

Call to Worship

Creating and recreating God, we praise you that you come to us in the wilderness of our lives and of this world.

Your promise is ever true, and your activity moves us from the old life to the new.

So we gather with gratitude that you receive us as we are. That you work within and among us to enable our becoming more than we are.

Help us to be open and participating in the new thing that you are about in this hour and in these days, in our lives, the church and the world.

Prayer of Invocation

Lord Jesus, you came into the world and things have not been the same. You challenge what we thought was real and intrude into our settled understandings. You invite us to your table today and we wait upon you with love and expectation. Help us to sense your mysterious presence, and to be open to what you would reveal as we sing, pray and listen. It is in you that we find hope and meaning for our lives and for the world. Do a new thing with us, Christ, we are yours. Amen.

The Word Isaiah 43:16-21 Common English Bible

The LORD says—who makes a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and battalion;

**they will lie down together and will not rise;
they will be extinguished, extinguished like a wick.**

Don't remember the prior things; don't ponder ancient history.

**Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?
I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness.**

The beasts of the field, the jackals and ostriches, will honor me, because I have put water in the desert and streams in the wilderness to give water to my people,

my chosen ones, this people whom I formed for myself, who will recount my praise.

Living the Word

The passages in Isaiah that we read this morning, reinforce the hope. Verses 18 and 19 say: ¹⁸ *Don't remember the prior things; don't ponder ancient history.* ¹⁹ *Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it? I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness"*

Isaiah is a prophet with a good word for the future of the people. This is because the Hebrew people, called Judah, in Isaiah's time were once again living in exile from their home.

The first 39 chapters of the book is a prophesy judgment against Judah. Judah thinks itself safe because of its covenant relationship with God. However, God tells Judah (through Isaiah) that the covenant cannot protect them when they have broken it by the worship of other gods and by acts of injustice and cruelty, which oppose God's law.

Two crises occurred between chapters 39 and 40. The first was the reform of official Judean religion under king Josiah, who banned many elements of the old belief such as the belief from neighboring cultures that there was more than one God; the second was exile of the royal court, the priests and other members of the ruling elite following the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem c.586 BCE.

The people were split, some taken to Babylon and some left behind without any leadership. A central theme in the second part of Isaiah is that of a new Exodus – the return of the exiled people Israel from Babylon to Jerusalem. The author imagines a ritualistic return to Judah led by God. This second part of Isaiah begins in chapter 40 with this word for the people “*Comfort, comfort my people! says your God.*”

Isaiah 43, verse 16 and 17 where we began today, refers the people back to Moses as he crossed the Red Sea with the people, thousands of years before: ¹⁶“*The LORD says—who makes a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters,* ¹⁷*who brings out chariot and horse, army and battalion; they will lie down together and will not rise; they will be extinguished, extinguished like a wick.*”

For Moses people running from Egypt, the sea was a barrier. But God was able to make a way for them, and then putting down Pharaoh’s army when they were trying to cross the same barrier. We are reminded of the same power of God in verses 20-21: ²⁰“*The beasts of the field, the jackals and ostriches, will honor me, because I have put water in the desert and streams in the wilderness to give water to my people, my chosen ones,* ²¹*this people whom I formed for myself, who will recount my praise.*”

Where water was a barrier in the first case, God has now made it a life saving gift in the desert and the wilderness. Living water is found in the springs and streams of the desert. The people of Moses’ and Isaiah’s time both had to put the past behind them, forgetting their hard suffering and move forward into an unknown future.

As for us, we can look to the past to know our history, but like them, we are not to dwell on or get caught up in the past as to not be able to move into the future. The past should not be a barrier to us as a congregation, nor to us as individuals.

A father had two sons, the younger left home, wasted all that he had and came home begging. The older son stayed home, but resented that he didn’t have what the younger son had. They each had the same choice: to review their past and dwell in bitterness, or to accept where they had been and move on. Neither can now go back. The younger has been changed by his experience, but so has the older son. Now home is more or less than it was before, not because anything is physically different, but because they have been changed.

If we go even farther back in the Bible, to Genesis, the first book, there is a story about the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, who had become so evil that only one family could be found, worthy to save. Genesis 19 beginning at verse 15: “*When dawn broke, the messengers urged Lot, “Get up and take your wife and your two daughters who are here so that you are not swept away because of the evil in this city.” After getting them out, the men said, “Save your lives! Don’t look back! And don’t stay in the valley. Escape to the mountains so that you are not swept away.”*”

As the sun rose over the earth, Lot arrived in Zoar; and the LORD rained down burning asphalt from the skies onto Sodom and Gomorrah. The LORD destroyed these cities, the entire valley, everyone who lived in the cities, and all of the fertile land’s vegetation. When Lot’s wife looked back, she turned into a pillar of salt.”

