

Our second reading comes from what is known as Second Isaiah. The people of Israel are living in exile but it is toward the end of the exile. It is a time of transition. During this period, Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonian Empire and not long after, passed a decree that allowed exiles to return to their homeland.

Listen now to God's word as it comes to us from Isaiah 43:16-21

It's New Year's Day.

The ball dropped at midnight.

Fireworks welcomed the New Year.

There is a parade and the Rose Bowl game today.

And black-eyed peas are having their best day of the year!

We mark the turning of the year with celebrations and by looking back and remembering, helped along by media segments highlighting the events and losses of 2022. And then there are New Year's resolutions- whether you make them or not, they are a New Year's staple.

Wharton professor Katherine Milkman has an interesting take on New Year's resolutions. She finds it striking that "at the start of a new year, we feel like we have a clean slate. She calls it the 'fresh start effect.'

According to Milkman, In making resolutions, we consider all our past failures and regrets from the last year and think: 'Those are not me. That's old me. That's not new me. New me, the 2023 me, is not going to make these mistakes.'

In other words, New Year's resolutions are not really about the resolutions. After all, for most people, the resolutions haven't changed.

Most people wanted to lose weight, and exercise and perhaps pray more on December 31, too. What we're doing on New Year's Day, according to Milkman, is more like a mental accounting trick. Our past failures are left on the ledger of Old Me. New Me starts today.¹

In God's hands, that sounds a lot like grace. "The old life has gone and a new life has begun" "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." How hard it can be to truly believe those words! If new year's resolutions can help us to leave the old behind, I am all for them. What better way to begin the New Year! Focusing on the past, particularly our sins and shortcomings, can suck all the energy out of a person.

Yes, There are *many* things we would each like to *change* about our *past*... things that we want to *re-do*... things that we think we could *correct*... *regrets* that we have... opportunities that we *missed*.... And sometimes at the turn of the new year, they come flashing before our eyes in vivid color.

Too often, I think we, myself included, we spend far *too* much time *examining* and *analyzing*, sometimes in *minute* detail... *all* the mistakes of our past. We drag *all* that baggage around *with* us... *opening* it up at *every* opportunity and *pulling* things out to look at them more closely. What a *waste* of time and energy! How much *farther* could we be into a bright and shining *future* if we poured *all* the time and energy we spend on revisiting the *past* into living into a new and different *future*?ⁱⁱ

God is not looking backward. God is not reviewing our past mistakes and planning for our downfall! In the first verse of the 43rd chapter of Isaiah, from which I read today, God says "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine."ⁱⁱⁱ And if we move to the verses just after today's passage God says: "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake." Not for your sake, mind you, but for God's own sake. For God's own sake he says, "I will not remember your sins."^{iv}

God is not keeping books on your wrong doings. God has better things to do with God's time! The old life HAS gone, and a new life has begun. There is not TIME to dwell on the past. Why? Because God is doing a new thing. If we are spending our time *living* in the past... *reviewing* our past... *reliving* our past... will we see the new thing that God is doing?

God's word to the people of Israel in exile is this: "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?"^v It is shocking to hear God tell the people "do not remember." Forgetting was the sin that landed them in exile. The Hebrew scripture tells God's people over and again to remember. One could assert that all religion is based on memory. "Do this in remembrance of me."

So what is going on here? There is no clear consensus on what the "former things" are that the people are told not to remember. Some recent scholars claim that the former things refer to everything that went on in the first 38 chapters of Isaiah- the sin and idolatry that resulted in the exile, as well as the hardship they endured. Perhaps. When one focuses on past sins, it is easy to get trapped in defining oneself by one's failures or tragedies or sin...and when that happens, vision narrows and hope runs thin. God would not want that for the people of Israel.

