

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 7, 2019
Isaiah 43:16-21
“Yahweh’s New Thing”

They had certainly gotten themselves between a rock and a hard spot. They were in a pickle. They were being pinched...the people of Judah that is.

They had had a succession of kings many of whom were bad but some of whom were pretty good. The good kings however could not affect a real change in the hearts of the people of Judah. Uzziah started off as a very good king. When he grew powerful however he tried to offer incense at the altar of the Lord which only the priests were consecrated to do and he ended up getting leprosy and dying. His son, Jotham, took the throne after him and was a good king but he did nothing to take away the altars to the false gods. Then his son, Ahaz, came along. He was one of the worst kings ever. He even burned his own sons as an offering to false gods! On account of this abomination the Lord gave Judah into the hands of the allied armies of Syria and Israel. As a result of Ahaz’s sin in just one day 120,000 fighting men of Judah were killed and 200,000 women and children were taken away into slavery. After that the armies of Edom and Philistia and Assyria also came up against Judah. Every time these foreign armies were victorious over Yahweh’s people because King Ahaz was so evil. Eventually Ahaz died and his son, Hezekiah, reigned in his place. Unlike his father though, Hezekiah was faithful. He cleansed the temple, restored order amongst the priests, reinstated the Passover and broke down the high places. He even defeated the king of Assyria by his unyielding faith in Yahweh. But he died and his son, Manasseh, took the throne after him and reinstated all the high places his father had destroyed. He even reinstated the burning of children at the altars of false gods. This is what gets the people of Judah into the predicament that they find themselves in. They do not allow themselves to be led by the good kings. Rather they allow themselves to be led astray by the wicked kings.

In response to all this evil Yahweh decreed: “I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such disaster that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plumb line of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. And I will forsake the remnant of My heritage and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in My sight and have provoked Me to anger since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day” (2 Kings 21:12-15).

And this is what Yahweh does. He uses Nebuchadnezzar and the armies of Babylon to destroy Jerusalem. He wipes them from the face of the earth. He turns Jerusalem upside down and shakes the people out of it carrying them away into slavery in Babylon.

There they are...Yahweh’s people stuck between a rock and a hard place, stuck between Yahweh and Babylon, hoping beyond hope that Yahweh will save them in spite of His wrath

and...nothing! He lets them be defeated and carried off as plunder, spoil for the victors. Either He was unwilling or unable to help!

They were also up against a rock, a hard place. The sea was at their backs and an advancing enemy horde at their faces...the people of the exodus generation, that is. "When Pharaoh drew near the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to Yahweh. They said to Moses, 'Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians?' For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness'" (Exodus 14:10-12).

To all appearances it seemed as if Yahweh had brought the people out of Egypt through a great show of power and then was unwilling or unable to save them as they saw the seriousness of their predicament.

Is this the way of Yahweh? He acts with great and mighty power and deeds and then fizzles out in the end? Well it certainly appears to be that way.

Consider Jesus. Here He is the very Son of God. He has spent the better part of three years doing great and mighty deeds. He has cast out demons, healed lepers, restored sight to the blind, and locomotion to the paralyzed. And yet He hangs from the cross.

Jesus is in a real pickle! He is dying up there. He desperately needs the Lord's help! He even cries out in His agony, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" The Lord has abandoned Jesus! The Father ignores His Son's cries for mercy!

We have to conclude either the Lord is unwilling or unable to help! Either way this is a scary conclusion because if that's the case with Jesus, that His Father is unwilling or unable even to help Jesus, then what hope is there for us? Will the Lord be there willing to help us in the midst of our life and death struggle with sin and the devil? Will He be able to help us?

That's the point of our Old Testament lesson for today! Isaiah steps into this world of doubt and fear and Yahweh says through him: "remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing" (Isaiah 43:18-19a).

Now we have to be careful here. This is not a divine command to ignore history or the lessons of history. If that is what Yahweh intended here, Isaiah could not have referred the people of Judah back to the lesson of the exodus generation, the people of Jesus' day could not have looked back at the lesson of the Babylonian exile, and we could not look back at the crucifixion of Jesus to learn the truth of God's love for His people.

But if Yahweh is not saying "Ignore history" what is His point? It's precisely this: The past is not indicative of the future. In his book, Prince Caspian, C.S. Lewis uses a lion as a Christ-like

character. That lion in a previous story rushed in and saved the day from a wicked witch. But in this story one of the characters who is expecting the same thing to happen again says, “I thought you’d come running in and frighten all the enemies away – like last time” to which the lion responds “It is hard for you little one, but things never happen the same way twice.”

