

Sermon, April 3, 2022

Isaiah 43:16-21
“A New Thing?”

In this morning’s reading the prophet Isaiah speaks of the Lord as one “who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters.” Obviously, he is referring to the Israelite’s exodus from Egypt, when the Lord parted the waters of the Red Sea, allowing them to escape Pharaoh’s army. But then he says, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.”

He wants the people to not dwell on the past - to leave the past in the past, because he was “about to do a new thing”.

Winston Churchill once said, “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” And Churchill was right, it is important to remember what has gone on before, especially remembering the mistakes of the past, so that we do not fall into the same traps. But it is also important that we don’t get so mired in the past that we fail to recognize that things change - that the things of the past can blind us to the possibility, or the presence of, a new thing.

The full verse from Isaiah reads, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Some translations ask, ‘do you not see it?’ The King James Version reads, “shall we not know it?” They all add up to the same thing - do we not recognize, or understand, that something new is about to take place, or is already present. And this was the essence of what Jesus was preaching, that something new was taking place, and that something new is what he referred to as ‘the kingdom of God.’

Although it was the central message of Jesus’ teaching, he never lays out a specific meaning of the kingdom. He always used parables saying that it was like something. For example, in Matthew 13 he speaks of the kingdom of heaven as being “like a mustard seed” or “like treasure hidden in a field”, or “like a merchant in search of fine pearls”, or, “like a net thrown into the sea”. In a sense these parables point to something of great value that we are seeking, but then in Matthew 4:17, Jesus proclaims “the kingdom of heaven has come near”. Some translations say, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand”. In the original Greek it literally says, “has been fulfilled”. The point is that the kingdom is something that is already present. The question is, do we understand that it is here?

In the well-known verse from the third chapter of John, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can **see** the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Again, I emphasize the word ‘see’, with seeing not meaning with your eyes, but with your spirit, or with your heart.

Part of the problem in understanding what Jesus is talking about lies in the word ‘kingdom’. That implies that he is talking about a place. But that is not what the kingdom of God is, or what Jesus meant by it. In Luke 17:20 we hear, “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God is

coming, and he answered, “the kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, “Look here it is!”, or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” The more appropriate way to interpret the ‘kingdom of God’, is as, ‘the reign of God’, which suggests that it is the will of God being present, and lived out, in the midst of human history.

Notice the words as well, “among you”. Some translations say, “within you”. Again, in the original Greek, it is “inside of you”. This can be read in two ways. First, it suggests that it resides in us as individuals. As the artist, Salvador Dali, once wrote, “The kingdom of heaven resides in the heart of the person of faith.” (Paraphrased). I would not deny that, however, we have to remember that individualism is a modern concept, but in the world, Jesus lived in people tended to think in terms of the community. That is why they tended to be upset, and either punished, or called to repentance, someone guilty of a particular sin, because it effected the community as a whole. So, when Jesus says that the kingdom of God is “among you”, he means that the reign of God is in the midst of you as a community of faith. When Jesus walked the earth the reign of God was at hand by virtue of his presence among the people. Today, it is at hand, because the spirit of Christ resides with us as a church community. Again, the question is, do we see it? Do we recognize its presence among us?

But how do we square that when in the Lord’s Prayer we say, “thy kingdom come”? Is it present, or is it still not here? I believe the answer is that it is here, but it is not ultimately fulfilled, and what is to be fulfilled appears next in the prayer - “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. That, to me, clearly points to what the kingdom, or reign, of God, is. It is the will of God being present and active in the world! The kingdom of God is not something that will come flying down out of the sky at some future date.

When the lost are found, the kingdom is here!

When the lonely, and those who mourn are comforted, the kingdom is here!

When the sick are healed, the kingdom is here!

When the hungry are fed, the kingdom is here!

When hatred and prejudice are no more, the kingdom is here!

When war gives way to peace, the kingdom is here!

When evil is vanquished, the kingdom is here!

When we truly love our neighbor, and our enemies, the kingdom is here!

When we place our trust in God, the kingdom is here!

When we open our hearts to God, when we look to Jesus as a guide to the fulfillment of God’s will on earth, and strive to make that will a living reality, then surely, we shall have seen what Isaiah called a “new thing”! Amen!