

“What in the World is God Doing?”

Isaiah 43:15-21

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In the hopes of hanging onto a sabbatical frame of mind, I’ve been using most of my Mondays – since returning from sabbatical – doing the things that people do at monasteries: praying, reading, listening – things that all Christians are supposed to do, but the truth is that even pastors have a hard time doing without intentionally carving such disciplines into our schedules.

I might not spend these “monastery days” in an actual monastery. I might sit and pray in a church sanctuary, or read in a garden, or write in a café. And I encourage you to try to take some monastery time yourselves. Praying and reading scripture and listening to God are disciplines for all of us.

A few Mondays ago, I was sitting on the terrace of a coffee shop soaking up a little sun with my Bible open and my notepad ready. But something happened that interrupted my moment of sabbatical flashback. I haven’t yet decided whether I feel proud of what I did (as a conscientious citizen), or I am ashamed of what I did (as an anxious American).

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Commentators tell us that since 9-11-01 we live in the midst of “The New Normal.” In “The New Normal” we are encouraged to “report suspicious activity.” In “The New Normal” we expect longer security checks at airports.

“The New Normal” is a result of terrorism in *our* land and in the lands of our friends, where suicide bombers have done their work on subway trains in London, and cafes in Tel Aviv, and embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

On my Monastery Day, I found myself in the throes of this “New Normal.” That afternoon, I saw a group of young men sitting at another table on the terrace, whispering and sharing information from their Blackberries, and looking – well – suspicious. I don’t speak Arabic, but I know enough Arabic words to know that they were speaking Arabic to each other and when they noticed *me* noticing *them*, they spoke in lower tones. A stream of men – all about the same age – came and went that afternoon – and I noticed that most of them came and left in rental cars with the telltale “Enterprise” bumper stickers on the back fender.

It went on for so long, and it made me so nervous, that I went to my own car and did something I never dreamed I’d ever do: I reported “suspicious activity.”

My heart both pounded and sank at the same time: it *pounded* as I worried about these strangers and wondered if maybe they were planning something wicked. And it

sank as I worried that these men could merely be making social plans. A birthday party for all I knew.

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As much as our lives have changed since that terrible day that changed all our days, we find ourselves on this Sabbath day in Isaiah 43 observing a group of Jews whose “normal” had been terrible for two centuries.

It’s difficult for us to imagine what it was like to be a Jew in the 6th century B.C. We’re talking about *more than 2500 years ago*.

We can barely imagine life 250 years ago. So consider that these words were written to a people who lived over *two thousand five hundred* years ago. Try for a moment to imagine.

Today we are Christians – the majority religion – in the United States of America – the world’s only Super Power. But the Jews who received these words were a minority religion with almost no power.

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After King Solomon died¹, the great kingdom of God’s chosen people was divided into a northern kingdom (Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah), weakened and politically vulnerable. First the Assyrian Super Power overwhelmed them. Then the next Super Power – the Babylonians – humiliated them. And then the Babylonians decimated Jerusalem² in such a way that makes our 9-11 look embarrassingly minor. From that point on a “New Normal” was established for God’s chosen people – the Jews. And this “New Normal” hasn’t changed much in over 2500 years.

When Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C., it would be *the last time* that most of the world’s Jews would live in The Promised Land. From that point on, a significant number of the world’s Jews would live outside The Promised Land without a king, without a Temple, without a line of priests.

We find ourselves – in the 43rd chapter of Isaiah – hearing God announce these Jews *were suddenly free* from what had become “normal” for them. In spite of the fact that the Babylonians still controlled them, they were free from their captors. They were free from wandering in the wilderness. They were free from thirst (a never-ending issue in this part of the world.) Even the jackals and the ostriches would no longer be a menace. **The people were free.**

¹ King Solomon died in 928 B.C.

² Samaria in the northern kingdom fell in 721 B.C. Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. but the battle began in 597 B.C.