Moral of that story...‘don’t look back!’ God can make a way in what might seem to be a desert or wilderness ahead of us. One more story, this one not in the Bible, but a Christian story which has some relevance to today...

There are many legends and stories of St. Patrick, but this is his story. Patrick was born around 385 in Scotland, probably Kilpatrick. His parents were Romans living in Britain in charge of the colonies. As a boy of fourteen or so, he was captured during a raiding party and taken to Ireland as a slave to herd and tend sheep. Ireland at this time was a land of Druids and pagans. He learned the language and practices of the people who held him.

During his captivity, he turned to God in prayer. He wrote "The love of God and his fear grew in me more and more, as did the faith, and my soul was roused, so that, in a single day, I have said as many as a hundred prayers and in the night, nearly the same." Patrick's captivity lasted until he was twenty, when he escaped after having a dream from God in which he was told to leave Ireland by going to the coast. There he found some sailors who took him back to Britain, where he reunited with his family.

He had another dream in which the people of Ireland were calling out to him "We beg you, holy youth, to come and walk among us once more." So he began his studies for the priesthood. Later, Patrick was ordained a bishop, and was sent to take the Gospel to Ireland. He arrived in Ireland March 25, 433, at age 48.

One legend says that he met a chieftain of one of the tribes, who tried to kill Patrick. Patrick converted the chieftain after he was unable to move his arm until he became friendly to Patrick. Patrick began preaching the Gospel throughout Ireland, converting many. He and his disciples preached and converted thousands and began building churches all over the country. Kings, their families, and entire kingdoms converted to Christianity when hearing Patrick's message. Patrick preached and converted all of Ireland for 40 years. He worked many miracles and wrote of his love for God in Confessions.

Why a shamrock? Patrick used the shamrock to explain the Trinity, and has been associated with him and the Irish since that time. Patrick was a humble, pious, gentle man, whose love and total devotion to and trust in God should be a shining example to each of us. He feared nothing, not even death, so complete was his trust in God, and of the importance of his mission.

It isn't about trying to fix or erase our pasts but to grow through our experiences. What must have been a horrible time in his capture and slavery became his education for the future. Thus when he was ready to return to Ireland as a priest to convert them from pagan religions, he knew the people, their superstitions and their beliefs. Like Jesus he used the simple, familiar things like the shamrock to teach them about his God and his faith in Jesus Christ.

Putting the past behind us we look to the future...Would you look to the TV screen as we read together Psalm 126. Note before we begin that the title of this Psalm is 'A Pilgrimage Song.' That would be a trip that we would take together...Let's read together, I'll read the odd verses and you can join me for the even verses.

When the LORD changed Zion's circumstances for the better, it was like we had been dreaming.

² Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter; our tongues were filled with joyful shouts.

It was even said, at that time, among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them!"

³ Yes, the LORD has done great things for us, and we are overjoyed.

⁴ LORD, change our circumstances for the better, like dry streams in the desert waste!

⁵ Let those who plant with tears reap the harvest with joyful shouts.

⁶ Let those who go out, crying and carrying their seed, come home with joyful shouts, carrying bales of grain!

They may have planted with tears, but they still planted, with hope for the tomorrows that would come. The future is always unknown, but their experiences from the past proved to them that even though sometimes the crop would fail, nothing would happen if they didn't at least plant the seeds, which could produce a great crop.

How many of you have spent these dreary days of winter, paging through a seed catalog anxious to plant? Back to the future – (sounds like a movie title!) The future is unknown, but the younger son and the older son have the same choices – two possible responses: to live in Bitterness or Praise. Our greatness in this life is yet unknown, individually or as the church.

Easter comes filled with hope. The disciples didn't realize in those hours what impact there could be in an altered Passover Meal – which has given us Holy Communion, or in the cross which helps us to understand our salvation through Christ's death or in the empty tomb that has given us the day to day hope that Christ is alive and always with us. But we know what God did and continues to do through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is about our knowing that God can make a way when we can't see any way. God does 'think greater'; we should work at it also.

Kristen Lagen, assistant professor at The Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, PA says this: "The great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls Isaiah's words of prophesy "poetry of homecoming," rich evocative language that uses the power of memory – looking back through the immediate situation of exile to recall the mighty deeds of God in the history of God's people – to stir up a belief in the power of God at work in the future. What God has done for you before, God will do again; hold on, trust in the Lord, and keep faith. What God has in store for you is a miraculous and satisfying as water in the wilderness."

Have you let go of the past and turned your heart toward home? It is a homecoming with God, worth seeking.