

REFLECTIONS FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT ~ 03 April 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Today we reach the fifth Sunday in Lent and the last Sunday before the beginning of Holy Week. Key to our understanding of the readings in today's Liturgy of the Word is the verse from the reading from Isaiah: "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?" (Is 43:18-19).

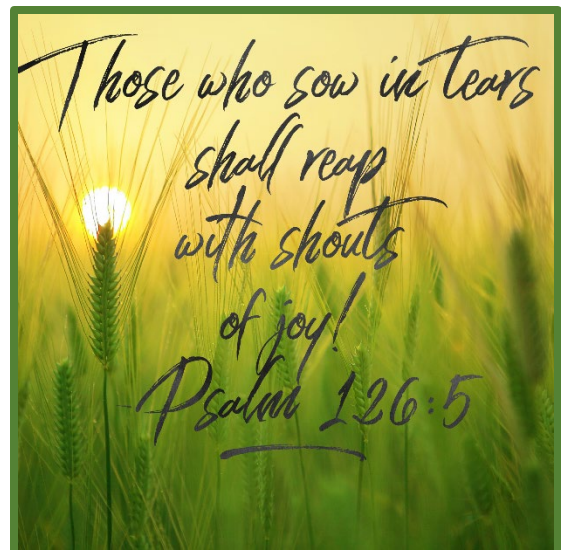


Chapter 43 of the book of Isaiah was written during the time the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon. In that time, the people had lost everything – their king, their temple, their land – and they feared that they had even lost their God. Yet, from that time of what could have been deep depression, we have in chapters 40 to 55 of this book the most hope-filled of all the books of the Bible. Therefore, it would make sense that the “former things and things of old” in the above quotation would be referring to the losses of the exile. Not so! The “former things and things of old” are actually the best things that had ever happened to the people.

It is not difficult to see the reference in the words, “the Lord who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior” (Is 43:16). It brings us back to the crossing of the Reed Sea and the Exodus from Egypt when God remembers the people, hears their cries of pain and suffering, and sends Moses to lead them through the wilderness into the Promised Land.

The previous verse of this passage, missing in today's Liturgy, reads, “I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel” (Is 43:15). Combined with the emphasis on the sea and the mighty waters (“the face of the waters”), this link to God as Creator brings to mind God's first incarnation in the creation of the universe as described in Genesis 1.

The surprising conclusion is that the “former things and things of old” are the most positive interventions of God in history in the minds of the people of Judah – the moment of creation and the Exodus leading to the Promised Land. Now the “new thing” will be a new creation with a new way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, the jackals and ostriches honouring their God, and new hope for the chosen people. Psalm 126, written after the return from exile, echoes exuberance, elation, and hope in response to this new thing – “mouths filled with laughter,” “tongues with shouts of joy,” “rejoicing.” In this very short psalm of six verses, the phrase “shouts of joy” is repeated three times.



In his letter to the Philippians (a joy-filled book in the New Testament), Paul speaks about his experience of “the new thing which springs forth.” He says that he is willing to give up everything

he has for the sake of gaining Christ and being found in him, knowing the power of Jesus’ resurrection. While he is not quite there yet, he echoes Isaiah’s words in a Christian context, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14).



The Woman Caught in Adultery
Cerezo Barredo

In the story in John 8, we see the realization of “the new thing” in the life of an unnamed woman. She has been accused of adultery – there is no mention of the man who has been engaged in the adultery for which she is being condemned. She alone is being shamed, she is forced to stand in front of her accusers, and she is about to be stoned. She is being used by the scribes and Pharisees as a way to trap Jesus. Jesus has to choose either to allow the woman to go free and publicly disobey the law of Moses or to approve of her killing and lose his reputation as a friend to sinners.