They were *not* free because an army of friendly marauders had burst on the scene to destroy their enemies. No awesome human king had yet arisen to save the day.³ After generations of suffering at the hands of numerous oppressors, they were free *merely because **God spoke***:

Thus says the LORD: *I am your King, your Creator.*

You can forget about the former things: how the Babylonians turned your temple into rubble, how your enemies have terrorized you.

Thus says the LORD: *I am about to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it?*

What in the world is God talking about here? What in the world was God doing?

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Imagine God saying to **us**: *You can forget about 9-11. You can forget about insurgents in Iraq. You can even forget about those times you've been hurt by someone who has made you feel parched or threatened. Forget about that.*

You can forget about the times when others in your tribe have disappointed you, when your faith community has let you down, when attempts to find spiritual refreshment have turned into lonely moments when life felt more like a wilderness than a clear journey of faith. You can even forget about the times you've given up on God.

If God could change this miserable world of the 6th century Jews, can we begin to believe that God might also offer **us** something new by merely *speaking* once again?

We are in need of *the springing forth* of a new word.

We are not alone if ever we wonder, "**What in the world is God doing?**" There is sadness and desperation all around. The bad guys seem to be winning.

Here is one answer: God is working through the church.

Before my sabbatical and during the sabbatical and today, I hear conversations about the ups and downs of the institutional church, about **God's-People-Who-Follow-Jesus**. That's what we are, you know. We are not a club. We are not a social organization. We are not even a service organization. We are first and foremost **Followers of Jesus**, people who have made a commitment in some way to be the hands and feet and voices of Jesus Christ in the world.

It was Jesus – indeed an awesome human king – who eventually arose to save the day for God's people – long after these words in Isaiah were written. But when Jesus came, most of the world did not get it. They could not perceive it.

³ Cyrus of Persia would be instrumental in helping free the Jews but at this writing, it had not yet happened.

And we in the established church – we who call this King Jesus *our Savior* – spend a lot of time trying to figure out how things might be different for the world. But we get stuck in conversations and activities that do not make a way in the wilderness for new people to come to Jesus.

I continually hear that “if only more people would come to church, the world would be a better place.”

But we’ve got that wrong. The world would not be a better place if more people *came* to church.

The world would be a better place if only more people would *be* the church. A “Newer Normal” would spring forth where *we would trust God more* and *try to save ourselves less*.

Being the church means that we recognize that we were created to serve God and not ourselves. Being the church means that we see our life’s purpose as living to praise God in all things. Rick Warren didn’t make this up. It’s right here in verse 21.

And for a couple of centuries now, our Presbyterian tradition has put it *this* way: The purpose of the church is:

- to proclaim the Good News to the world so that the world would be saved,
- to shelter, nurture, and spiritually connect God’s children,
- to provide opportunities for divine worship,
- to defend the truth,
- to encourage social justice, and
- to exemplify God’s loving will to all the world.⁴

What in the world is God doing? God is still speaking. Do we not perceive it?

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The problem is that sometimes God speaks, sometimes God acts but we prefer remaining *captive to what is familiar* rather than being free. The Israelites had been captive for so long that they had become comfortable in their “New Normal.” They were slow to give it up.

It was much like their ancestors who had escaped from Egypt hundreds of years before. As the children of Israel ran out of Egypt and away from slavery led by Moses, they tended to look back wondering if they were making a big mistake. At least in Egypt,

⁴ These purposes are “The Great Ends of the Church” as found in the constitution of The Presbyterian Church (USA) found in *The Book of Order* G-1.0200.

they knew what to expect. It was slavery, but at least it was familiar.⁵ They were eating slave food, but at least they were eating something!

Do you think it is possible, *do you think it might be true* that God is still speaking, still preparing to do a new thing, still freeing a captive people? And do you think it might be possible that we are afraid to be free? Is it possible that we have become *so comfortable in our faith* (or in our *lack of faith*) that we choose to be satisfied with *coming* to church instead of *being* the church?

