

## **A New Thing**

### **Isaiah 43:16-21**

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,  
who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished,  
quenched like a wick:

Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth,  
do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honor me,  
the jackals and the ostriches;  
for I give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,  
the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.

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Isaiah 43:16-21

April 3, 2022  
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**I.**

For your spiritual nourishment this morning, I'd like to serve up a "slice of life" sermon about Karen Bailey's last day, why having nachos for dinner turned out to be a bad idea, and how good it can be to break the rules every once in awhile.

This past Thursday was Karen Bailey's last day on the job here at our church. For the past two years, she has served our congregation with a style that is all her own: welcoming and engaging, highly adept and professional, and with no small amount of humor, compassion and grace. In general, the title of "secretary" really doesn't begin to adequately describe the role; even less so as it relates to Karen Bailey, in specific. Karen began working at the height of COVID, and for the past two years she has held us together like glue, greased the wheels and guided us through.

**II.**

Karen, her husband Kevin, and their sons Josh and Logan were still relatively new to the congregation when she began in the office, so I'm sure it was quite an eye-opener to see what really goes on behind the curtain at the Emerald City of Oz we call the Church on the Park. Turns out, all the beautiful, awesome and amazing things we do as a church begin and end right there in that little office with the person sitting in the chair working the levers, plying the pulleys and pushing the buttons; and in Karen's case, doing so with a twinkle in her eye and a grin on her face.

Though I'm certainly sad to see her leave us for the greener pastures of teaching pre-schoolers to play piano (she *does* love those kids) I celebrate her journey as she moves forward through her life. We owe Karen a great deal of thanks for all her time, energy and good work. She is the real deal, and conscientious to a fault; I will greatly miss her steady hand, cool head, and warm heart.

### III.

Of course, this in no way dissuaded me from working her like a dog these last few weeks trying to get ahead on bulletins and mailing labels, catching up on Session minutes and record keeping, tidying bulletin boards, updating the Deacon and Elder photo frames, reorganizing and labeling the mailboxes outside the sanctuary, and every other single thing I could imagine to help weather the storm to come while we search for her replacement.

If it weren't for her relentless, sunny disposition, I could have started to feel bad about it; especially in the last hour on Thursday when I asked to run off and fold *all* the bulletins for the next four Sundays. Recognizing it was a "Big Ask" I came into the office to help her fold just as she was starting on the bulletins for the 24th, the last Sunday in April; and, after two years, the last set of bulletins she would ever do. Which made what happened next all the more poignant; it could have been outright cruel if it wasn't so darn funny.

### IV.

I strode into the office and joined her at the counter. I grabbed a small stack of bulletins from the pile and folded them over all together as one with only a gentle crease and then proceeded to take each individual, pre-folded bulletin and quickly line up the corners of the right edge and put a hard crease in the left; moving on to the next in rapid succession.

She's an incredibly quick study, that Karen Bailey, and in an instant *she* realized what I was doing, and *I* realized what she has *not* been doing; apparently, for the past two years. She looked at me with rank disbelief and said, "You've *got* to be kidding me!?! On my *last* day!?! " I said, "Easier, right?"

Turns out for the past two years, she'd been folding them one at a time. "Why didn't you show me that two years ago?" she said. I replied, "You never asked, and I didn't know you didn't know. Sorry!" And we both laughed; which is pretty much all we've done for the past last two years. I'm going to miss that most of all.

## **V.**

Of course, by the time Karen left it was 4 p.m. on Thursday and I was eager to get out to the lake where I typically spend a blessed evening of solitude, then wake up early on Friday morning to work uninterrupted on the sermon. I went home to pack the car and, as she always does, Linda offered to help me gather food for dinner; typically, leftovers which are easy to fix. While this comes off as trying to be helpful, I know her secret agenda is to sneak in some vegetables; squash in this case. When I'm at the lake, though, I like to keep it simple; put a sandwich in my hand and I'm a happy man. Of late, however, I've had a yen for nachos; a small pile of corn chips on a dinner plate, with freshly shredded pepper jack cheese and a liberal amount of jalapeños (jalapeños count as a vegetable in my book); 45 seconds in the microwave, done. With only the one fork, one plate and the grater to clean up; perfect.

