

God's 'New Thing' (Isaiah 43:16 - 44:5)

Intro

If you were here last week, when you heard that this morning's Bible reading was Isaiah 43:16 again, then you probably thought it was Groundhog Day. That we're re-living last Sunday all over again, just without our civic friends! For those of you who were thinking we'd entered some kind of time warp, let me reassure you it is in fact a different Sunday. For those of you who thought it was a mistake, let me assure you that it isn't. And for those of you who weren't here last week, and have no idea what I'm talking about, let me explain that I've deliberately chosen to preach on the same passage (give or take a few verses) that Ian preached on last week. Not, I would like to add, because I don't think Ian did a good job last week! But because I believe God has some more to say to us from this part of Isaiah's prophecy.

For those of you who weren't here last week, then let me do a very brief re-cap. If I've missed the point, then Ian can tell you what he really said over coffee!

The prophet Isaiah urged God's people 'to forget the former things. Not to dwell on the past'. There are generally two responses to the past – nostalgia and regret. Neither of those help us to move forward. Instead we need to be open to the new things God is going to bring our way.

God forgives all the stuff of the past that traps us. He does it out of his great love for us, and he does it through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That's it in a nutshell!

New thing

So last week's message dealt pretty thoroughly with 'forgetting the past'. This morning I want to shift our focus away from that and home in on this 'new thing' that God is doing. For the people of God in Isaiah's day, and for us too.

(V19 of ch. 43) *See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.*

Look, says God. Here's something new. Have you noticed? Can't you see it? Don't you perceive it?

Do you not perceive it?

Often the honest answer is - we don't!! We don't see it at all.

Men and women see things differently, *allegedly*.

Men can supposedly focus better on what's directly in front of them while women can apparently see more to the periphery. There are various theories as to why that is, ranging from the 'there are differing numbers of rods and cones in the eyes of the two sexes' explanation, to the 'Men chase food, women look around to keep offspring safe from danger' explanation. Decide for yourselves whether you think there's anything in it, and feel free to use whichever excuse you think appropriate the next time you get into hot water for not being able to find something!!!

All I know is that boys cannot see matching socks in the drawer right in front of them!!

Can't you see? says God. It's right in front of you!!

Isn't that every frustrated parent's cry?

God says through his spokesperson, Isaiah, 'Look, will you! Look at what I'm doing, right in front of your noses!! I'm making a way for you to get to where you should be.'

God was making a way forward for his people, a way through the desert. Something that looked like it would never happen, something they'd probably given up hope of long before. A way back to their spiritual home, to the land of their fathers, to Jerusalem. A return from exile. But also in the longer term, a new way through Jesus Christ.

Is God making a way for us?

Before we berate those people of God as dense, unseeing twits, let's ask ourselves the question; 'Is God doing something right in front of *our* noses?' Something that we haven't noticed up until now? Is he saying to us 'Look. Here it is. Can't you see it? Something in our personal lives perhaps, or in our corporate life here in this place as the body of Christ? Is God opening up ways for us that we haven't even noticed?

Regardless of the number of rods and cones our eyes have, or the difference between the sexes, we don't see things often because we don't look properly. A quick glance at God and his plans isn't enough. If we really want to find something then we invest time in it. Like the woman who lost her engagement ring somewhere in the house, and literally turned the place upside down to find it. She even looked in the u-bend of the plumbing under the sink, and that's where it was! Sometimes we treat God and his plans like an odd sock that could do with being found, rather than a precious ring that must be found. So are we taking time and effort to ask God to show us his plans?

I'm willing to bet that those people to whom this prophecy was originally directed failed to see partly because they were scared. Scared of setting out across the desert. It was a long trek, maybe four or five months, a journey of several hundred miles, and certainly dangerous. Scared of leaving the familiar. Babylon might be exile, but it was still home. The majority contemplating the journey would have been born in Babylon. They didn't know anything different. Scared of what they would have to face upon arrival. It wasn't exactly

going to be a picnic if and when they did make it. They were returning to a heap of rubble and a lengthy programme of rebuilding.

Fear stops us seeing things and it stops us doing things. But the message from God is clear: I am making a way in the desert.

A way through the desert had been made before by God for his people, when they were led out of Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the wilderness into the Promised Land. Here's a reminder of his faithfulness. The desert has been conquered before; why couldn't it be again?

Those of us here this morning who would describe ourselves as God's people (as followers of Jesus Christ) will almost certainly have experienced His faithfulness in particular situations that we have faced. Times when God has made a way for us through something that looked so daunting, or helped us through something that just looked impossible. And it helps to remember those times when we are faced with new difficulties. It can help to deliberately recall what God has done.

