

Waiting for new
Menno Mennonite Church
April 3 2022

Purpose: to declare the hope of God's ongoing new creation

Message: God's initiative will remain active and creating in all things as a matter of hope

Scripture: Isaiah 43:16-21; John 21:1-8 (please read)

Synopsis: it is easy to underestimate the power of the faithful declaration and expectation. Convinced as we are of the stability of reality and the difficulty in fighting against it, we wonder if there is anything new under the sun. Yet YHWH comes to us again and again with the promise of hope.

Isaiah 43:16–21

¹⁶Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,

¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;

they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

¹⁸Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

¹⁹I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
²

⁰The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;

for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,

²¹the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise

In my experience, there are two varieties of people: those who can see the desert and those who don't. I don't mean this to be harsh by any means, but I am guessing you know the type. Beauty in landscape is a fairly subjective and fickle thing, and I have hosted enough people from all over in the west to have a fairly good idea for how things are going to shake out. Sometimes it is an instant affinity: the sense of scale, breadth of sky, the emptiness speaks some how of opportunity and possibility and they take to it like fish to water (I know—bad metaphor for speaking about desert experience, but you know what I mean). They are the ones who I knew may well fall in love with this landscape and end up staying for a while.

Then there are the others who can never quite negotiate the shift in color pallet far enough to entertain that sage is actually a color of green. My aunt from Northern Indiana is a case in point. Hosting them when they made their western tour was a bit of an experience as she kept wondering loudly why there were so many rocks, and when the plants would come into play. When I told her about the plants and their amazing abilities to survive and thrive long periods without moisture and all the rest, she was profoundly unimpressed “What's the big deal about a stick?” she would say. There is just no pleasing some people. Through generations of Mennonite Voluntary Service volunteers, and the rest, I have gotten a fairly keen nose when I meet someone who is going to get it and those who are not. When you live off the beaten track, there is only so much you are going to be able to do to make that place and its way make sense to people.

I think there is the same differentiation when it comes to hope: there are some who can see it; there are some who struggle to imagine it. But here we have it: “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?” This is hope in its most audacious, unbridled and visionary aspect. Rooted in the realities of the past and present this is the passage to read when the world is crashing down around our heads. here is no challenge too hard, no obstacle too great, no body of water too wide, no desert too dry to keep God from creating or recreating the necessary conditions for God's people to flourish and all of creation to rise up in praise to God. That is the declaration of faith and the articulation of hope that can, at times seem far off and hard to believe. For the first readers, I am sure it was. A word that comes to them in exile and in the midst of the series of disappointments and contemplations of what now; a condition that too

many know too well. Sometimes, when we are so consumed with our pasts—for good and for bad—and uncertain of our present, there is little mental or emotional energy to entertain the possibility of a future. Sometimes we can see the trajectory of what is and become so convinced that the graph will continue uninterrupted to no-where good, we can struggle to imagine that there is such a thing as a hope or a future. Or when we have reached that point in Lent where we have become sufficiently aware of the brokenness of our relationships, our world, ourselves, that we long to remember that this is leading somewhere and somewhere good.

It is here, right here that we have the two responses—those who keep looking up, and those who struggle to see a reason for hope—come to the fore. Both are reasonable, rational responses, and sometimes we find ourselves in one camp or the next depending on the circumstances, our capabilities, our willingness to see something else. But in either case, the prophet speaks the Word of the Lord. It does not matter whether you can see it or not, whether you can imagine it or not, or whether you are prepared for it or not, the new is coming, and will emerge. Like Spring to the desert, the growth will come and the harvest will be known, in one shape or another, for that is what YHWH intends.

It is not like the prophet's vision come out of nowhere or fails to speak with evidence or experience. It is rooted within the experience of the what God has done with and for Israel in the past. God is the God of the exodus, and the faithful wondering of the desert years that did, finally end. To this we might add that this God is the God who has walked with our ancestors through fire and fury when new ideas were punishable by death. That this is the God who led us to find the place where roots could, finally, be safely planted and deeply sunk. The God who comes in human form and parts not just the waters of the sea for a moment of crossing, but parts the divisions of all that has made human experience the challenge that it is in the reconciliation in Christ. In this hope, we know the God is re-edenizing the world, making a place where God's people can fully flourish again, and the whole of creation can come into its own. For this is what God has done, and this is what God is doing in promise and deed each and every day.

I think this hard-won hope is something essential to the work of faith—it declares the reality of God even when that reality seems at odds with the facts on the ground, releasing us from the full tyranny of the word as it is, and inviting us, always, into the world as it shall be. When we step away from the power of the punditry that would describe doom in every detail and

subscribe to the movement and expectation of faith, we are time and again invited into the vision that sees beyond the landscape that we might first see, full of rocks and brambles, but opens our eyes to the subtle changes—the little lupins and poppies and the reset who venture out the first, the bravest, the best—that pop up in places where no one is perhaps even looking.

This is one of my favorite plants of the desert. It is the ocotillo. Most of the time it is an unassuming creature; literally a collection of thorned sticks that sprout from a common root and arc toward the sun, sometimes 30 or more feet into the air. When they are dormant, they look entirely dead—not much green, or growing about them at all. It looks like something out of the Doctor Seuss school of design. But when the rain comes, finally, they leap into action and leaf out all along the stem of the plant up and down, making the transition sometimes in a matter of a day or so. So sensitive to the coming of the life giving rain are they, these leaves can be nourished by just a token amount of rain for sometimes up to a month or more before falling off and returning to its dead state. In the mean time, it does what it needs to do—come to flower and fruit when the time and conditions are ripe. It is amazing to watch, to see and to know, seeing what God can do even when we are least expecting it.

I like to think that we, at our best are like this Ocotillo; ready to be nourished, grow and flower when the conditions are ripe. In the mean time we wait. We hope. Sometimes, that waiting is easier than others, but always it anticipates the coming of the Lord, and the returning of hope.

God is doing a new thing—in us, in Menno, in our country in our world. May we be given the eyes to see the changing landscape that describes God's love, even in the midst of that which would hold us down.