

Rivers in the Desert

In 2004, the United Church of Christ began using a new slogan: “God is still speaking.” I like that a lot. It conveys the belief that while God has certainly spoken to God’s people in the past, preeminently through scripture, God continues to speak to God’s people today. And so it behooves us to listen, to pay attention, to not get stuck or stalled in the past. God is alive today! God is working and speaking in the world today! Hallelujah! Let all God’s people say, “hallelujah!”

But are we stuck or stalled in the past? I will come back to that question.

The children of Israel were stuck in the past. They were living in exile in Babylon, far away from their land, their temple, their beloved worship rituals. They were far away from their God. Or so they thought. So the prophet known as “Second Isaiah” comes to them and reminds them that God is still speaking. And, still acting.

It’s so interesting that already in the Old Testament we find reminders of ways that God had acted in the people’s distant past. Especially through that archetypal event known as the Exodus, in which God heard their cries, delivered them from slavery in Egypt, chose them to be his people, gave them their identity, established a covenant with them, revealed his will to them through giving them the Torah. But for the people now living in exile, that event was already in the distant past. And so understandably, they were now doubting whether God was still speaking, still acting, or conversely, whether God was nowhere to be found.

Notice how Second Isaiah speaks with great authority and certainty. “Thus says the Lord,” he begins. Making it very clear that his words are God’s words, that God is about to speak to the people through him.

And notice how Second Isaiah reminds them that this is the very same God who long ago “made a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,” that this was the God who delivered their forebears from slavery in Egypt, first, he says, by “bringing out” the Egyptian armies with their chariots and horses and warriors, and then God “extinguished” them, “quenched [them] like a wick” by releasing the waters of the Red Sea upon them after the children of Israel had already passed through. Isaiah’s language is vivid and graphic, and can make us a bit uncomfortable if we think about the vast numbers of Egyptians who died in that deluge, as if God was only God of the Israelites, and no one else. But that’s not Isaiah’s point. His point was that God acted in a very decisive, dramatic, miraculous way in the past, and this very same God can and will and is about to act again in a decisive, dramatic, miraculous way. Isaiah doesn’t specify what that will be. Only that it will be equally dramatic.

Then God says through Isaiah something unexpected and surprising, and seemingly contradicting. “Do not remember the former things.” After God had just reminded them about the former things. As if to say, “you ain’t seen nothing yet.” Or as one commentator says, adapting that famous tune from the musical “Annie Get Your Gun,” “anything I have done I can do better . . . I can do anything better than me.”

Notice how God brings the future and the present together. “I am about to do a new thing,” God says through Isaiah, implying that it will be very soon. And then God switches to

the present: “Now it springs forth,” suggesting that God’s action, whatever it was, was even now beginning. “Do you not perceive it?” Isaiah asks them. As if all they needed to do was open their eyes and look, and it would be obvious.

“I am about to do a new thing,” God says to God’s people. Reminding them, and us, that God is still alive. Is still their God. Is still speaking and acting. Is still creating in miraculous ways.

“I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” As if to remind them, and us, that we are still God’s “chosen people,” the people God long ago formed for himself so that they might declare God’s praise. Along with the rest of God’s creation, including even such exotic and wild animals as the jackal and the ostrich. (Do we have any jackals or ostriches here today? ☺)

On the past three Wednesdays we have been participating in the “SWOT” analysis, in which we so far have identified our “Strengths,” our “Weaknesses,” and our “Opportunities.” And in the process we have spent a fair amount of time remembering the past—remembering our rich history, all the wonderful things this church used to do, how many more people used to come.

To be honest, since I’ve arrived six months ago, I’ve been hearing that from a lot of you. As if you are very understandably grieving all the changes and losses. Grief is important and necessary. You can’t skip it or go around it. You have to go through it.

But what might this passage from Second Isaiah be implying to us today? Are there ways in which we’re stuck or stalled in the past? Or to put it differently, are we remembering the wrong things? Are we spending our time remembering how vibrant and active and alive First Mennonite Church used to be, when what we should be remembering is how God acted on behalf of our forebears long ago, and how that very same God is about to—and even now is—doing a new thing. Right here. At First Mennonite Church. Do we not perceive it? Do we not believe it?

The prophet doesn’t tell us exactly what that new thing will be. But he hints that it will be decisive and dramatic.

This coming Wednesday we will continue our conversation about the “O” in the acronym, which stands for “Opportunities.” I expect that this will again involve lots of remembering and longing for the past, and will again stir up some feelings of discouragement. But may we also remember [and never again forget] that the same God who acted long, long ago to deliver the people of Israel from bondage, the same God who acted not quite as long but still long, long ago to lead the people of Israel out of exile, will and already is acting again. This same God will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The imagery of water might not be as dramatic and hope-giving to us today—we’ve had no shortage of water lately. But Lois and I lived in the Arizona desert for four years. And I’ve seen how dry and desolate it can seem. The image of “rivers in the desert,” for anyone who has lived in the desert, truly is miraculous and dramatic and transformative.

In other words, let us not lose or forget the promise that whatever God is about to do will be similarly miraculous and dramatic. Whenever we are tempted to doubt or be discouraged, let us instead be reassured: God is still speaking. And that very same God is about to do a new thing. That very same God is about to make rivers in the desert. Right here, in Hillsboro, Kansas.

I look forward to our conversation this coming Wednesday; I encourage all of you to come.