

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Isaiah 43:18-25

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- 18 "Forget the former things;  
do not dwell on the past.
- 19 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.
- 20 The wild animals honor me,  
the jackals and the owls,  
because I provide water in the desert  
and streams in the wasteland,  
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
- 21 the people I formed for myself  
that they may proclaim my praise.
- 22 "Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob,  
you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel.
- 23 You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings,  
nor honored me with your sacrifices.  
I have not burdened you with grain offerings  
nor wearied you with demands for incense.
- 24 You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me,  
or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices.  
But you have burdened me with your sins  
and wearied me with your offenses.
- 25 "I, even I, am he who blots out  
your transgressions, for my own sake,  
and remembers your sins no more.

Everything old is new again. There's nothing new under the sun. There's no such thing as a new idea. These are quotes and phrases we've all heard before. One of them, "there's nothing new under the sun" is even biblical—it comes from the book of Ecclesiastes. We often use phrases like this when fashion trends return—whatever thought today's teenagers would be wearing the bell-bottom pants you or your kids wore thirty years ago? I often think of these kinds of phrases about the cycle of history and trends when I go to the movies—most plot lines are predictable and run parallel to the plots of movies I've seen before. Often it's obvious that there's nothing we haven't heard of before in the movie--such as in the case of remakes. Did you know that there is now yet another movie version of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. When I read about these remakes, I often wonder why Hollywood can't come up with something new instead of rehashing the same old plots and predicaments. One of the most disturbing instances in which it becomes obvious that there is wisdom in these old phrases about life repeating itself is in the study of history. When Adolf Hitler proposed the idea of the Holocaust to the other leaders of the German government, his colleagues were aghast, claiming that they could never get away with something like that. Hitler responded, "Who today remembers the Armenians?" And it's true. Hitler just followed the lead of the way the Turkish government treated the Armenians—killing them by the thousands while other nations just sat back and watched it happen. And though we now wonder how the Jewish Holocaust was allowed to happen and we have each probably vowed in our hearts to do everything in our power to keep a similar thing from happening ever again—what would you call the ongoing situation in Darfur other than an ethnic genocide? Tens of thousands, and perhaps even a million people have died

as a result of violence, malnutrition and illness, not to mention the thousands who have been enslaved, stolen from their homes and taken to work in a foreign land (again, sound familiar), and yet it wasn't until a few months ago that the world's media began to take any real notice and any government started to intervene. I'm proud to say that Christian agencies and other concerned groups such as the I Abolish charity in Boston have been working for years to buy back slaves and return them to their homes. But their good work escapes the notice of newsmakers and politicians while the horrendous crimes they live to abolish escape the notice of most people in the "developed" world. Sadly, even the really bad ideas and horrendous crimes of humanity aren't new and similar things have already occurred under the sun, and continue to happen even as the sun rose over our homes this morning.

From the mundane, bell-bottoms and movies, to the truly heinous, genocide and slavery, history seems to be repeating itself. I experience this every week as I struggle to find new ideas when I write sermons. I sit at my desk wondering, "Well, didn't I say something like that last week?" And often the answer is yes. There are some basic themes such as love, grace, and forgiveness that we just can't escape as we study these inspired words of scripture. And indeed, these are the themes that repeat themselves again this morning—I know I talked about them last week when we left our spiritual baggage behind at the altar, but they're relevant again this week. Indeed, I sometimes feel like there are no new ideas under the sun.

Recently I was doing some work with a young man struggling with depression. I was lending him some insights into how he might go about getting treatment for his disease—counseling, anti-depressant drugs, meditation, the list of coping techniques that I shared with him went on and on. He rejected each of my suggestions, explaining how they wouldn't work for him. This negativity is, of course, symptomatic of his depression. After a while of this going back and forth, he finally admitted that he didn't want to work to get better because he'd probably just get depressed again sometime in the future so what was the use. This young man obviously lives with the conviction that there is nothing new under the sun. He doesn't believe that his life can be much different than it is now. He views the rest of his life as repetition of what he's already experienced. And what a tragedy. He has lost hope. And isn't hope basically the belief that God can and does do new things—even when we can't begin to imagine or plan for the new things God has in store for us?

