

March 21, 2010
Lent 5

"Are the Best Times Still Coming?"

ISAIAH 43:16-21

This is what the LORD says-- he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: ¹⁸ "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. ¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. ²⁰ The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, ²¹ the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

The other day I was standing at the gasoline pump in Orcutt. I overheard two contractors talking about the number of employees they had to lay off just to keep their business going. How many people do you know who are without jobs, or who are underemployed, or who are in danger of not making their house payments? We are in the throes of what has been called the great recession.

The words of the Lord we just read were intended for God's people who were going through much harder times than we are experiencing. They were written to comfort the people who were hauled away as slaves in the evil land of Babylon where they lived as captives for 70 years. Listen to their lament in Psalm 137. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'" Listen to their lament in Isaiah 49:14, "But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.'"

"Are the best times in the past or are the best times in the future?" God has an answer for his people living in Babylon and his people sitting here this morning. He tells us not to dwell on the past in such a way that we take our eyes off the precious promises the Lord has given us for the future. He wants us to see the new things he has planned for us. The pessimist sees the light at the end of the tunnel and fears a train. The optimist sees the light and thinks there is hope. The Christian sees the light and says, "The Lord is my light and my salvation whom shall I fear?" We may not know what the future holds, but we always know who holds the future.

Living in the past can present its problems

Listen again to what the Lord says about dwelling too much on the past. "This is what the Lord says--he who made a way through the sea, a path through the might waters, who drew out the chariot and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: 'Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past.'" The Lord reminds the people of that great day in their past history when he gave them a path through the waters of the Red Sea. Remember how

afraid they were when the Egyptian chariots were coming across the desert ready to run the people over with war horses, cut them down like grass and grind them up with the iron wheels of their chariots. Oh, how they cried out to the Lord in fear and anger. Moses told them, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again."

The people watched in amazement as the Lord caused an east wind to blow all night and created a path through the sea. They went through the sea on dry ground with a wall of water on their right and on their left. The prophet Isaiah says that these were "mighty waters" not just a shallow marsh that dried up over night. Stick your hand into the wall of water. Marvel at how the water stands up 30, 40 or even a hundred feet high or more. Isaiah says it was the Lord who drew the Egyptian army into the sea. The Lord led them to foolishly throw all caution to the wind as they marched through the walls of water. It was the Lord who caused their chariot wheels to fall off. It was the Lord who caused the waters to return. It says in Exodus that not one of the Egyptians survived. Isaiah says, "And they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick." I am lighting this candle. The Egyptian army with its might chariots burned brightly, but then Lord snuffed them out the way I am snuffing out this candle.

It surprises us that the Lord says to his people, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past." This seems to conflict with what the Lord told his people about celebrating the Passover and using it to remember how he delivered his people from the Egyptians. Notice the Lord says, "Do not dwell on the past." If we think the best days for us are in the past, then we will not be able to look forward to the good times the Lord has planned for our future.

Perhaps you dream of the good old days when things were less hectic and complex in your lives. Remember when you could walk 10 miles a day without pain and weariness? Those were the good days. Remember when you could volunteer for anything that needed to be done at church because you had the energy? Now you wonder if there are any tasks for you to do. Remember when things were so much happier and less hectic and less stressful in your family life? Remember when you read your Bible every day, and even marked certain verses. Those were the good old days when you walked closer with the Lord.

In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Deliver us from evil!" It is OK to dwell on the times the Lord has reached into your life with his powerful hand to deliver you, but don't dwell on them to such an extent that you think the Lord can't do very much to help you in the present or the future. The people living in Babylon thought that the Lord could never deliver them the way he once delivered their ancestors from the land of Egypt. Let's listen to what the Lord says about thinking so much about the good old days that we become blinded to what the Lord has for us in the future.

Living in the future is based on promises

It is the Lord who speaks through Isaiah and says to his Christians of every age; "See, I am doing a new thing. I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland." The Lord says, "See!" Look at the promises that I am giving to you. I am going to make a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The desert that existed between Babylon

and Jerusalem was huge. The Lord says that he can create streams in the desert and cause plants to grow, and even the jackal and the owl will honor the Lord for the streams he causes to flow in the desert. The Lord also promises to provide his people with water to drink just as he did in the past. And the Lord is so powerful that he can provide a way through the desert just as he provided a way through the waters of the Red Sea. The Lord wants his people to believe that the best of times for his people are still ahead of them.

How did the Lord deliver these people from captivity? Isaiah 45 answers how the Lord did this. He did not provide something like a bullet train that took them across the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem in less than hour. He did not send an angel to escort them home the way he once sent an angel to take Peter out of prison. The Lord raised up a heathen king named Cyrus who overthrew the Babylonian Empire overnight. One of the first things he did was to order God's people to go home. He even sent his army along to escort them safely through the desert.

Let's go back to what the Lord says about providing streams in the desert for his people. "Because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wastelands, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself, that they may proclaim my praise." We are the people the Lord has formed for himself. Here is what the Lord says in the first part of this chapter, "Fear not for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name; you are mine." It is the Lord who took you and me when we were nothing but spiritually dead corpses with no life in us. He redeemed us by the blood of his Son and created faith in our hearts to believe in this process of redeeming us. Ephesians 2 says, "Because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions, it is by grace you have been saved." God planned out the details of Jesus' perfect life and perfect death so he could pronounce you forgiven when Jesus rose from the dead. God planned out the faith for you to believe and trust in this plan for your salvation. 2 Corinthians 5 describes us a new creation formed entirely by God's grace and mercy to us. We are the clay and the Lord our God is the potter.

This past week I visited with Luella Bestul because she is leaving this morning to return to Oregon. We read to her from these words of Isaiah 43. She made the comment, "When you look up at the cross of Jesus you know how much God loves you and cares about you." Then we talked more about the recent loss of her grandson Doug. When you look up at the cross of Jesus, you know how much the Lord cares about you and loves. God's mercy, his unfairly love you, is a like stream in the desert of this life.

We never want to forget that hour and that moment in history when Jesus took all our sin upon him and cried out in triumph, "It is finished." We don't want to forget that halcyon moment when water was placed on us in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and our sin was washed away. These moments from the past are meant to be cherished. They are the touchstones, the benchmarks, the defining moments in your life and mine because we have been born again to living hope by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We can dwell on them as much as we want.

As we look at the past and think of all the times the Lord has been there to deliver us from evil, we cannot allow ourselves to think the Lord will not do the same for us in the future. In a way we can say, "The best days are still coming" because I know that the Lord is going to find ways to open our eyes to see more of his goodness, and kindness and love and

mercy for us. The Lord says to you and me this morning, "See, I am doing a new thing." As we sang in the hymn, "Every morning mercies new, Fall as fresh as morning dew...For your mercies Lord are sure; Your compassion will endure." We want to pray with Paul in Ephesians 3 that we may have power together with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ."

See that light coming at the end of the tunnel. It is the Lord, your light and your salvation, who has already planned the different places where he will quiet you with his love. Are the best days still coming? After hearing the Lord speak to us this morning, we can say a resounding "Yes." Amen.