

4/7/2019

“Making A New Thing”

Scripture: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14

Series: With All Your Heart

Theme: Letting go of past and present burdens and boastings, we press on in faith to the new life and new thing that God is doing in and through our lives.

† For the people of God in Christ, we seek and strive to live in and live out our faith, in the present reality and promise of the resurrection.

Today, we embark on our fifth Sunday in Lent. For the past four weeks we have been on a journey to return to God with all our hearts. And today, we continue to perceive and rejoice in how God is making a new thing of us, with us, and through us.

As the Reverends Todd and Jennifer Pick share with the United Methodist Discipleship Ministries:

“It has been said that *anyone* can master *anything*, given 10,000 hours of deliberate practice. [1] ‘Deliberate practice’ does not mean a few hours a day of half-hearted plunking on a piano will make you an expert concert pianist any more than playing around on the monkey bars would make you an Olympic gymnast. Deliberate practice requires total, whole-bodied, whole-hearted focus and devotion. It is the kind of practice for something that you would feel incomplete without; something that finds an echo in your very bones. Ten thousand hours is about 10 years’ worth of persistent, intentional effort, until mastery becomes more like muscle memory. Then doing that one *thing* that you’ve worked so long and hard to master feels like coming home.

They go on to say, “For the people of God, our one *thing* is resurrection – the movement from death to new life. We practice resurrection as a church and as individuals all the time, or at least we should. Every time we gather in a space of confession, we practice resurrection, unburdening our lives and our hearts from the weight of sin we have carried far too long. Every time we come to the Table (of Holy Communion), we practice the movement of death toward new life. We come starving, hungering for nourishing grace and bread that sustains our bodies and souls and leave the Table, full of community, hope, and memory. Every time we lift ardent prayers for one among us who is suffering, trusting that our prayers rise to a God who hears our every need, we step out of a grave into a new reality.”

Every time someone comes to the waters of baptism and we recommit ourselves in the same Spirit that hovered over the waters at the beginning of time, we walk into newness of life. “It is deliberate, this practice that we do, until something as counterintuitive as resurrection seems like the most natural thing in the world to us. It is our truest home.” (ibid.)

“In this long preparatory time of Lent, we still practice resurrection. It is still our one thing. It is still our home. We still pray and confess and come to Christ’s Table. We still affirm, ‘Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.’ If we have really immersed ourselves in this Lenten season, we will find our hearts transformed on Easter morning. It still takes deliberate practice.” (ibid.)

We are starting that final push toward the empty tomb, but there is still some practicing we must do before the stone is rolled away.

Some of you may be engaged in practices of spiritual formation, piety and self-discipline. Others may be more intentionally practicing acts of mercy and love. Some may be doing a combination of both. Whatever changes we make for the better, we do so with the hope and expectation of what God is doing in us and through us. We move on with joy in the “new thing” that God is making in our lives. And we rejoice at the “new thing” we can help make in the lives of others!

To do that, though, we may need to do something else . . .

† **Let go of past and present burdens and boastings; and press on in faith to the new life and new thing that God is doing in you and through you.**

From the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, addressing others during the time of exile in Babylon, he proclaims the word of the LORD: “*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?*” (Isaiah 43:18-19).

Some 15 chapters within Isaiah (sometimes referred to as Second Isaiah) are written as a reminder that God is still practicing resurrection even when (especially when) life is at its darkest and it seems like hope is lost. These words from the prophet were a reminder of centuries past when the people of Israel were tempted to go back into slavery, because the wilderness seemed too challenging and endless. At that time God made a way into the new promise. And God will do it again (and again and again).

It may seem a bit strange that the prophet Isaiah proclaims, “*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old*” (Isaiah 43:18). Traditionally, every time that Israel forgot their history, dreadful things happened to them. Without being rooted in memory, the people of God were easily led astray and would neglect all the things that made them God’s people in the first place. Here, however, he is talking about past trauma, haunts, and hurts that tended to keep the people of God bound in graveclothes rather than memory that propels them forward toward a future with hope.

All of us experiences dark times that are hard to release – grief, shame, despair, death, disappointment, anger, depression, and addiction can keep us from practicing resurrection.

Sometimes we can even forget that resurrection is possible and natural for the people who claim the name of Christ.

Remember the words of God from Isaiah, “***I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.***” (Is. 43:19b)

That’s essentially what God did for Saul of Tarsus, who had been persecuting the church, as he journeyed from Jerusalem to Tarsus. Saul’s intention was to find and take anyone “belonging to the Way”, as followers of the risen Lord were known, back to the High Council for trial. He thought he was doing God a favor by enforcing the religious Law of God given through Moses and others, as well as subsequent interpretation of that Law.

He had much to be proud or boast of. As he put it to the early believers in Philippi: *If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.* (3:3b-6)

So, Christ revealed himself to Saul, who later became known as Paul. Paul’s life was transformed, made into a new creation, as we heard him say last week. And as said, that was just the beginning of a life-long course of faith-filled living.

As Paul went on to tell the Philippians (3:7-14 NRSV):

“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Friends, as we turn our faces toward Jerusalem this week and the cross that awaits in a story of betrayal, crucifixion, and death that leaves us in stunned silence, let us remember to practice resurrection.

What is it that may be keeping you in the wilderness? What former or even present “things” – traumas, hurts, failures, resentments, illness, loss, financial setbacks, or others – are keeping you from seeing, pursuing and realizing the new thing God is doing or about to do?

Difficult as it might be at times, let us with hope see the new thing that God is doing in our lives, in our church, in our community and in our world. Although it will mean making some changes, remember that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, what really matters most has already been changed for the better. Now it is up to each of us to follow him in faith.

How have you, or are you, practicing a resurrection faith already? How will you do so in the future? God’s kingdom has come – and is coming! Let everyone who believes receive it and be a part of it, to the glory of God! Amen.

[1] Popularized by Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Outliers*, the assertion was originally published in a psychology paper called “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance” by K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Romer in 1993.

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Questions for Reflection:

What may be keeping you in your wilderness?

How have you, or are you, practicing a resurrection faith already? How will you do so in the future?