## **VI.**

So, I nestled myself in my recliner, put on some mindless action movie I've already seen before, silenced my cell phone, and proceeded to let the cares and woes of the world mercifully and quietly slip away to yield a few hours of respite for heart and head: nothing to think about, and nothing to worry about. Nearing the big finale of the movie, and with my tummy rumbling, I hit "pause" and got up to fix the nachos with no small amount of eager anticipation. Out of habit I turned on the radio, always set to NCPR, as I got out the fixin's for my nachos.

Though I've grown a little tired of the national navel-gazing and myopia of NPR, I knew the BBC News Hour would be on the air and I always appreciate their insights on events taking place beyond our borders which rarely are given voice. On this night, though, the voices were brutal in tone and tenor and I soon regretted tuning in as I was abruptly ousted from my "Happy Place."

## **VII.**

While fixing my first plate of nachos, I heard about Somalia, currently in the middle of its worst drought in decades, with millions of people in need of aid and thousands on the brink of starvation. The UN estimates 4.3 million Somalis don't have enough food to eat, with half-a-million displaced. About 1.4 million children under five are likely to be acutely malnourished; with conditions expected to worsen.

Again, out of habit and hoping for better news I turned on the radio once more while fixing my second plate of nachos. This time it was Darfur: two years after the Sudanese revolution, hundreds of thousands of people have been internally displaced as violence in Darfur continues. Many hoped a hard-earned peace agreement would put an end to the decades-old conflict, but the region's bloody legacy continues.

Who knew? A better question is, who is paying attention? I know I certainly wasn't; darn nachos, I should have taken the squash.

### **VIII.**

I am *well* aware, as are all of us, of the war in Ukraine; especially every time I fill up my gas tank, or think about how the war's effect on the stock market will impact my retirement. This on top of COVID, the endless circus that is our national politics, and Will Smith slapping Chris Rock at the Oscars. As if all this wasn't enough already, now I've got Somalia and Darfur to worry about, again? I swear we've seen *this* movie before, too; haven't we?

I confess that I've really enjoyed the modicum of wisdom that has come with age, but I'm beginning to feel like a stone stuck in the tread of a shoe getting scrapped by the pavement with every step on a very long journey. I don't want to feel this way, I want to care about these things, and I'm not a cynic by nature; the world just seems have gotten old and I along with it.

### **IX.**

Still, every once in awhile I have the good sense to *carpe diem*; or, at the very least, *carpe momentum*. Such was the case when, on Thursday, Karen and I had left the church and I got the car packed (with Linda's help) and started off to the cottage. I rolled to a stop at the corner of Park Street to look across the road to see Patience outside with the Cameron and Aubrey (hula-hooping like a crazy person). I hesitated a moment to think, then, switched my turn signal from left to right, and pulled out toward Main St. and then did a wide 180 degree turn across from the library to park at the curb in Morgan's where Cameron was standing. I rolled down the window to say hello, chatted for a few minutes with all three then, after another final mental pause to reconsider (I was *really* itching to get out of Dodge) finally said to Cameron, "Hop in, I'll take you down to the Pavilion for your first driving lesson."

## **X.**

Awhile back, I had approached Patience about the possibility of getting a head start on his driving; though he looks like he is 19 Cameron actually won't turn 16 until August. "Just some spins around a parking lot," I had said to her, "get him used to the controls, learn a bit about how a car works, whet his whistle a little." She was all for it, but between the weather and my schedule I had yet to manage it.

After tutoring him for several years, I was well aware of Cameron's mathematical aptitude, and after working with him on his bookshelf project for shop class, his mechanical aptitude as well. Still, I must admit, even *I* was surprised by the ease with which he took to driving; turns out he is a natural. We must have gone in circles around that parking lot at least 20 times; he didn't even break a sweat. More to the point, neither did I. In fact, I got bored. And, as Linda will emphatically attest, boredom is the *last* thing I want in any area of my life.

## **XI.**

"Take a left here out of the parking lot," I told Cameron, "let's get on the road." "The actual *road*?!?" he said. "Yes, the actual road," I replied, "drive down to the Village Barn, and we'll turn around there and come back." Which we did, and then we did it again. On the way back to the Pavilion the 2nd time I talked him through a 3 point turn, which he nailed. Now we were headed back toward downtown.