Jesus bends down, not standing with her accusers. He writes something on the ground and then speaks the challenging words, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn 8:7). He repeats his actions by bending down again and writing once more. It is worth noting that all the men walk away, led first by the elders! In the words of Eleonore Stump, “Only when it is clear that her accusers have been caught in their hypocrisy and shamed by it, does Jesus lift up his eyes and look at her. Of all those who came to Jesus because of her, she is the only one left standing by him at the end of the story. And she is the only one who calls him “Kyrie” (“Lord,” “Sir”).” Jesus forgives her and restores her dignity, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (Jn 8

There two other connections from the Old Testament between the law and writing, “When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God” (Ex 31:18). Jesus seems to be interpreting the Law of God given to Moses in a new way by echoing God’s writing on stone



with his writing twice on the ground. A second interesting connection of the writing on the ground comes from Jeremiah, “Those who turn away from you shall be written in the underworld, for they have forsaken the fountain of living water, the Lord” (Jer 17:13).

Can you imagine how the woman's life was changed by this encounter with Jesus? In what could have been the moment of her tragic death becomes instead a new moment in her life, a moment in which she is forgiven, and her dignity restored. The Jesuit, John Foley, says "This scene could refashion the whole earth. If we could each accept our own sinfulness as well as the forgiveness that surrounds it, we would have peace. We would drink in the compassion of God, who has been there all along, tracing in our souls." [Irene Zimmerman osf](#) writes a beautiful poetic re-telling of this story:

From the angry crunch of their sandaled feet
as they left the courtyard, Jesus knew,
without looking up from his writing on the ground,
that the Pharisees and scribes still carried their stones.

The woman stood where they'd shoved her,
her hair hanging loose over neck and face,
her hands still shielding her head
from the stones she awaited.

"Woman," he asked, "has no one condemned you?"
The heap of woman shuddered, unfolded.
She viewed the courtyard - empty now -
with wild, glazed eyes and turned back to him.
"No one, Sir," she said, unsurely.

Compassion flooded him like a wadi after rain.
He thought of his own mother - had she known such fear? -
and of the gentle man whom he had called Abba.

Only when Joseph lay dying had he confided
his secret anguish on seeing his betrothed
swelling up with seed not his own.

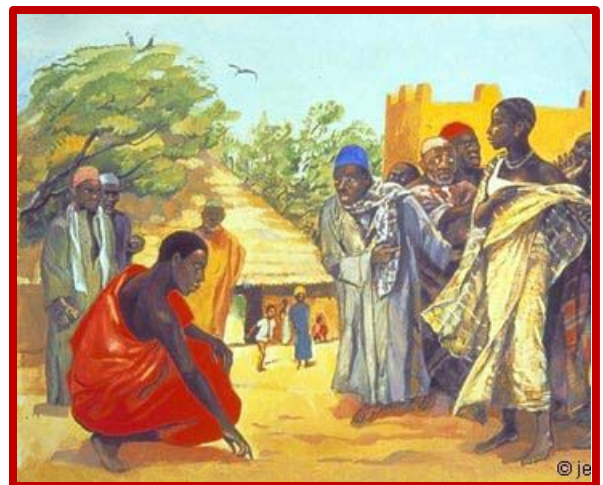
"Neither do I condemn you," Jesus said.
"Go your way and sin no more."

Black eyes looked out from an ashen face,
empty, uncomprehending.
Then life rushed back.
She stood before him like a blossoming tree.
"Go in peace and sin no more,"
Jesus called again as she left the courtyard.

He had bought her at a price, he knew.
The stony hearts of her judges
would soon hurl their hatred at him.
His own death was a mere stone's throw away.

As we come closer to Holy Week, let us hear again the promise from God in Isaiah, "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?" (Is 43:18-19). How is the new thing springing forth in your life, in the life of your family or community? While it may not be as dramatic as the experience of

The Woman Caught in Adultery
Cerezo Barredo



© je

the Jews in exile in Babylon or Paul's call to become a follower of Jesus or the woman's being forgiven by Jesus, each one of us will experience the living out of this prophecy.

[Sheenagh Pugh's](#) poem, *What If This Road*, is a reminder to us that God is showing us the new thing. It is our choice about whether or not we accept it:

What if this road, that has held no surprises
these many years, decided not to go
home after all; what if it could turn
left or right with no more ado
than a kite-tail? What if its tarry skin
were like a long, supple bolt of cloth,
that is shaken and rolled out, and takes
a new shape from the contours beneath?
And if it chose to lay itself down
in a new way, around a blind corner,
across hills you must climb without knowing
what's on the other side, who would not hanker
to be going, at all risks? Who wants to know
a story's end, or where a road will go?