This morning we find God, through the Prophet Isaiah, reminding the Israelite people that God does indeed do new things. To prove it, God goes through a litany of the new things God has already done for them as a people to reassure them that if God has done something new for them in the past, God will surely continue to do new things. The Israelites are asked to remember the new things God did for them in the Exodus, which by this time is hundreds of years in their past—and yet the story of their delivery from slavery in Egypt would have been kept alive through stories and in worship. Surely, when they were a people enslaved, they didn't see a way out. They must have assumed that they would be living a life of captivity and bondage for the rest of their days. It was all they knew. I imagine there was a strange kind of comfort in the predictability and stability of their lives. Get up, get dressed, eat a meager breakfast, work until your fingers bleed under the hot Egyptian sun and don't get lazy or you'll get beaten by a guard, go home when the sun goes down, eat with your family, and go to bed so that you'll be rested to do it all again in the morning. Surely, a less than desirable life, but they didn't know much

different. And so can you imagine their surprise when Moses entered their camps sharing the word that God wanted them to be free and was promising them a land flowing with milk and honey when, in their lives as they then knew them, they'd be lucky to get a bit of water and grain—let alone food that was luscious and sweet. God intended something new for them. And though it was a long forty year journey to that land of milk and honey, a journey that was filled with conflict, struggle, and doubt, God did indeed do something new for them. It wasn't within the time frame or in the manner in which they were hoping, but God did do a new thing.

And Isaiah reminds them of those good things God did—aiding them in their escape across the Reed Sea, providing them with manna when they were hungry in the wilderness, giving them a cloud by day and a cloud of fire by night to guide them on their way, bringing forth water from a rock when they were thirsty—God was constantly doing new things for the Israelites as he brought them out of slavery into a life of freedom. And if God did it then, for restless, doubting, cantankerous, unfaithful people—surely God would continue doing new things for them in exile. At this point in the life of Israel, some of them had been taken captive and removed to distant parts of the Middle East in a Babylonian ploy, not to enslave the Israelites or in hopes of genocide, but simply to divide them up to diffuse their power. The situation seemed hopeless and into the despair comes the voice of God reminding them that God has, does, and will continue to do new things.

And from our vantage point, we can be ever more convinced of God's ability to do new things. After all, we're talking about the I Am who sent Jesus to be among us, to teach us, to guide us, and ultimately to save us. We're talking about the one who not only brought water forth from a rock but brought life forth from an empty tomb. We're talking about the I Am who blinded Saul on the road to Damascus and gave him sight again only after he could see that Jesus is indeed the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We're talking about the I Am who not only did the New Things of the past, but has been at work in the New Things of our lifetimes. Surely it is the same God who sent the Walls of Jericho tumbling down who also sent the Wall of Berlin tumbling down. Surely it is the same God who freed the ancient Israelites from Egyptian captivity who freed black South Africans from the evils of apartheid. Surely it is the same God who had compassion on the Israelites living in Babylonian Captivity who has worked to bring to light the despair of the people of The Sudan. Surely it is the same God who healed Jairus' daughter who healed those of you here this morning who have defied death by recovering from illness and injury. And surely it is the same God who welcomed home beloved servants who have gone before us into the heavenly embrace who will, when our time comes, welcome us into that same eternal embrace of love. God has not stopped doing New Things. Rather, it is often we who have stopped believing in new things. And it's not hard to stop believing, it's not hard to lose hope. We rely on our own experience, knowledge, and understanding. In doing so we try to stuff God into a little box of our making, setting limits on God and constraining God's power in our lives with our doubt, fear, and disbelief. And yet, God refuses to be kept in our boxes of predictability and expectations. God is like a beautiful woman popping up out of a big birthday cake—shocking us, surprising us, delighting us, and reminding us that things are not always as they seem.

Behold, God is doing new things—even if we can't comprehend or appreciate them now. But we can rest assured and have faith in the new things God is doing because we've been witness to

them in the past and we know the power of God. Thanks heavens God, the great I Am, keeps doing new things—giving us new life, new hope, and new opportunities. Behold, God does new things and we can too. Thanks be to God.