Things never happen the same way twice. That’s the point Yahweh is making through Isaiah today. He is telling the people of Judah not to expect Him to come rushing in and save the day by parting the sea. No! He’s been there, done that. Instead He is telling them to expect a new thing, a better thing!

He begins by reminding them what He’s done in the past. Isaiah declares Yahweh is the one who “makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick” (Isaiah 43:16-17). This is what Yahweh did when His people were stuck between the army of Pharaoh and the Red Sea. He moved the sea. He made the wet place dry so that His people could pass through as if on a road. Then He drew in the armies of Pharaoh and destroyed them there on that road through the sea as the dry place became wet once more. In answer to His people’s concerns that Yahweh was unwilling or unable to help them He says, “No way. I am able. I am willing. Look at what I’ve done.”

Isaiah then turns to the people of his own generation, the people who are languishing as slaves in a foreign land called Babylon. They too are wondering if Yahweh is willing and able to come to their aid. But remember: “Things never happen the same way twice.” That’s why Yahweh says “remember not the former things...Behold, I am doing a new thing.” What new thing is Yahweh doing? He tells them: “I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Isaiah 43:19b). In other words, where He once made a wet place dry now He is going to make a dry place wet. This is going to be necessary because as He leads His people out of Babylon back to Israel they will be traveling through the desert and they will need water. He promises to give it to them. He is willing. He is more than able! He is God.

Things never happen the same way twice. Never is that more true than in the case of Jesus! Jesus was in a hard spot (no doubt about it), hanging on the cross suffering the taunts and jeers of people whom He had come to help. He is even abandoned by His Father. In agony He cries out for help and breathes His last. One is tempted to conclude that the Father is either unwilling or unable to help Jesus or both. But wait...three days later the tomb is empty. Three days later Jesus lives. Three days later in the resurrection the Father screams “I am more than willing! I am beyond just being able! I in this death and resurrection have defeated death and sin and the devil for you!”

And the same goes for us. Oh we find ourselves every so often in a real pinch, don’t we? It really doesn’t matter how we get ourselves there. The fact is we *do* get ourselves there. Jaimie was a high school junior in love with a college freshman. They went out, hung out, partied, had a good time. And as sometimes happens Jaimie soon found that she had become pregnant. When she told her boyfriend about her situation he said he would drive her to the abortion

clinic and they would take care of the problem, her parents need never know. The problem was that Jaimie didn't want an abortion so she told her boyfriend "I want to keep my baby." He told her that if she kept the baby she would not keep him. Over the next weeks Jaimie grew increasingly sad. She mourned the loss of a man she loved and she worried about what her parents might think about her when they found out. She cried out to the Lord "help me." It didn't seem like He heard her though or if He did hear her it didn't seem like He was willing or able to help her. As the days and weeks drew on her parents recognized that something was terribly wrong with their precious daughter. They asked and asked her about it until one day she told them that her boyfriend had left her and she was pregnant. They were of course disappointed but told her "We love you no matter what. We'll help you. We're disappointed that this has happened, that you have made some bad choices, but you will always be our beloved daughter."

You see in life we come up against obstacles that to us seem insurmountable. The Israelites faced the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. The Judahites faced the might of Nebuchadnezzar and the desert. We face a sinful nature that holds us in a grip that is as tight as our earthly flesh. We face death at every turn afraid of when the doctor might say "We can't do anymore to help you." We face an enemy who knows all our weak spots and attacks just when we are at our weakest. It's enough to make us wonder if the Lord is willing or able to help us.

Today's lesson comforts us with the assurance that He is not only able but He is also more than willing to come to our aid. In fact that's why He sent Jesus. Jesus came not to help us as we limp along weak and weary. He came to carry the cross for us. He came not just to usher us through death. He came to destroy it for us. He came not to carry us to heaven where we would live as disembodied souls forever. He came so that He might die and be resurrected so that we could look forward to our own resurrection unto eternity.

This is Yahweh's new thing. Jesus has promised that He will return and when He does we too shall rise into a new life in a new world where all of creation will declare the praise of the Lamb who was slain and who now reigns as He sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. You will be there with the jackals and ostriches praising the Lord for all that He has done because by means of all that He has done in Jesus' death and resurrection you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.