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Coming Into Focus  
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash  
October 27, 2019

Introduction to the Text:

The book of Isaiah is actually a collection of three author's works. First Isaiah was written early in a period of exile and includes hard critiques of the people. Second Isaiah, from which our reading today is drawn, was written around the fall of Babylon, when a return home was beginning to seem possible "Unlike most other biblical prophets...Second Isaiah is filled not with warnings over wrongdoing, but with encouragement to reevaluate Judah's past and future...Second Isaiah soars with inviting poetry of hope, offering to pave the way homeward with confidence and expectancy."

Text: Isaiah 43:16-21

16 Thus says the Lord,  
who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,  
17 who brings out chariot and horse,  
army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:  
18 Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
19 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.  
20 The wild animals will honour me,  
the jackals and the ostriches;  
for I give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert,  
to give drink to my chosen people,  
21 the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.

Prayer

Sermon

From the text Jim read to us, let me call to mind these verses:  
Thus says the Lord,  
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?

Do you not perceive it? Can you imagine it? Have you heard a whisper of it? Is it coming into focus for you yet?

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Here we are, approaching the year 2020.

It seems like every town (including Lexington), every school system, and most churches I know have spent the last ten years developing something like a Vision for 2020. It just sounds good, doesn't it? It's a nice round number. 20/20 vision is something most of us would literally like to have. And, back when Visions for 2020 started to become popular, the year 2020 was far enough away that planning for it seemed wonderfully future looking.

2020 is two months away. Does that shock anyone else? It's no longer a time to dream about, it's basically here.

In fact, it's so close that we're in the middle of the stewardship season that will enable what we do as a congregation in 2020. We have a marvelous narrative budget filled with beautiful pictures describing our income streams and the ways we'll use that income next year. (You can pick up a copy in the Narthex if you didn't get one in the mail.) This narrative reads in part: "We strive to be welcoming and to fuse our Christian faith with everyday life. We use our time and talents to do good in our world, though this good work also requires treasure. As a UCC congregation, we rely on your generosity to fund most of our efforts." So we prepare for 2020 hoping that you feel that the vision for 2020 is starting to come into focus, and asking you, Pilgrims, to participate in that vision.

Pastor Karen Gale chose our beautiful Stewardship theme verse for this year: Behold, I am doing a new thing! It was among her many generous gifts to the congregation and to me, to offer a theme for this pledge campaign. Those of you who were present for her sermon on September 15, "Preparing for the Next Chapter," may hear echoes from that sermon. She told you how she understood the chapter of Pilgrim's life that she shepherded.

It is time for a new chapter. A new leader. A new people. You are not the same people as you were when we met two years ago. I don't just mean the new folks who have joined us or those who have passed on or left. I mean we have changed together. You all have let go of much of the hurt of the past and looked again to each other asking how God is leading you all forward. A shift from surviving, to embracing the mystery and ministry of what is next.

We're in the first sentence of the first paragraph of that new chapter, so it is not yet clear what this chapter will hold for Pilgrim Church, but in large part because of the work of the interim chapter, I think we are feeling strong and hopeful, and we are looking forward to 2020. Can I get an Amen?

Now, Isaiah (or as Jim told you, second Isaiah) feels hopeful for the people when writing:

18 Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
19 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.

It is a curious thing, though, this instruction not to remember former things. Isaiah, offering God's message of future looking hope to the people, first reminds them of God's extraordinary care in the past, speaking of:  
the Lord,

who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,

Remember God, who brought the captives out of Egypt by parting the sea?  
Remember that act which was foundational to the people's relationship with God?  
Remember that, Isaiah says? Then, in the very next verses, Isaiah says, forget that.

If I were in exile in Babylon and wondering, is it possible to be freed and to return home, I would not want to forget that.

Maybe, maybe, Second Isaiah does not mean to forget the way God has blessed the people in the past.

First Isaiah spends a lot of time talking about the causes of exile and exploring what the people have done to contribute to their own suffering. To say it more bluntly, First Isaiah is a more traditional prophet who is calling the people out. Maybe, Second Isaiah is saying, don't dwell in the crisis of the past - remember that God makes a way for us even in crisis. Never put a period where God has put a comma. See, we know from other sources that once the people entered exile, they adjusted, they dealt, they got used to the crisis. Perhaps they stopped thinking about the future, stopped yearning for home. Donald Gowan says Second Isaiah's major mission was the battle against cognitive surrender. It's as if Second Isaiah is saying, what God did in the past is not the only thing God does. What's coming next is also powerful and good.

"On the one hand," says Stan Duncan, "we do have to remember our pasts. But on the other hand, over-remembering our pasts can also bog us down...get in our way of seeing a future that is actually (potentially) clear and hopeful."

So, Isaiah says, there is a bright future coming. Behold! God is doing a new thing! And you are ready to perceive it. You are ready to be part of it.

And sure enough, there was a new Exodus. If you look at the arc of the Bible, Hebrew Bible and Christian Bible taken together - there are three of these of these great saving moments. The Exodus; the return from Exile which Isaiah predicts and does come true; and Easter. And before and after each, there were highs and lows, but God was always with the people.

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One of the things I am learning about this congregation, in this first sentence of the first paragraph of our chapter together, is of your sense of wisdom and perspective born of experience. Bob Beckwith is one among you with the perspective of the entire past of this congregation, who also embodies hope in our future. He says something like this: we've been through ebbs and flows as a congregation before. Hopefully, (hopefully, looking toward the future) we're in a good phase now.

Thus says the Lord: I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

This chapter is being written now.

Let me close by bringing us back to vision.

Do you not perceive it? Can you imagine it? Have you caught a glimpse of it? Is it coming into focus for you yet?

Here it is, the vision you have cast so beautifully, the mission that is becoming clear, the work God is calling us into, the chapter are writing with God and each other:

Pilgrim Church is, and will be:

A welcoming home to all spiritual seekers  
Making a difference in our world,  
By fusing our Christian faith with everyday life and  
Serving God by serving others.

In this next chapter we will love each other and laugh together and sing with joy. We will welcome new people and we will bless our neighbors and friends. We will serve God by serving others. There will be joyful noises and laughing voices, hands receiving, hands connecting, hearts believing and hearts accepting.

The specifics of our next chapter will become clearer as we ask what it will mean to do and be all these things right here on Coolidge Avenue, nestled between Bedford and Woburn, Lexington and Waltham, surrounded by new and old neighbors, learning who needs our blessing in 2020. But, it's coming into focus, as God is making a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

And in this season, when all of us make choices about our resources, we are each invited be part of this chapter.

Folks, if there is a whisper of this new thing in your ear,  
if you can glimpse this vision coming into focus,  
if you have turned to this new chapter with wonder and expectation,  
I hope you will be part of Pilgrim Church's vision for 2020.

Amen.