, if you believe the right things, if you try a little harder, or if you allow it to happen." We don't make it happen. We can't prevent it from happening. Our doubt and unbelief can't prevent it. Nor can our sin or good works. We can only look for it. The new thing God is about to do is hidden. It's like a treasure hidden in a field. We perceive it in the most unlikely and unlikeable people. It springs forth and surprises us. Do you not perceive it - the new thing God is doing? In this world, and in and among us God *is* about to do a new thing.

O gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.