Most scholars say the "former things" refer to the Exodus, even though Israel is commanded to observe the Passover each year as a way of remembering. In pondering the context in which Israel might be called to forget, Biblical scholar Paul Hansen suggests that perhaps the people

needed to be shocked out of their exile induced comfort and sluggishness. They might not be home, but things were going along pretty well. They may have been struggling to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land, but then again, maybe they were getting a little too used to it. They might have been in exile, but the relationship with God was safely within the bounds of a comfort zone of memory, where expectation and anticipation and creativity had long since been lost.^{vi}

In other words, perhaps they had become lost in nostalgia, nostalgia that threatened to tie the people to their past- nostalgia that dulled their alertness to the present realities and present opportunities. Remembering becomes problematic and stifling when God's people cease to perceive or believe God can do a new thing. Perhaps "Do not remember" is not so much a call to forget, as a call to loosen Israel's grip on things as they were and to expect something new.^{vii}

It is easy to hold on tight to our memories and our traditions. As we get older, talk often turns to "the good old days"...the days of wine and roses...the wonderful days that will never be again- those days we remember with rose colored glasses. Perhaps that happens especially when we recognize that some things we use to do, we can't physically do anymore. So it is easy to slip into memories...memories of perhaps happier times...memories that comfort...memories that remind us of all the things we use to do.

Churches can get stuck in this way of thinking as well...Remember when the pews were full on Sunday morning across the country...

when there were no ball games or work on Sunday...when church was THE place to be and the nursery was overflowing. Boy, we did some great things back then! Today, we even reminisce about the days before the pandemic. Perhaps churches were not as full or active as in their hay day, but more people showed up on Sunday morning than they do today.

As individuals, and as the church, it can be easy to sit around reminiscing...to slip into thinking "the best days are behind us."

But here's the thing. I can find no evidence in the Bible, anecdotal or otherwise, that would support the notion of retreating into self or of the church retreating into memories. I can't find it in any of the sayings of Jesus. I can't find it in the parables he told. I can't find it in the actions he took during his life and ministry. There are lots of stories of people being healed...the lost being found....the good news being proclaimed...the dead being raised...disciples being sent out...but I don't find any stories of Jesus holding someone's hand, or sitting in a gathering of disciples as they reminisced about the past....or turned their backs on the world of their day.^{viii}

When times are tough, instead there are stories of God's surprising power and mercy breaking in...making a new way in the wilderness-providing water from a rock raining down quail and manna from heaven-stories of God urging God's people forward, nudging them to keep moving even when they would rather retreat to the comfort of the familiar.

From the first verses of Genesis through the last verses of Revelation, God is in the business of creating... God is always surprising God's people with the new thing God is doing. The great danger for Israel, and perhaps for us, both as individuals and as a church, is faith that ceases to be able to expect anything really new from God.^{ix}

Regardless of your age, though you may be too old to do everything you use to do, or too young to do certain things yet, God has not sidelined you! I believe that as long as you are alive on this earth, God is creating new and surprising ways for you to serve. Remember Jeremiah was only a boy when God called him to be a prophet. Abraham was 80 years old when God called him to leave his home and travel to a new land. Are you looking back? Or are you looking forward to what new things God is doing in your life?

As you have heard Ellen say often, the post-pandemic church will never go back to the way it was. Yet if we trust, if we expect, that God is doing a new thing, we have no cause for despair.

How does the church combine an appreciation of tradition with a daring openness to the future God is creating?

As a church and as individuals, how do we remember without clinging to the past...without getting stuck in the past?

Friends, God is not looking backwards. *God is not reviewing your past or the church's past... God is looking into our future!*

It is true that usually we make the same New Year's resolutions year after year after year. Let's not fall into the trap of thinking God uses the same list year after year, that God will always do things the way they have been done.

Are you ready to be *surprised* by God... with a *new* direction in your life... *new friends*... *new work* to do? You *can* be. Are you ready to be surprised by God in the church...with new avenues for mission...for worship...for reaching those who have turned from organized religion.

Friends, let 's mark the new year with commitment to being more present, more alert for the new thing God is doing in this community... in this church...and in our lives.

And may we walk boldly...face forward...into our future, knowing that our future is the hands of our loving, creating, surprising God.

And now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, now and forevermore. Amen.

ⁱ Stuart Straughn, *The Pastor's Workshop, Revelation 21:1-6a*

ⁱⁱ I am indebted to a sermon by Rev. Sharon Bryant on this text given at First Presbyterian Church, Albemarle, NC for this section and one that follows later.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 43:1b

^{iv} Isaiah 43:25

^v Isaiah 43:18-19

^{vi} David A. Davis, *Connections: Year C Vol 2*, pg 96.

^{vii} Patricia Tull, *Connections: Year C Vol.2*, pg 95

^{viii} Sharon Bryant

^{ix} Walter Brueggemann, *Westminster Bible Companion: Isaiah 40-66*, pg 59.