

## ***“TILL ALL CREATION SINGS”***

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Scripture: Isaiah 43:16-21; Mark 2:13-22

Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue . . .

At every wedding, there are both tears and laughter. The tears are often those of the parents, the ones who realize a chapter of life is closing. The laughter of the entire community, on the other hand, reflects the excitement of a future that is being initiated and celebrated.

Today’s reading from Isaiah depicts such a situation for the Babylonian exiles after their release from captivity by Cyrus of Persia. The prophet predicts a period of open possibility, but he does so in a passage that addresses both their anguish and their anticipation.<sup>1</sup> The prophet has God focusing on the future, reminding them of God’s great deeds long past — the exodus, in particular. But he exhorts them not to dwell on the recent difficulties during their exile. These times will soon be over; Isaiah contrasts them with the better things to come.<sup>2</sup>

In our reading, this shift from past to future sounds a little like the song from *Annie Get Your Gun*: “Anything God can do, God can do better, and backwards and upside down as well.”<sup>3</sup> This God — the God of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and all the rest — the God who made a path of dry land in the Red Sea, will now *instead* bring water in the desert, will transform the wild animals — images of God’s judgement — into channels of God’s praise.<sup>4</sup> Hear these words again:

“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.” (43:19a-21)

The people are reminded that “the future will not look like the past, or it will look like the past radically reshaped.”<sup>5</sup> And for the newly freed Israelites, moving into that future, without yet being able to see it, creates anxiety, just as it does for humans in any age or time. We all grieve those things we leave behind — our known universe, both good and bad.

In *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder “tells the story of Emily Webb, a young woman who dies in childbirth, in the small, turn-of-the-century town of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire. As the play ends, Emily’s ghost is allowed one last look back at her hometown, before moving on to the afterlife. It’s time for her to go on, she knows, but Emily lingers—turning around to look, one last time. ‘Wait!’ she says to the Stage Manager (that character who seems to know how everything works), ‘One more look. Good-bye, Goodbye, world. Good-bye, Grover’s Corners ... Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking ... And Mama’s sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths ... And sleeping and waking up.”<sup>6</sup>

That melancholy look back at things past affects us all, both in our private lives and in the life of the church. Even as you may be recalling, right now, such transition times in your own lives, I’m going to depart a bit

here and read you a good portion of the sermon our new Regional Presbyter, Wendy Bailey, delivered at the September presbytery meeting. The entire sermon is available online in Wendy's blog. It was directed at the presbytery, but it's true for every congregation and every one of us:

"Garage Sales ... I don't like them. I know there are people, like my mother-in-law, who love to go 'garaging'. They do their research, know the neighborhoods, map out the sales on a Friday or Saturday, and get there two hours before opening. They are on the lookout for unwanted treasures. I don't like them, because, well, mostly, I just see ... junk, not treasures. I have had garage sales, but only when I've had to move for one reason or another. For me garage sales mean a new chapter in life, a new leg of the journey.

"This summer I spent going through closets, drawers, attics, and every nook and cranny looking for things that would not take the trip to New Jersey with us. So for weeks I'd cull, separating the stuff that would still be of use to us in our new home, from the stuff that we just didn't have a use for anymore. Two or three times through each closet would always produce more things for the garage.

"The day before our sale in August our garage was full of ... junk ... and memories. I was emotionally paralyzed just looking at it; thank God for Amy Miller-Martin who knew a thing or two about managing garage sales. Amy was able to organize the clutter into categories: linen, electronics, books and music, Christmas decorations, kitchen items, etc. And then she asked, "So, Wendy, how do you want to price these things?" Ugh. All I saw was junk or memories ... neither is helpful when pricing. So I told Amy and the others there ... just look at it, and make your best guess. I wasn't interested in 'getting my money's worth,' as much as I was interested in letting someone else use and enjoy these things.

"There's an element of stewardship in garage sales, after all. The "stuff" doesn't belong to us; it's God's. It blessed us for a time, and now it's time to have other lives blessed by it as well. That's easy to say when it comes to the zillion mugs we collected from various groups marketing themselves. It's not as easy when it comes to our daughter's five American Girl Dolls we sold at our previous sale, or the Spinnet Piano I learned to play on that we sold before our trip to New Jersey. Even our treasures have to move on sometimes. I could see the joy and happiness in the granddaughter of one our church members as she played with "Samantha". And I could see the anticipation in the face of the young Vietnamese couple who drove off with the Spinnet; she was a great player and so happy to have a piano to practice on again.