So, taking all that into account: the not noticing what's in front of our eyes, either because we don't look properly or because we're scared of the size of the task, and then the reassurance that God has been faithful in the past, is there something new that God is doing that he really wants you to notice and get a hold of? Is there something new that he's doing that he really wants us as a body of people to grasp? We need to earnestly seek God's direction for our lives as individuals and our lives corporately. And we can do that through prayer.

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

Notice it's not just a way in the desert that God is making, but also streams in the wasteland.

Refreshment

The middle section of the book of Isaiah has loads of references to streams in the wasteland, in the desert, to water coming to dry and arid places, to the refreshment that the water brings. We meet it here in verse 19, and then again in verse 3 of ch 44 towards the end of today's passage. *I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground.*

It's all about being adequately refreshed. Four months travelling would have been impossible for God's people without those streams, without the availability of water. God promised not only the path to follow, but the refreshment that was required too. And it's the same for us today. If God is going to do a new thing, show us a new way, then he will provide the refreshment to go along side it. He will resource our journey.

But there's more to this desert/dry and springs/stream thing. The people Isaiah was addressing had become spiritually dry, as dry as the desert they would travel through. Verses 22-24 make that pretty clear...

God says to them: You haven't called on me. You haven't wearied yourselves for me. You haven't brought me sheep for burnt offerings. You haven't honoured me with your sacrifices...etc etc. It's a list of how the people have failed in their worship, in their vital relationship with God.

It's all looking pretty hopeless at this point. And then the good news that we heard last week: God is going to wipe from his memory all this bad stuff. All this disobedience and paying lip service to him. All this half-heartedness and not paying attention. He's choosing, out of love, not to remember it anymore.

And he's going to drench us, so that we are no longer dry, no longer arid. So that our relationship with him is fresh and luscious. *I will pour water on the thirsty land....I will pour out my Spirit...*

You know that feeling when you haven't been able to have a shower for a while for whatever reason (You've been camping, or you've had an operation, or your shower's broken.) And then you step under the water and it just cascades over you, and it's the best feeling in the world. That is what God can do to dry lives. He can refresh them so utterly that it's a complete joy – the best feeling in the world.

And what will happen when we've been refreshed?

Known as God's

People will want to be known as God's.

44:5 One will say, 'I belong to the Lord' another will call himself by the name of Jacob; still another will write on his hand 'The Lord's' and will take the name Israel.

Holy Spirit will be poured out, and people will want to be known as belonging to God. Because we'll be attractive and full of life, not dry and shrivelled up.

And I guess the question for us all this morning is, do we identify with this? Do we feel dry and shrivelled up and need to know that refreshment from God? We all get dry from time to time. We all reach the point where God could quite justifiably say of us 'you haven't been putting any effort into this relationship'. Come to God this morning and ask him to drench you in his Holy Spirit. Ask him to pour water on the thirsty ground. And then you'll be fresh and luscious again. You'll want to be known as God's. And others will see something so attractive in you that they'll want to be known as God's too!

Are you in exile? God is showing you a way back. He's preparing the ground in front of you. Will you trust him to take the first steps?

Perhaps you've never met this living, life-giving God. Now's the time to begin a journey with him.

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

Let's spend some time asking God to show us the way forward, to show us where he's leading us, and to ask for the refreshing of his Holy Spirit in our lives, so that we might better serve him and be attractive for him.

See God's 'New Thing'
Isaiah 43:16 – 44:5

There are times when we can't see something that is happening right in front of us. That could be for a whole host of reasons, but might well include not paying attention or being scared to face reality.

God's people in exile in Babylon were being shown a way back to their homeland. *See I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.* (Isaiah 43:19). But they had to notice what God was doing and then have the courage to make the difficult journey.

In those situations when we are afraid it can help to recall what God has done in the past, and to reflect on his faithfulness. The desert would have reminded God's people of the journey through the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

When God calls us to do something, he promises to provide the resources to go along side the task. In this case it was the provision of water to get them through the desert.

The dryness of the desert also reflects the dryness of the people's spirituality. They have neglected God in all kinds of ways (*see 43:22-24*). But (and here is the good news!) God chooses to remove from his memory those failures, and instead to drench and refresh his people with his Holy Spirit.

Questions for discussion

1. How do you seek God's will? How does God speak to you?
2. What things stop you looking and listening for him?
3. Is God showing *you* some 'new thing'? What about for Wade Street Church? How might that be communicated?
4. Think of a time when God has been faithful. How might that help you with the situations you face now/in the future?
5. In what areas do we need refreshment? Ask God to drench you with his Holy Spirit.