

Sermon, 25 March 2007—Fifth Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:8-14; Luke 20:9-19

The words we heard from Isaiah and from our dear older brother Paul have in common a radical readiness to, in the words of Gandhi, “be the change you want to see.” If we have spent Lent in self-examination and discernment, the first glimpses of what might change, if we are to live lives more full of God’s presence and power, have become apparent. It was no different for these three men—Isaiah and Paul and Gandhi—and it was no different for Jesus as he began to comprehend his ministry, and left his carpenter’s shop, and listened to his cousin John, and was baptized, and went out into the wilderness to wander and to fast for forty days, and returned, proclaiming and enacting Good News. The day comes when what you could not even conceive before, what was formerly impossible for you, what you might even have considered with distaste and discomfort, not to say terror, becomes necessary for you and becomes true about you.

Isaiah was speaking to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. For seventy years, as captives and slaves, they had mourned the fall of Jerusalem and struggled to retain a sense of their identity. Without a Temple, how could they pray and repair and maintain their relationship with God? Without those communal rituals, what cohesion did their nation have? Well, they came to realize they had the Torah and the Psalms. They could gather around their sacred texts when they could no longer gather at a sacred location. The collection that was to become Hebrew Scripture began to coalesce in the back rooms of slaves’ quarters in Babylon after their hours of work. They would retell and piece together and write down the stories that

gave them their identity; they would “meditate on God’s Law day and night;” they would “retell the mighty deeds of the LORD.”

For huddled slaves in exile, two strands of stories rose to prominence in those days: the Covenant with the Jewish People at Sinai and the Covenant with David at Jerusalem. The Covenant at Sinai was the climax of the Exodus from Egypt; God had brought them as a tribe of slaves out from the Iron Furnace to worship Him on his holy mountain and to receive His Law, which would establish them as his Chosen People forever. The Covenant with David was the climax of the entry into the Promised Land; God had driven out their enemies and chosen a new holy mountain, Zion in Jerusalem, where his Name would dwell, and had pledged to David that the throne set up there would be a house that would endure forever.

You can see why Jewish slaves in Babylon would hold on to both these strands of stories, and finger them, and strengthen them by spinning new filaments into them, and tighten them with knots. If God had freed their ancestors from Egypt, God could do the same from Babylon. If God had promised faithfulness to David, God could keep that promise in Babylon.

Isaiah was a more radical thinker. Perhaps he saw that this exercise in nostalgia, while it might help them remember who they were, could not help them become what they could be. Ultimately, this retrogressive hope to restore the past is stifling and embittering, and any future to which it gives birth is still-born and rigid. We cannot grasp how shocking Isaiah’s message was. As for the Messiah, Isaiah said, it is not some son of David, but Cyrus the Persian. As for escape from Babylon, Isaiah said, God is God in all places and for all people, and all flesh shall see God’s glory.

So in the passage we heard today, Isaiah starts out on familiar ground. God makes a path in the sea—and so God had when the Red Sea opened and

we fled through it. God brings out and extinguishes chariot and horse, army and warrior—and so God had when the Red Sea closed on our pursuers. So Isaiah obtains the consent of his listeners. But immediately he adds, “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.” With God’s voice in him, Isaiah says, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” God makes a highway in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. This barren Babylon can be Eden again. The whole world is God’s, so even your return, to the extent that it matters, is a small thing for God and requires no gripping straining retrofitting effort of yours.

Paul was equally radical—and far more personal than Isaiah. We also cannot grasp how shocking Paul’s message was. The inclusion of the Gentiles, by faith, into the promises made to Abraham violated the very meaning of a covenant with a chosen people—let alone broke most of the Laws by which that Covenant was kept. But Paul states that he regards his Jewish identity as loss because he is a follower of Christ—if one could even believe in a crucified Messiah, which is offensive nonsense. Paul, though, considers it all as he would rubbish in order to gain Christ.

“Regard not the former things; God is doing a new thing.” Note Isaiah’s present tense. For Paul also, this is not a single past catastrophe, but a daily effort at transformation. “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” Paul begins to hope that what he longs for can be true in him because Christ has already laid his irrevocable claim on him. He is no longer his own person, and therefore can now do and become what that former person could not even imagine.

Listen to him as he shows how to be the change you want to see. “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I

do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” This is the same posture as Isaiah. The fact is it is terrifying.

None of us step into being the change we want to see unless where we are or what we are is intolerable. And the dangers are considerable. You can lose your way in the wilderness—just as the part of Israel that fell to Assyria, rather than to Babylon, was absorbed and vanished. Family members can become strangers—just as Paul was rejected by Israelites. You can pick the wrong means of bringing about a change—just as the tenants in the vineyard chose violence and reaped violence. They acted like owners, which was the change they wanted to see, but they acted as murderers, which was the change they brought about on themselves as well.