So, I start thinking to myself, "I'm breaking all kinds of rules here, how far should I take this?" He's certainly capable, and I'm still bored. I decide the worse case scenario is we get pulled over by the police. I'm pretty sure I could "explain the situation" and get a pass; at least this *one* time. Go past the Village Barn," I said, stop at the Stop sign and take a right." He just looked at me, raised his eyebrows, but then kept on driving; smart kid. We did the loop around Grove Street (twice) did another 3 point turn, crossed Lincoln, then crossed Miner, then came to a stop at the corner of Park Street, where I took over.

## **XII.**

Today's scripture reading from Isaiah 43 is written to the remnant of Israel living in exile in Babylon in order to present them, first, with a challenge and, then, with a promise. It is the same challenge, and the same promise which

Lent presents to *us*: the challenge to not remember the former things, and the promise of a new thing, even now, springing forth. It is a biological imperative and a persistent human trait to live from the past. Which actually turns out to be quite helpful: we don't put our hand into the fire because we remember being burned in the past, and we lean upon previous experience to help us decide what we shall do next. Living from our past helps us to survive in the present. More often than not, though, we get so locked into the past that it begins to *dictate* the present and this prevents us from moving unfettered into the future. So, if we are to live *into* our future and thrive we must challenge ourselves to leave behind the past and not remember the former things.

### **XIII.**

Which is much easier said than done, however. When we find something that works we tend to stick with it, even if it doesn't work all that well. So much so, that it makes it almost impossible to imagine any *other* way of doing it; like folding bulletins one at a time. It never dawns on us that there might be a better way because we don't know what we don't know and so we don't ask; with the result being we stay stuck in the past.

Worse, sometimes *we* don't know what *other* people don't know so we don't help them; when *this* happens, we *all* stay stuck in the past rather than living into the future. Which wouldn't be all that bad if it were only a matter of folding bulletins faster. However, when the past in which we are stuck is the same old, churning cycle of violence hunger, disease, retribution, war, infighting and inanity we've got to start asking ourselves what is it we don't yet know, and recognize these former things for what they are: that which keeps us in exile from our future.

### **XIV.**

Which, again, is easier said than done. Because these things always seem to be happening all at once, one on top of the other. It's not that we don't *care*, we're just trying to live from day to day and keep gas in our tank; literally and metaphorically. It's not that we don't *want* to live into our future, we do. We want to imagine that a new thing *is* possible, that is God *doing* a new thing; and, more boldly, that it is *even now* springing forth.

The past, though, is persistent in preventing us from perceiving such a future. Especially when we are always hurrying from one thing to the next.

Every once in a while, though, we find ourselves at a Stop sign and, if we are lucky and if we are open to it, we are afforded the choice of turning from the direction we've taken so many times in the past, a direction we *thought* we had to go or even *wanted* to go. Instead, we can chose to turn in a different direction toward a new future...for us all.

## **XV.**

Later Thursday evening, with movie finished and nachos eaten, I received a text from Patience: "I cannot express how thrilled Cameron was! Thank you for taking that time! He is still talking about it." To which I replied, "LOL. Hey, he's earned it. Glad to do it. Kinda feels good as a young lad to break the rules a bit by driving on the road. Not too many kids in his class did that today."

What I didn't say that night but, rather, saved for today is this: however excited Cameron was is nothing compared to how excited I am to see him living into his future. Prior to this, his future was just a nice idea languishing on some far-off horizon. But, after having driven around on the back streets of Canton, he can actually *perceive* that new thing that is springing forth even now.

## **XVI.**

Every year during Lent, I always get the feeling that however nice an idea, the atonement of the cross, the mystery of the resurrection, and the miracle of the empty tomb are left to remain languishing on some far off-horizon. That we look at each other with raised eyebrows and rather than drive forward onto the road which will lead us to live into our future, we chose to stay idling in the past; relentless remembering things of old only to end up going around in circles as in parking lot. All too often, this is how we *think* we must live our lives.

The season of Lent, though, is the occasion to break the rules and discover the good which comes from taking a pause at whatever Stop sign is afforded us so we can give ourselves the opportunity to consider which direction we *want* to be going, and challenge ourselves to actually *perceive* a new thing that God is doing through Christ. Let us not wait until the last day to say, "Easier, right?" Let it be this day. Explain the situation. We get a pass. Amen.