

New

(Isaiah 43)

Pause for a moment this morning and consider your first reaction, the first response that stirs within you when you hear these words, “new car”. Perhaps you could smell that unmistakable scent the moment you sit inside and the first breath you inhale when you went out test driving cars. Perhaps you recalled the first new car you ever purchased; the way your hand shook signing the paperwork. What leaps in you when you hear the words, “new job (*home*)”? For some that might awaken a giddy nervousness or sense of excitement of setting off on an adventure, for others those two words nestled nearby are reason for concern or even uncertainty. Or what about when you hear the words “new food” sitting side by side? A normal response might be one of suspicion, especially if you are like my daughter who pokes at any strange glop she has never seen before on her plate and smacks her mouth noisily with a wrinkled nose upon tasting the first bite. Or the words “new members” this morning that can bring smiles to our faces as we think about this wonderful group of folks who are now on the faith journey with us, blessing us with their ideas and insights and indeed their very presence. The reality is the word “new” is not emotionally neutral. These three letters stir up so much within us. But the truth is a lot depends on where we are at, what is going on inside us and around us at that particular time and that impacts how we receive and process and respond to the word “new”. At the same time, another truth is a lot depends upon the words that huddle close by and congregate around the word “new”. Offering “new” idea in a classroom can earn you extra credit, offering a “new” idea in a church we might be greeted with weary looks of been there, done that. Get a “new” bike as a kid and you’ll feel the contagious enthusiasm swell within, receive a “new” bike as a gift as an adult and it might be a commentary on the effects of winter on your waistline. There is this complex relationship the word “new” awakens. It is like an algebra equation where figuring out the value of “x” means taking into account the words surround “new” and figuring out the value of “y” means assessing what is going on inside us and around us.

So, when Isaiah proclaims that God is about to do a new *thing*, my first response is, “Gee thanks Isaiah for being so specific.” I mean consider what you would do if you knew God was going to act or appear in your life and then couple that with the uncertainty and being unclear about exactly where and how and what and when God is going to show up would make me a bit anxious. I mean what if God’s new thing comes when I am upset at the kids or what if God breaks into my life when I haven’t been keeping up with my covenant to pray or what if God disrupts me when I am trying to download the latest podcast from NPR. Would it be easier if God scheduled an appointment or at least could God tell me what facet of my life this new thing was going to impact?

I don’t think that these words that God was about to do a new thing were any easier received or processed or responded to in the hearts of the people who first heard them. Isaiah speaks these words to the Israelites shortly after they entered the Babylonian exile. The Babylonians captured the land that was so integral to the identity of the Jewish people; they carted off the best and the brightest, the leaders of the people back to Babylon; the temple lay in ruins; it was the worst of times. Psalm 137 proclaims, “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, we also wept, when we remembered Zion. We hung our lyres on the willows in its midst. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” The people are distraught, their hearts broken. Now, to be sure, Isaiah spends the first forty chapters warning the people of impending doom. Isaiah cautions and cajoles and confronts the people

about how their relationship with God needs reconciliation. And so the very future Isaiah had predicted becomes reality, it comes true. And most of us, even the most faithful of us, today in such a situation still stick out our chest, cross our arms and proclaim, "See, told you so!"

But that is not what Isaiah does, not at all. Instead he shifts from a minor key of singing the blues to a major key of popular music. He moves from forecasting a bleak midwinter to talking about hope springing eternal. He has the courage to suggest that God will do a new thing, here in this foreign place at this time when hearts are heavy. How in the world when everyone else feels like Chicken Little, does Isaiah seem to become Little Orphan Annie doing a reprise of "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow"? Why the sudden change, because Isaiah remembers and begins to recount God's activity in the past. He clings to God, who when their ancestors were captive and enslaved in Egypt, heard their cry and led them out. He re-tells the people that even on the banks of the Red Sea when the water was a barrier between being a slave and the freedom the people craved, God created a way. But it is not just about looking in the rearview mirror; it is not about looking around for a sea in Babylon for God now to part, for God will act in a new, in a different way.

Therein we find the rub. You see, we are called to look to the past not as a definitive solution to the perplexing problem of how God is going to act today, but rather we look to the past to remember that God has acted. We look to the past not for clues, but to clear our vision so that we might spot God acting out in a way we never thought possible or even considered. We look to the past not as an anchor to which we can cling, but to give us the courage to embrace today. Isaiah brings up the Red Sea to remind the people of the barriers to new life that have been faced in the past. Then, goes on to say that God will make a river in the wilderness of where the people find themselves today. The image of water is one that flows from being a barrier to being a balm and blessing to the people. In Egypt water blocked their path; in Babylon, water will soothe their soul. For you see, having just entered into captivity, it will be forty-eight long years before Israel is restored, it will be forty-eight long years of living in a different place from where the people wanted to be. And during that time, people will have to look around and notice God even in a place they never thought to look. Not only that, this river is not reserved solely for the private use of the Israelites, did you notice who else is going to drink along side? The jackals and ostriches, strange, outlandish creatures will come and join them. I see you glancing at your pew mate sitting beside you, I see that odd look you are giving me. We are all a bit off center. But just as God's activity cannot be confined to the ways God has acted in the past, nor will God's activity be confined only to the four walls of any church, or the walls of the hearts of any of God's people. God will do a new thing. God is doing a new thing. And to be honest, if that does give us pause, perhaps we need to go back to the part about the jackals and ostriches again.

My hunch is that when the people heard Isaiah say this, one of their first thoughts might have been, God will lead us back to our land. But we know that did not happen immediately. Sometimes our plans and predictions, our hopes for tomorrow don't pan out the way we thought. Life twists and turns, life goes up and down. I don't think Isaiah is being rhetorical when he asked the people if they perceived this new thing God was about to do, for indeed if someone asked me what new thing God was going to do here, I'd stammer around trying to suggest this or that, before finally shrugging my shoulders and honestly saying, "I don't know." I am not sure what is all in store for us as a people of faith, as the community called First Congregational UCC. I trust in a grace and love that has guided us to this point. I trust in a grace and love that will guide us onward, where ever that might be. Along the way,

we will laugh together, disagree together, reconcile together, eat together, grieve together, and try to love each other the best we can. And while that may not seem all that new, in some ways that togetherness will always be the refreshing river of life and restorative balm for which our souls thirst. So, welcome new members and welcome those who have been here awhile. Welcome those who thirst for new and those who are not quite ready to let go of the past. Welcome those who are so confident in their faith and those who question absolutely everything. Welcome to this new day, this new week, this renewed community where we are all received with a grace and love and peace that makes us new. Thanks be to God and all the people of God said, "Amen".