This, which I am speaking about so casually, is one of the most difficult things any of us ever have to face. At its simplest level it means that if I want to see something done, I must see to it. I am embarrassed to say that it took me over fifteen years as an adult to learn this. I would come home, offended by the imposition of having to earn a living, and I would act out shaking off the yoke of accountability by dropping my coat on the floor, tossing my keys somewhere, dumping my suitcase and books and packages on the chairs, and turning my back on it all. What followed several hours later was a stifled tantrum when I needed to step over a pile of clothes on the floor and found no place to sit. Having no idea where my keys were didn't usually become a crisis until the next morning, as I frothed myself into a panic, already late for work. In my case, it was nothing short of a new tilt to the earth's axis to realize that if I hung my coat up as soon as I got in the door, I wouldn't have to pick it up later; and if I carried the groceries into the

kitchen, I would have a place to sit; and if I put my keys in the same place each day, close to the door, they would be there the next morning.

This is not far from also realizing that the solution to my complaint that no one is putting away the chairs is to put away the chairs. The trick is to be clear about what I actually want. If I want the chairs put away, I can do that. But if I want other people to put them away, that quickly leads to a grumpy old age. What is the change I really want to see: a clean room or other people doing what I don't want to do? The first is possible; the second is a well of resentment that never runs dry. We all know there ought to be a law; we all agree somebody ought to do something. Forget the former things. If you want more young families to join our church, be the change you want to see: find ways to invite them, bring them, welcome them here. Why should any of us think that one day it will simply happen?

Hidden in our preference that someone else put away the chairs is the more sinister core. All of us are damaged, wounded, needy. All of us wish that someone would come running out, as the lavish indulgent father of the prodigal son did, embracing us and celebrating us. All of us long to be noticed and tended and honored. How often that becomes an internal murmur that no one appreciates us, no one includes us, no one notices us. Never underestimate the risk you are under when the rust of your resentment starts to corrode the iron that structures personality. The astonishing prayer attributed to Saint Francis says, "Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love." Not too long after I learned to pick up after myself, I heard that prayer as a sentimental and self-defeating little list of rules, more evidence that sainthood is nothing more than a case of low self-esteem. Yet another assignment, I thought: now I had to be understanding as well as tidy!

But the heart of that prayer is this. In a world where I myself feel misunderstood, I can never guarantee that others will understand me, but I do have control over whether or not I am working on understanding them, as I listen and clarify and affirm and wait and repeat back what I hear and wait again. In a world that I know is full of resentment at being ignored and misunderstood and overlooked and set aside, I can be the change I want to see: if I want understanding, I can offer it. I can offer my cup of water in the name of Christ. Rather than wait forever for the invitation, extend it; rather than look enviously at an imagined inner circle, be welcoming of others. Then be at peace with having been the change you want to see. Notice that what you hoped to see you have seen, not by receiving it, but by giving it.

This requires all the compassion and patience and encouragement that you can bring to bear as you study your self in the mirror. All of us, in our depths, I believe, are starving infants, screaming ourselves crimson, barely able to suck in our breath in the fury of our despair. If only we could be fed! If only we could be held and warmed! If only they understood how badly we need love, how ashamed we are of the ferocity of our need, and how terrified we are of being known to be so needy! How can we say to our depths, where the primal wound of alienation has never healed, “Be the change you want to see,” when what we most feel is that we are caught in the suction of a black hole in our soul? Being the change you want to see can be excruciatingly painful, because this is about scouring our insides clean of this crust of self-regard and misery that keeps getting baked on, layer after rancid layer, when we feel we have not been appreciated enough, not thanked enough, not coddled enough. That’s a hot dish recipe that gets passed down through the generations. Being the change you want to see is not about virtue; it is about ending the tyranny of the starving ego, because

the world cannot be rearranged to feed us, and our insistence that the world is our food is simply untrue. This ignorance—our core ignorance—is to be pitied, not punished; but it must not be indulged. We can glimpse the truth of this long before Christ’s light even begins to shine on us.

My dear sisters and brothers, we cannot do this on our own power. That is why this prayer says “*grant* that I may seek not so much to be consoled as to console.” The squalling pouting infant we each are on the inside does not know a better way. It is cruel to think we should. That is not God’s view of the matter. God did not simply send rules, but sent Jesus, “to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us.” Even now, in you, Christ shares your human nature, ready to live and die again as you, strengthening you to be the change you want to see. That is the true meaning of “forgetting what lies behind” and “remembering not the former things.” We ask God for the strength gently to put the infant in us to bed anyway, patiently to substitute the meat of compassion for the milk of indulgence, carefully to notice which diet makes us stronger. We cannot make this change unless we trust that God is already doing for us what we cannot ask or imagine.

We cannot make this change unless we begin to sense Christ being in us the change we want to see in ourselves, just as God in Christ became the change God wanted to see in the world. May God first of all quicken in us the knowledge of his love for us, his abiding presence in us, his intention for us, so we can forget the former things, and be the change we want to see, so that God might be glorified in us and at all times and in all places, as we praise the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one God, today, whom we hope to praise forever.