

Hard Times: Hope From The Prophets

“A New Thing Is Coming”

**Isaiah 43:14-21
2 Corinthians 5:16-20**

God is doing a new thing.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
July 12, 2020

Have you learned anything new during the pandemic? It seems that many people have taken this time of isolation to learn a new skill or to take an activity to the next level. I've heard that sourdough bread is all the rage. Many families have planted gardens—we did that. Carey has been learning how to knit two socks at once—pretty amazing to watch those take shape. Board games and puzzles have enjoyed a new popularity. Many new things have come out of the pandemic.

Early in my ministry I read lots of books on leadership as I was trying to get a handle on how to lead a church. One of the best I remember was a book in which the authors interviewed dozens of business leaders—CEO's and entrepreneurs—to see what made them tick. Across the board, the one characteristic that these leaders had was not education or family background or anything else that might have given them a leg up on success. The only characteristic that all these leaders shared was that they were lifelong learners.¹ They never stopped exploring new ideas, new strategies, new ways to improve their performance as leaders. I think that characteristic may be the defining factor for success in our present moment.

We have been on a steep learning curve at the church since March. We had been talking about livestreaming worship for two years; suddenly we were forced to do it. Any meetings or classes that we wanted to hold had to be done through a technology like Zoom. We had to design a Vacation Bible School without the kids all coming to the church for a week of fun and learning. We have had to intensify our non-physical expressions of pastoral care. We have increased our options for electronic financial support. In order to accomplish the same mission—to make disciples of Jesus Christ—we have had to do things very differently. I know we are not alone in that.

We have had to do all these new things because we have suffered what I have been calling the Perfect Storm: the coronavirus pandemic, a once-in-a-lifetime economic disaster, and the eruption of tension around issues of race and justice. Any one of these tragedies would be enough to cause us concern, but all three together have created a disruption in our nation and world. The equilibrium has been upset, and we are reeling from its effects, just trying to survive.

We know that God did not send these tragedies upon us to torment or punish us. We do not believe that everything that happens is caused by the will of God. But we do believe that in everything that happens, God has a will, and that will is for the good of God's people. So we believe that even in the midst of this storm, God is doing a new thing, if we can only perceive it.

Our prophetic word of hope today comes from a prophet we call Second Isaiah. His writing is included in the larger book of Isaiah, mostly in chapters 40-55, but the words come from a time about 150 years after the historical prophet Isaiah lived. The situation is very different. The first Isaiah prophesied a word of judgment against the arrogance and injustice of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Sure enough, in Isaiah's lifetime, the Assyrians invaded and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. But Jerusalem was spared. Then, a hundred years later, the Babylonians took over from the Assyrians and finished the job, destroying Jerusalem and carrying the wealthy and powerful of the nation away into exile in Babylon. This is when Second Isaiah came on the scene. Where the first Isaiah brought more of a message of judgment, Second Isaiah brought a word of hope to a people who had experienced disruption much worse than what we are experiencing today. Their homes and nation and temple were destroyed, and they were living as prisoners in a foreign land.

But Isaiah sees a new day coming. God is about to do a new thing. He is going to break the prison bars of the Babylonians and turn their shouts of joy into cries of lament. Why? Because "*I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.*"² Then the Lord reminds them of his deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. They crossed the sea to freedom, and the chariots and horsemen that followed them were all destroyed by the hand of the Lord. So everyone is reminded and is taking great comfort in the mighty deeds of God in the past.

But then Isaiah does a quick u-turn; it's like literary whiplash. He says, "*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?*"³ In other words, forget the past; God is doing a new thing. You have something to look forward to. You can have hope for the future.

Here is what the future looks like: there will be a way in the wilderness. God is going to make a road back to Jerusalem. Even the animals of the desert, the jackals and ostriches, are going to line up in honor of this grand procession. There will be rivers of water in the desert for the people to drink. It's like the promise we read every Advent when we tell the story of John the Baptist: *"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."*⁴

Why is God going to do all this? Because Israel is God's people. They have served time for their sins of arrogance and injustice, and it's time to come home. The community of faith will be reformed, and God will again be at the center of their lives: *"my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise."*⁵

So here's your word of hope for hard times if you are in exile in Babylon in the 6th century BCE. You are part of a long history of God's deliverance, all the way back to Moses and Egypt. But God is about to do a new thing. There will be a new Exodus. You will soon go home. God will again be praised in God's hometown of Jerusalem. Hallelujah!

What does that ancient word of hope mean for us today, in the midst of our disruption and chaos? Could God be doing a new thing in our midst? Do we have a word of hope for hard times today?

I believe God is doing a new thing with us personally. Our current situation is a moment when we can turn to God and begin or renew or strengthen a relationship and go deeper with God than we ever have before. The fact that we are enduring hardship just means it is more important than ever that we depend on God. George Whitefield, the evangelist who was a friend and contemporary of John Wesley, said, "Suffering times are a Christian's best-improving times."⁶

We are all created in the image of God. But we tarnish that image in the course of time by our sin and selfishness, our arrogance and injustice toward others. But when we come into a relationship with Christ, we are re-created in God's image—cleaned up, made new, filled with the Spirit, to live a new life. Paul wrote, *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"*⁷

Through Christ, we are reconciled to God; we receive forgiveness of our sin; we have peace in our hearts; we are made like new.