"Phyllis Tickle says that every five hundred years or so the Church has a garage sale... Every five hundred years there is a critical change or shift in history that necessitates the Church going through its "stuff" and re-evaluating what we're keeping and what we're letting go. The Great Schism, Gregory the Great, the Great Reformation ... every time the Church goes through this crisis, though, three things happen: 1) something dies; 2) something new is birthed; and 3) Christianity grows.

"We are in one of those Garage Sale times right now. We have been for, depending on who you ask, the last 50-150 years. There are tremendous changes in our culture and in the world, and, as Len Sweet says, it's a 'perfect storm' of change: political, economical, ecclesiastical, technological, educational, social. These shifting times may prove to be even more profound than the Reformation or the Renaissance. Tickle calls this the 'Great Emergence' talking about the rise of the work of the Spirit in today's faith communities all over the globe.

“Each one of these times, though, requires us to do some serious culling in our closets, on our bookshelves, in our drawers and attics. We need to let some things go, in order to move on unencumbered into the new chapter of life together.

“My colleague, Mary Marcotte, and I developed a project we call ‘Future Story’ in which we work with sessions and invite church leaders to join us in writing a narrative about the work and mission of their particular congregation five years in the future. We prepare the writers by emphasizing: every Future Story is a story of resurrection. What needs to happen for there to be resurrection? — Something has to die. The work of the church right now is to wisely and faithfully allow some of our “treasures” — our structures, our forms, our buildings, our programs ... to die ... so that something new can rise up within and among us.

“God is a God of hope and resurrection, but holding on to the past or to the stuff or patterns of our life together even when they no longer function well to proclaim the love of God in Christ to our children and grandchildren, let alone our neighbors representing many cultural heritages ... this separates us from the resurrection work God wants to do and will do among us.

**“There is a new church coming ... God is doing a new thing ... we can’t stop it. We can only get ready and prepare ourselves faithfully for the trip to the new land. Our faith is in the assurance that even when we let go, God will lead us on. God will continue to build up God’s people and will continue to draw us to the Kingdom.**

“Garage Sales are hard work! Not only in the physical labor of moving boxes and furniture, but in the emotional grief of saying goodbye to our treasures. This will be the hard work of our presbyteries, too, these next couple of years. As we reexamine ourselves and our work together, you will hear me asking questions ... something like, ‘do we need this in our new place?’ These are difficult decisions to make. It takes going back through the stuff over and over again ... each time finding something else that needs to be let go.

“Some find that throwing things away or putting them on the garage sale pile is not faithful at all. My grandmother was a [string-saver]. She could not part with anything that she or someone in the family might have a use for someday. She kept wrapping paper and Christmas cards, pie tins and milk bottles, Chinese food containers and every magazine that had ever come into her home. For her ... letting it go was foolish, even sinful, because it could be used again.

“There is a place for [string-savers] ... I’m glad my grandmother saved cardboard cake plates and rolls of string, they made great craft projects for school and the Girl Scouts. But, after the grandchildren grew up and weren’t making homemade Halloween decorations for their rooms ... the paper plates piled in the house became a fire hazard. The Church has been called to preserve the Truth, but it isn’t called to hoard. We need to understand who we are and how we bring the Good News and the Truth we’ve preserved to a new people, and a new culture. We’re called to cull, evaluate, and imagine. We’re called to let go and let God. We’re called to discern.

“This is a huge responsibility, I know. But just as it seems overwhelming, we need to remember God calls us to this at this time. Reggie McNeal says this in chapter six of *The Present Future*:

‘God must have had a lot of confidence in you to put you on the planet at just this time. It was his sovereign decision to insert you onto planet earth during a time of huge transition. It takes incredible faith to lead during hinge points of history.’

‘We can no longer afford to say, “But, I’m only a child” [as did Jeremiah] or “I cannot speak well” [as did Moses]; we can’t wait for a new Martin Luther or a John Calvin to tell us what to do; we have to understand that God has called us – you and me – to this unwieldy task. And we will do it faithfully and prayerfully and imaginatively together.”<sup>7</sup>

Friends, as we look ahead to the future of this congregation, what are the things we need to let go of, in order to cooperate with God, who is doing a new thing – right here?! There’s one thing that comes immediately to mind for me – something that causes great anxiety but less anticipation. Can you think what it might be?

