

Text: Isaiah 43: 16-21  
Title: Take Me to the Water  
Date: 05.01.22  
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The First Reformed Church of Schenectady was founded in 1680.

At the back of the sanctuary hang the three flags of the three sovereigns under which the church has existed: the Dutch East Indies Trading Company, the United Kingdom, and the United States. At the front of the sanctuary the church's organizing charter, signed by the King of England, is enshrined in a stately case.

At the beginning of worship, the church sexton opens the charter's case as the elders, choir and pastors process from under the three flags down the long center aisle, ending with the elders taking their seats in the front row. It is really quite grand – if you like that sort of thing.

It's hard to miss the markers of history in New England. At every turn there's some reminder of this battle or that birthplace. I was particularly fond of the garden plaques that read, "On this site in 1742 absolutely nothing happened."

But the reminders of history also serve to shape or shade the present. It was impossible to serve at First Reformed of Schenectady without being mindful of the past. I well remember the sense of being in a deep long river....

We were part of a tradition – carried along by currents more powerful than the present moment. We weren't alone – the river was full of those who came before and those who would be carried further along. There were times when the river rambled over rocky rapids or slogged through murky swamps. There were places where the water was deep and wide and places where it slowed to a trickle, but the river kept flowing...

On the occasion of Hope's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary we have opportunity to reflect on our place in the river. With joy and thanksgiving, we rightly remember:

a Canadian with charisma called to plant a new church in a new suburb,  
the corner lot and a model home donated by a colorful builder,  
a congregation finding identity as a refuge for all who couldn't fit or find their way in other churches.

We remember those in the river with us: Ruth DeYoung, Albertena VanderWeele, Ellyn Lubbers, John Van Vossen, Pete Post, Klandermans and Kwasteniets, Bill Lenters, etc.... All floating along to the music of Dora Diephouse and Lynn Hollender. We're mindful of the depth, the weaving, the wandering, and the long flow of the river. We paddle into the future with confidence in the river's current.

Bill and Fenetta Stoub got married when she was 80 and he was 86. Both were widowed; both had family – Bill's brood numbering in the hundreds. When Bill died at 99, they'd shared 13 good years together.

In their wedding homily I imagined a rowboat. The rowboats of most newlyweds are positioned close to the shore. With their backs to a big blue expanse of water newlyweds are eager to grab the oars and begin rowing. Their vision of the past is short; their expectation for the future is long....

Bill and Fenetta's boat had been in the water longer. There was good water ahead of them, but there was no missing that they'd already rowed a distance. They had a sense of history. They knew "strength for today and a bright hope for tomorrow" because they knew God's faithfulness in the past.

Dear friends, part of today's celebration is looking back down the river. Like a rowboat we look backward to go forward. We remember our history, we miss loved ones, we recognize our limps and losses, we confess our frailty and our missteps, and we celebrate God's faithfulness. Our hearts are full of gratitude; we marvel at the distance we've already rowed. Thanks be to God.

And yet, listen again to Isaiah:

*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*

Forget the former things?  
Don't dwell on the past?  
Surely that can't be right!  
Clearly that's the wrong text for today....

Consider...

The Babylonians had overrun Israel and carried the Israelites into exile. Jerusalem was in ruins, the temple destroyed, and the Israelites were strangers in a strange land – brutalized, homeless, powerless. And to them Isaiah announces God's coming deliverance. For fifteen chapters the prophet/poet offers encouragement and hope for the exiles. For example:

*But now, this is what the Lord says – he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine..."*

Or the first lines of our text:

*This is what the Lord says – he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters...*

Isaiah reminds the Israelites of their identity and their exodus from slavery. They can face the future without fear because of who they are and what God has done in the past. But then there's this odd turn of phrase:

*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!*

Rather than look to the past, they're to turn around and imagine what God will do in future. Rather than a rowboat the instruction is to get in a canoe....

And Isaiah turns the previous imagery on its head. Rather than dry-land through the waters there will now be water in the dry-land. Rather than animals that scavenge, even vultures and jackals will find provision. Rather than dying of thirst in the wilderness, even there, God will provide water to drink....

It's a remarkable reversal!

Samuel Wells suggests that this moment in biblical history is the pivot point of all scripture. Listen to how he puts it:

*I regard the exile in Babylon as the fulcrum of the Bible, where the pigeons of the exodus and the covenant and the wilderness all come home to roost and where the transformation in Christ is anticipated and foreshadowed. God restores creation, shapes the kingdom, and renews the church from people who are in exile of their own or other's making. This is the moment when the stories converge.*

As we stand at this fulcrum, that seems a helpful image.

As we mark 60 years, that seems a hopeful image.

As we turn toward the future, that convergence seems essential...

What if we came at it this way?

The Jordan River runs from the Sea of Galilee down through Israel/Palestine and eventually spills into the Dead Sea. But the headwaters of the Jordan are a series of springs or tributaries in northern Galilee and the Golan Heights.

These freshwater springs bubble up with life. In a desolate desert they're fragrant, fertile, verdant oases – springs of water literally gushing from rocks in a wasteland. The Jordan is an artery that runs the length of the Promised Land through some rugged-harsh terrain, but its source is springs/pools that are shaded, cool, gentle, and life-giving.

Isaiah invites the exiles to look not just back down the river but to consider the source. To remember not just who they belong to and what God has done in the past, but to look to the creative-redemptive spring of life that is gushing forth from the very being of God.

To a people in exile,  
to those living under the boot of an oppressor,  
to those weary and worried,  
to those anxious about the future,  
to those short on hope and long on cynicism,  
Isaiah says,

*...don't dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!  
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*

Rather than a river, maybe today is about a life-giving spring, a pool of grace. It has the same contours of covenant, community, and compassion, but it's a new thing bubbling up from the creative-redemptive heart of God.

The 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee asked Roz DeBoer to do a textile wall hanging. For the 50<sup>th</sup> we commissioned an anthem; for the 60<sup>th</sup> we went with art. We didn't give Roz any direction. We trusted the artist and Spirit. And she went to the source. She went to water bubbling up, to a pool of grace. So, now hanging in the narthex is a beautiful piece that Roz entitled "Gathering." These lines speak to what she envisioned:

*A people gathering  
around the pond of grace  
that is Hope Church  
Accepting and inclusive  
Helpful and healing  
Joyful and intergenerational  
We gather to be  
restored and renewed  
and leave to love and serve*

I love that!

Dear friends, for 60 years we're gathered 'round the spring of grace. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God is doing a new thing – a thing that bubbles up endlessly with hope, healing, joy, acceptance, abundant life, forgiveness, community, and love. This morning we baptized Sylvie in that pool. Thanks be to God.

I don't know what the future will hold. I don't know the next 6 months or next 60 years. I do know it's easy to be discouraged and cynical. The terrors of war, economic instability, climate change, and today's political discourse feels like a wasteland. With our denomination poised to tear-itself-up over how to love same-sex attracted folks, or when faith communities splinter with disinformation and hubris, I do know it can feel like a wilderness.

It's easy to respond by enjoying the view from the rowboat.

It's inviting to rest in the gifts and goodness of the past.

It's tempting to make the past an idol.

But our faith is the life, death and resurrection of God in Christ.

Our hope is in the creative-redemptive new thing that God would do among us.

Our call is to stay to close to the spring.

Let us cherish the past and find there: identity and the grace of God.

Let us redouble our commitment to be a refuge – an oasis of hope for all.

And, let us turn to the future without fear because God will continue to do a new thing among us. God in Christ will provide

*water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*

Amen.