I believe God is doing a new thing with the Church today. As Winston Churchill is reported to have said and others have copied, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” There have been significant changes going on in the Church at large for a long time, but this current crisis has accelerated the changes and made us do things differently very quickly.

One of the church leadership gurus that I still follow is Carey Nieuwhof. He’s the founding pastor of a church in Ontario, Canada, and writes more than I think. Recently he gave a prophetic vision about the new thing the Church is becoming, some of which we will experience:

1. Online worship is here to stay. We hope soon to be able to re-start in-person services, but we are not going to quit offering church on livestream. We are reaching more people this way than we were in person.
2. The ministry of the church will become less facility-based and more home-based. Instead of being a physical location with a digital presence, it will be the other way around, a digital organization with a physical location.
3. There will be less focus on what happens on Sunday and more on what happens or is available every day.
4. People will connect with more than one church or preacher or teacher for spiritual growth. The Barna researchers found that since the pandemic started, 23% of the people watching church online are watching churches other than their own.
5. Electronic forms of giving will become the norm, and you have seen us making those options available to people.⁸

After the pandemic is over, we will not be going back to normal, if normal means how things were in January of this year. Our mission will continue—to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world—but the church will be a new thing, changed, but better, and finally living in the 21st century.

I believe God is doing a new thing in our community and culture. This crisis has provided opportunities for us to open up our hearts of

compassion toward people who are hurting more than we are. The pandemic was already illuminating again the health care disparities that exist in our culture for communities of color. Then the murder of George Floyd, caught on video for all the world to see, just blew the top off the mountain.

Hardly anybody I know is comfortable with riots and destruction, and I am glad that the protests in Fort Smith were peaceful. I appreciate the positive, constructive response of our police department. But even the riots are voices crying out that we should be listening to. Fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, an absolute advocate of non-violence, spoke about the destructive demonstrators of his time: “I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? ...It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity.”⁹

What if God is giving us an opportunity in the midst of this crisis to open our ears and truly listen to the voices of those on the margins of our society? What if this became the time when the wrongs of racial injustice could be righted once and for all? What if we as disciples of Jesus and as a church could become what Paul envisioned—“ambassadors of reconciliation”? That would be a new thing, wouldn't it?

One Black woman who has made it her mission to seek racial reconciliation is Latasha Morrison. She is the founder of an organization called “Be The Bridge,” calling people to be ambassadors of reconciliation with people of other races. Latasha formed a diverse group of women to talk about racial issues back in 2014, just before Michael Brown, a young, unarmed black man, was killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri. Since then, her organization has grown and added resources, and in the wake of George Floyd's death, participation has skyrocketed. Be The Bridge now sponsors groups all over the country and has over 60,000 followers on their Facebook group.

Morrison's philosophy is based on conversations and relationships. All people bear the image of God, and if they can just be with one another, to

listen to one another, to hear their cultural experiences, their pains and joys, they can come to have a better understanding of each other. The goal is not to become color blind, but to affirm and celebrate the diversity of what God has made. Morrison says, “in the love of the family of God, we must become color brave, color caring, color honoring, not color blind. We have to recognize the image of God in one another.”¹⁰

The church is the place that is uniquely qualified to do this work. Morrison’s vision is deeply rooted in the nature of the church: “I do believe that the body of Christ is the only place that is equipped to do this well and do this right. Our goal with Be the Bridge is to be who God created us to be—that credible witness for his glory as it relates to racial reconciliation. We are all created in his image. We’re called to love our neighbor regardless of who they are or who they look like. ...we want the church to be just that.”¹¹

These new efforts at racial reconciliation—Be The Bridge, Black Lives Matter, the United Methodist Bishops’ Initiative to Dismantle Racism—are possible because they are in alignment with the word of the prophet, the teaching of Paul, and the mission of Jesus. Morrison says, “What Jesus did by dying on the Cross reconciled us to God, and he has given to us the ministry of reconciliation. As Christians then, we are benefactors of reconciliation, and we should want to live reconciled lives. Reconciliation is also the essence of who God is. He is the God of justice. He is the God of righteousness. If we are the outward expression of his character, his heart, and his words, then we have to reflect this reconciling part of who he is. But the thing that brings us together and unites us as the body of Christ is the message of Jesus. Racial reconciliation is not some kind of agenda—it’s a gospel message. It’s discipleship.”¹²

I believe in the midst of this perfect storm, God is doing a new thing. It’s a new thing in our hearts. It’s a new thing in our church. It’s a new thing in our community. It’s a new thing that gives us hope. So we pray today in the words of Charles Wesley,

Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,

Perfectly restored in thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and Praise.¹³
Amen.

¹ Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985).

² Isaiah 43:15.

³ Isaiah 43:18f.

⁴ Isaiah 40:3.

⁵ Isaiah 43:21.

⁶ George Whitefield, *Christian History*, Issue 38. *PreachingToday.com*.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

⁸ <https://careynieuwhof.com/the-original-2020-is-history-7-new-disruptive-church-trends-every-church-leader-should-watch/>.

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Other America,” speech at Stanford University, 1967.
<https://www.upperroom.org/news/1188>.

¹⁰ <https://www.crosswalk.com/culture/books/be-the-bridge-offers-practical-steps-to-racial-reconciliation.html>.

¹¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2017/january/latasha-morrison-church-is-only-place-equipped-to-do.html>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” *United Methodist Hymnal*, #384.