Yes, you’ve probably already guessed — I’m thinking of the Oyster Supper. There are wonderful memories around the times that you all gathered and opened this church to literally thousands of people, and made a great deal of money to supplement the budget. But the reality that many are realizing is that we no longer have the people power to invest days . . . no, weeks, in such a venture. The older folk have done their share, and the younger ones are mostly working Monday thru Friday. There’s melancholy over this, but perhaps we need to think of what we can let go, and what piece we might want to save and see transformed.

I suspect that one thing to keep and value is the fellowship that was shared in doing the Oyster Supper. Remember, “the future will not look like the past, or it will look like the past radically reshaped.” In our mission study, many themes have come forward, and many good ideas have bubbled up from your input — things that the session would love to have an opportunity to discern among and begin to do. As we go forward, let us think about some of these ideas — where might we build teamwork and fellowship memories, how might we see the future begin to take shape? Here are the major highlights of the ideas coming out of the mission study — you’ll note that we’ve made some steps toward realizing some of them already:

- Expanding Our Church Family
- Excited, active membership
- Thriving and exciting interest groups
- More children’s participation
- Diversity in the worshiping community
- Occasional “Name Tag Sundays”
- Feel the spirit in the congregation
- Healing of past wounds
- People working together with the pastor to solve problems
- Using Music to Build the Congregation
- Increasing Community Outreach and Mission
- A community garden, possibly with the Bordentown Green Team
- Everyone sign a card for mission meal inclusion
- Improving Communication: Envisioning a Worship bulletin 10 pages long due to weekly activities being listed

- Sermon audios available on the website
- Financial giving available thru the website
- All church schedules, programs available in pews (AA, Bible study, Scouts, etc.)
- a PTS Field Ed Student
- A Greenfaith energy audit
- Creating an Inviting Environment, a Cheerful inviting space
- An air-conditioned sanctuary
- A New entrance with an elevator
- Small parking area next to the church for accessibility
- Greens & seasonal banners outside
- New tables for Fellowship Hall
- Fellowship during church school
- Fellowship before worship
- a Van to shuttle people to/fr the Acme
- At least 5 visitors each Sunday
- More comfortable chairs for F'ship Hall
- Well-Organized facilities

And the last one on the list . . . Creating Long-Term Solvency. Let me be prophetic for a moment. I don't claim the wisdom of Isaiah, but I rely on the wisdom of many others. Longterm solvency will not be achieved through fund-raising. Fund-raising helps. And this year we've added nearly \$5000 to our budget through fund-raising. But long-term solvency comes from stewardship . . . stewardship of our time and talents, of course. But also stewardship of our treasure — the kind of treasure we find in our wallets.

When you receive your stewardship letter, the estimate of giving card offers a plan for moving toward proportional giving . . . giving a percentage of your income . . . in your regular estimate of giving. But we will also be asking you to consider providing seed money for beginning to work on these longer-term goals. Surely among those I listed, something must have caught your imagination. It may have been banners outside the church, or air conditioning, or changes in our communications. Whatever it is, I hope you'll join me in setting aside an additional gift toward our future. For God is doing a new thing . . . right here . . . and we are called — "you and me — to this unwieldy task. And we will do it faithfully and prayerfully and imaginatively together."

Let us pray:

*Now to God, who by the power at work within us  
is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.*

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#### ENDNOTES

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1. Samuel L. Adams, "Exegetical Perspective on Isaiah 43:16-21", in *Feasting on the Word*, C-2, 125, 127.
  2. Christopher R. Seitz, "Isaiah 40-66" in *NIB VI*, 378.
  3. David L. Bartlett, "Homiletical Perspective on Isaiah 43:16-21", in *Feasting on the Word*, C-2, 123, 125.

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4. Seitz, 378.
  5. *Ibid.*
  6. Carlos Wilton, *Lectionary Preaching Workbook, Series VIII, Cycle C*, 140.
  7. <http://njregionalpresbyter.wordpress.com/author/njregionalpresbyter/> (Oct. 13, 14, 15, 2011)