

Lent 5, Yr. C

April 7, 2019

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14

We've noted before that the scriptures both comfort and challenge us. This morning's scriptures do both. What we hear in the Isaiah reading is all about comfort. "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing...do you not perceive it? Isaiah is writing to a community in exile in Babylon. It's a community that has endured excessive suffering and that is without hope. But Isaiah is thinking of the Persian general, Cyrus, who will further God's plan by defeating the Babylonians and allowing the exiles to go back to Israel. What God is going to do next, says Isaiah, is even more powerful than what He did for us during the Exodus. Don't only look backward to that, but look and see this new thing that God will do. Paul saw something new, too. Something so new and so powerful that it made him count all the things he formerly saw as crucially important, as rubbish.

First those words of comfort, in which God says that he is doing something new. We're a long way from

what the Israelites were suffering but in our own weary and suffering world, in our own temptation to despair, those words, that God is doing something new, lift our hearts as well. N.T. Wright, the Anglican theologian, reminds us that God is always about new creation. Our task is to watch for it, to celebrate and nurture it.

But then there are words of challenge as well. We hear them first in the Collect which intimates that we can choose the wrong way of life – that we need help so that our hearts will be fixed where true joys can be found even though we're tempted by those swift and varied changes of the world. And then there's Paul. What we're hearing this morning is not only a listing of what we could call his c.v., all his credentials – that he was born a Hebrew, was educated as a Pharisee, that he was righteous under the law, that he was blameless – but that he discovered, in the presence of Christ, that none of that mattered; that he was going in the wrong direction. You'll remember that Paul was a zealous Pharisee and thought this new sect that was following Jesus needed to be stamped out. In fact, it was when he was on his way to Damascus to do just

that, that he saw a blinding light, was thrown from his horse and heard a voice from heaven saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” That encounter with the risen Christ caused him to completely rethink all his previous assumptions, all the things he thought he understood. Now he has a different goal, “I want to know Christ,” he says, “and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” He saw the resurrection of Christ as God’s definitive intervention on behalf of humanity. THE new thing! From the point of view of all previous human experience, this was indeed something incredibly and powerfully NEW. And from his new understanding, Paul constructed a new theology – he saw that as Christ had humbled himself and come down from heaven, becoming human, letting go of all his prerogatives, we too need to let go, to get rid of anything that keeps us trapped in our self-centeredness. We too have to die to whatever it is that’s keeping us from being reborn with the mind of Christ. Paul came to understand that, after the resurrection, the spirit of Christ filled all creation, and

so everyone you meet is a part of the body of Christ. This new thing resulted in a kind of radical egalitarianism – all the old divisions were gone, because all the things we thought mattered, like birth and status, and credentials, really didn't. Now Paul understood that there was equality before God and God's unconditional love. No slave or free, he says, no Jew or Greek, no male or female. So Paul found out that he was going in the wrong direction and did a U turn.

There are some good stories about people going in the wrong direction. One of them is a football story that you've undoubtedly heard before. Apparently, in a 1964 NFL game, a Vikings player scooped up a fumble by a San Francisco 49er and, seeing no opposing players ahead of him, just a clear field, he took off running. He heard the crowd roaring behind him; he saw his teammates on the sidelines running alongside him waving their arms madly. He crossed into the end zone and triumphantly threw the ball into the stands. And then one of the 49ers came up and gave him a hug; that was when he realized that he'd been running in the wrong direction and had scored two points for the opposing team. He was

like the man driving down the highway whose wife called him because she heard on the news that there was a crazy person driving the wrong way down the same highway she knew he was on. “You’re not kidding, honey,” was his reply. “There’s not just one crazy person going the wrong way; I can see hundreds of them!”

A few days ago I was talking with a friend who posed a question: what kind of paradigm shift do we have to undergo so that we can really understand the Gospel? You’ll remember some years ago there was quite a bit written about paradigm shifts in knowledge. The idea was that we develop a set of rules or procedures of standards, a model for understanding that’s called a paradigm. It sets boundaries and helps us receive and order information and solve problems. It filters out extraneous stuff. The problem of course is that we can forget that it’s just a model, a way to organize information and begin to think of it as the ONLY way to do so. Anything new that comes in that doesn’t fit is discarded. So, in the theological arena, think of Copernicus or Galileo and the Church’s refusal to believe that the earth revolved around the sun. It

was just too threatening to the status quo and would require a whole new way of thinking. But enough facts that don't fit any particular paradigm and eventually, we're forced to make a change. Thus, a paradigm shift. That's what happened to Paul and the other disciples. They encountered the risen Christ and this radically NEW thing means that all previous understandings were inadequate. A whole new way of thinking and a whole new way of living were required. So, again, thinking about Paul. It wasn't that all those things he was boasting about weren't good things. It was just that his goal, that righteousness that meant he had a right relationship with God, wasn't attainable by him being all the right things and doing all the right things. The loving relationship was simply given; it was all grace. That's the same paradigm shift that Martin Luther made: from law, from scrupulously needing to do everything exactly right, to the realization that it was already done, he was the recipient of grace, that he was already safe in God's arms.

One final thought here. If one is convinced that God has already won and that you are safe in God's arms, perhaps there would be a temptation to

complacency, to saying, well, thanks very much, I no longer have to exert myself in any way. But look at Paul for the corrective to that. He's still running, he says. But now he has a completely different motivation. He doesn't have to run to "save himself." So what's going on with that? I think one way of thinking about the answer is to think back to what running and marathons were originally all about. The word comes from the historical legend of the Greek runner-messenger Phiedippides. Around the year 490 BC, a gigantic Persian army landed on the Plain of Marathon, threatening the city of Athens, just 25 miles away. The Athenians, against all odds, defeated the Persians. So, after the battle, a runner named Phiedippides was sent to carry the good news of the victory to the terrified residents of Athens. He ran the entire 25 miles to the city, and when he arrived, exhausted, dehydrated, panting, he burst into the city assembly and with his last breath, shouted, "Rejoice! We conquered!" And then he collapsed and died. The Greek word that the Bible uses for "gospel" or the good news, was a word that referred to those Battle-of-Marathon type announcements about a great victory or blessing.

And for Paul, God's victory won in Jesus Christ was that kind of news. So he kept running, not to prove anything, not to earn anything, but to share the incredible, life-saving good news.

There was one more conversation I had recently that I think fits with all this. It was a conversation about starting an initiative for affordable housing in Door County. The person we were talking to said that whenever you're trying to get a project like that going, you have to be prepared to answer a central question. And that question is WHY SHOULD I CARE? Thinking about the good news, and about grace and about our knowledge that God has already won a great victory and that we are the constant recipients of God's love and goodness, the answer to that question has to be: I care because I have come to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. I care because God cares. I care because I'm gloriously and joyfully alive and want to share that good news. Amen.