

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

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God's New Thing

I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun!

Do you not see it? – Isaiah 43:19-21

When I was a child, I would wake up every morning not knowing what to expect. It was exciting to get out of bed. I never knew what mischief I would make or what excitement might present itself to me the moment I tumbled out of bed and presented myself to the world.

Now, I wake up every morning expecting that, short of some tragedy or shocking development, most days will be pretty much like the last ones. Now that I am middle-aged, and my life is pretty orderly, the start of each day isn't nearly as exciting. That is, I suppose, a sign of experience and some middling degree of maturity. It is a good thing, I suppose, that I am not worried about whether I will have enough to eat, or about getting mugged, or living in a war zone. Stability is good; predictability is good, for the most part.

But for some, predictability is not such a good thing:

- if you live in poverty, and you see no way out, then it is not such a good thing that your life is predictable;
- if you are in an abusive relationship, and you see no hope of that changing, then predictability is not a good thing;
- if you are imprisoned, facing ten more years of confinement, then predictability is not a good thing;
- if you are infirm or disabled, and all anyone (including you) can see is your limitations, then predictability is not a good thing;
- if you are female in a patriarchal society, black in a racist context, gay or transgendered in a homophobic culture, Jewish in an anti-Semitic society, or aboriginal where your heritage is not respected, and you know that every day you will be predictably humiliated in one way or another, then predictability is not a good thing.

The prophet whose words are contained in the second part of the book of Isaiah, lived during the time of the exile, in the 6th century B.C.E., when the Jews had been taken from their ancestral homeland and deported into exile in Babylon. They were strangers in a strange land, isolated from the land they considered holy, torn away from everything they thought of as meaningful. For them, getting up in the morning and experiencing one more day of exile was not a good thing.

But to them and to us, Isaiah offers hope: the future is not closed, but open. Fate may not be on your side, but God is, and God is doing something new. Just as in the past God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt by making dry land through the waters, so now, God is watering the dry places so that the exiles can make their way across the forbidding deserts between Babylon and Jerusalem.

This is not just hope for ancient exiles, but for us here today, whatever it is that makes us feel trapped. For us too, God is doing something new!

- If you feel trapped in an abusive relationship, God has already begun doing something new! Don't you see it?
- If you feel trapped in an unfulfilling job, God has already begun doing something new! Don't you see it?
- If you are worried for your children or your church or your nation, God has already begun doing something new! Don't you see it?
- If you have given up on life and are just waiting to die, God has already begun doing something new! Don't you see it?

Someone wise (G.K. Chesterton?) once said that the world does not lack for wonders, only for a sense of wonder. In the same way, Isaiah is suggesting that the world does not lack for new possibilities, but it lacks for a sense of vision to see those possibilities.

If your future seems closed and predictable, if you get up each morning thinking that today is going to be just as dull and disappointing and humiliating as the last, then maybe the problem is not with the day but with our ability to see the new things that God has begun. Perhaps we need to learn to see the endless possibilities that are in each new day as we did when we were children. Perhaps we need to open our blinded eyes to see the new things that God has already begun doing.

The author Ralph Milton tells the story of a day when he was sitting outside reading when along came a little girl he didn't know, riding her tricycle. She was around six years old, he thinks. They smiled at each other, and she stopped her trike and looked at him rather intently. Then she asked him, "Are you old?" Ralph is usually pretty quick of lip, but this question stopped him cold. She waited patiently, perhaps knowing that she had asked a very difficult question. Finally, Ralph came up with the only appropriate answer: "Yes," he said, "yes I am." And then the little girl asked, "Will you play with me?"

Those two questions, "Are you old?" and "Will you play with me?" might seem unrelated to you and me, but to this little girl they were linked. Why they were linked was not clear, but to her, being old made him a good playmate. And that, says Ralph, opened his eyes to a new way of seeing himself and his age. She transformed me, he wrote, "from a man angry at his age and its limitations and necessities, to a man delighting in his age and in the candid, open and affirming trust of a child." We live in a culture that denigrates age, a culture in which we often feel so trapped by a focus on the physical limitations of aging. And in this little girl, God was doing something new, offering a new way of seeing age and its possibilities, watering the dry places in Ralph's old heart.

May it be so, for you, and for me. Amen!