Two Sundays ago I asked you to consider what we cannot live without in this church. Maybe – on some level – you do not want to live without the choir (when the choir is not on summer break). Or you don't want to live without your Presbyterian Women's group. Or you don't every want to live without Sunday School – the way it's always been – or without a congregation full of familiar faces or a familiar worship or a familiar coffee time after worship.

But the question is not: What do we not *want* to live without as church people. The question is: *What can we not live without?* Isaiah 43 offers some clues:

- we cannot live without a God who speaks to us
- we cannot live without a God who guides us
- we cannot live without a God who quenches our thirst.

We were created to praise the living God in such a way that others would praise God too. We were created to be free from the things that bind us so that others might be free as well. How are we doing? What's holding us back?

If we believe that God continues to speak, that God continues to guide us, that God continues to quench our spiritual thirst – then come with me to *a place where what is "normal" becomes new again.*

Come with me to a place where we spend more time *trying to perceive* what God is doing in the world. Talk about these things with each other. Take a monastery day. Consider joining a small group of Christians who intentionally seek a path of faith in a world filled with distractions.

In the coming months, you will be hearing more about how we – as a group of Christians intent on following Jesus – are moving into a "new normal," into the next chapter of God's ministry with us. In just a year and a half – in February 2007 – Fairlington Presbyterian Church will celebrate its 60th anniversary. We will certainly consider the things of old in that celebration. But if we don't recognize that *God is doing a new thing* in our midst, then we are keeping the church from being free to expand and grow and make way for new people to declare God's praise.

I have a final story about my sabbatical. I didn't take many exotic trips, but I did make one moving pilgrimage at the suggestion of one of my sisters in this congregation. She told me that I needed to experience a place not far from here that would really

⁵ See Exodus 16:2ff, 17:3 ff.

“wow” me. That place was not a monastery. It was a grocery store. “You’ve got to go to Wegman’s,” my friend said. And in faith, trusting in her guidance, I went. I went to Wegman’s Grocery Store in Fairfax.

I know something about grocery stores. My grandfather was the sole butcher at a little grocery store in Mooresville, N.C. when I was a child. He cut and sold the meat that came from local farmers, and every day, for every meal, we enjoyed lots of meat. The name of that store was “Teeters” and Mr. Teeter – the store’s owner – was a neighbor and an elder in the Presbyterian Church. “Teeter’s” was sold about the time my grandfather retired from the meat cutting business, and if my grandfather was alive today, he would marvel at what “Teeter’s” has become. “Harris-Teeter’s” has a 24-hour pharmacy and a wine section staffed by an expert who can help you find the perfect chardonnay for your meat.

And then there is Wegman’s.

People drive from far and wide to come to Wegman’s where there is something for everyone: no-name granola in sacks for people on a tight budget and boxes of cereals from Sweden if you need Swedish cereal to get your day started.

They sell meat and fish from all over the world. They sell Italian pottery and cheap grills. They welcome strangers into both elaborate cafeteria lines and a short-order restaurant with everything from salads to sushi to Bananas Foster flambé. You could have your wedding reception there. It’s simply beautiful.

A little store like “Teeter’s” is no match for a place like Wegman’s. No longer do we live in a world where people only want one kind of bread and one or two kinds of meat.

And this is not to say that the church should offer cafeteria-style ministry where people can pick and choose what they want to believe.

But we *do* live in a world where one kind of music, one kind of preaching, one kind of spiritual nourishment does not fit all those who long to perceive God’s Word. **God is moving us to reach out to a thirsty world.** Do we not perceive it?

This text is one of the most important for our time. Like the Israelites, we find ourselves captive by many things that hold us back. But God is setting us free. God is presenting us with “a New Normal.” God is doing a new thing.

In faith and trust, let’s follow and see what springs forth.

Let us pray:

Holy and merciful God, we like things simple and easy. We like to be comfortable and at peace. But we’ve seen in the lives of the Israelites and in the life of Jesus that you rarely keep your people in the same spiritual place. You move us onward into new depths of faith and service. Make your way clear and so inviting that we cannot help but journey towards that promised place of wholeness and light. Grant us the faith to follow your Son in whose name we pray. Amen.