

DO A NEW THING

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Text: Isaiah 43:16-21 and John 12:1-8

SCRIPTURE

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.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

SERMON

So, I am wondering if anyone here bought a Honeywell Kitchen Computer back in 1969. Anyone? No? Actually that was a trick question. No one bought a Honeywell Kitchen Computer. It was listed as a fantasy gift in the Neiman Marcus Christmas catalogue that year. As you probably know Neiman Marcus is a luxury department store that each year generates a lot of free publicity by offering extravagant items for sale, that almost no one can afford or probably even want, for that matter.

The Honeywell Kitchen Computer was actually a H316 pedestal model computer that weighed around 100 pounds, had a 16-bit processor, with 32-K of memory and cost at that time over \$10,000. That was rather pricey. You could buy a brand new VW bug for under \$2,000 and a new Ford Fairlane for around \$2,500. In today's dollars the cost of the Honeywell Kitchen Computer would be around \$78,000. So what did you get for your money? Well, for an extra \$100 it came with 1,000 recipes already stored in its data banks. However, in order to have access to these recipes you had to take a two-week programming course, which was included in the price. You did not operate this computer with a typewriter style keyboard, but rather by using toggle-switch input and binary light output. After taking this course, the would-be-cook would simply enter an entrée into the computer and a whole menu with ingredients and instructions would be printed out. Besides the recipes, the computer had a program for balancing your checkbook (wow!) and at no extra cost there was a built in cutting board. And that was about all you got for your \$10,000.

As I said, no one bought this kitchen computer, but even so it was a radical concept at the time. It was, of course, meant to be lavishly extravagant, but it was the first time anyone tried to market a home computer for personal use. Honeywell did sell quite a number of H316 pedestal computers, but to major corporations and universities. No one seriously imagined that the computers as they existed at that time would be practical for

anyone to use in their homes. They were too big and bulky and required a lot of skill to program in even the simplest type of calculations. Yet here we are, 50 years later, all of us walking around with smart phones in our pockets capable of doing amazing things that could not even be imagined back then.

It is an indication of just how much our lives have changed over the last 50 years. We have been living through a time of radical transition, when things we think of as routine and normal would have been regarded as science fiction by our grandparents. Now, perhaps these changes have come at a faster rate than at other times in our history, but the reality is that a key part of human existence is that we are always undergoing radical transitions. We are always changing, always transforming, always evolving into a new way of coping in this world. There are those who long for a more stable time, wishing we could somehow get back to something more normal, back to the good old days. But the truth is things were never what we think might be normal, and the good old days were not any better than they are today.

But while things are always changing, that doesn't mean we like it. Change is always hard. It is difficult. It is risky. It is often confusing and bewildering. There is something within us that resists change, even when we know it is inevitable and probably for the best.

Our Old Testament lesson is about change. The setting for this passage is not actually the land of Israel, but Babylon, an area that we know as Iran today. These verses were written after the Babylonians had conquered Judah and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. They rounded up a large segment of the Jewish population and took them back to Babylon. It was a dark terrible time for the Jewish nation. Yet, there were some good things that came out of this experience. The conquerors had a sophisticated civilization, with many layers to their society. Naturally, they had a very complex bureaucracy, requiring thousands of civil servants. Many Jews filled those offices and as a result, literacy increased among the Jewish people.

With more being able to read and write, an interest developed in their own literature, and people began reading the books of Moses. This led to an attempt to revive the religious practices of their ancestors. There were a number of people who thought that maybe history would repeat itself. They compared their situation to the slaves in Egypt, and hoped that if they followed all the old religious practices, God would again raise up a deliverer like Moses, who would bring them back to the Promise Land. In this context we find the message of God coming in the form of our lesson for this morning: "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."

Now when those captives in Babylon heard those lines, they started paying attention. They picked up on some key words: sea, waters, chariot, horse, army, warrior, and what did they immediately think of? Moses taking their ancestors through the Red Sea in order to escape Pharaoh's army. They got excited. "All right! That's what I'm talking about," they said. "God is going to show these Babylonians just like he showed those Egyptians!" They were all fired up and ready to go.

But then what did God say? "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?" And that stopped those original listeners dead in their tracks. They were ready to break out singing, "Gimme that old time religion. It was good for the Hebrew children and it's good enough for me!" But God said, "Forget about the former things. Never mind the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. Things are going to change." And they said, "Change? We don't want to change. We don't want new stuff. We want things back the way they were."

But God didn't stop there. God went on to say, "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..." At this point those original listeners probably reacted like the victims of an April Fool joke. They were stunned, indignant and possibly even outraged. They had read the Law of Moses. They knew that jackals and ostriches were unclean animals, considered scavengers and vermin. The thought of any animal worshipping

God was absurd, but jackals and ostriches? That was sheer foolishness, utterly ridiculous and beyond comprehension.

So what is wrong with wanting the old ways, especially when it comes to matters of faith? If God never changes, then the way we interact with God should remain the same, shouldn't it? That way of thinking sounds logical until you remember an old story about the cat in the monastery. It seems this monastery was doing rather well. There had been a number of years with winters that were not too cold and wet, and summers that were not too hot and dry. As a result, the fields had been productive and there was a lot of grain and other kinds of food in the store rooms of the monastery. However, this surplus food attracted various rodents, that soon became a problem. So the Father Abbot acquired a cat to keep down the rodent population. This worked out fine, except that rodents are nocturnal and so the cat would begin its hunting just about the start of evening prayers. It was somewhat distracting to have the cat scurry across the chapel floor chasing a mouse in the middle of the service. So the Father Abbot ordered the cat to be tied up right before the service began. A few years later the Father Abbot died, but the monks continued to tie up the cat before evening prayers. Eventually the cat died and another cat was attained so that it could be tied up before evening prayers. Down through the years the tradition continued, with the monks of the monastery writing thick pious documents discussing the theological implications of why God is delighted with us when we tie up a cat before evening prayers.

In this message from the 43rd chapter of Isaiah, God knows the people are longing to return to the good old days. The danger is that out of nostalgia and sentimentality, traditions and rituals can easily entrap them and as a result they miss out on loving God. The message is a warning about confusing the goal and the means to the goal. The ceremonies and customs of their ancestors were not the goal, but only the means to the goal. The goal is obeying, loving and serving God, and so they are given this jarring, scandalous image of disgusting unclean animals worshiping and honoring God, so that they might see what is really important. They should be open and ready for whatever God was going to do, ready and willing to follow where God should lead.

The situation and circumstances of our New Testament lesson are very different from the text in Isaiah, but many of the emotions are very much the same. Whenever you read a story in the Gospel of John, you almost have to peel it like an onion, because there are layers upon layers of meaning in the text. Jesus is a guest at a dinner party in the town of Bethany, in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. In the middle of the meal, Mary brings in a container of nard, something that was very expensive, and smelled wonderful. She pours it all out, all over Jesus' feet, and then wipes up the excess with her long hair. Judas Iscariot comments that this was a waste of good money, and it does seem extravagant, because the amount Judas mentions would be about \$30,000 in today's economy. Maybe it was not quite what a Honeywell Kitchen computer would have cost, but it was certainly lavish and excessive.

But there is much more to this story. John makes a point of telling us that this was less than a week before the Passover. In other places in the Gospel, John makes it very clear that he regards Jesus as the Passover lamb who was sacrificed back in the book of Exodus in order to protect the Israelites from the Angel of Death. And there at the table is Lazarus, who John reminds us Jesus has raised from the dead. So we have this initial connection with the Passover, the old order of doing things, when in comes Mary. What does she do? She washes the feet of Jesus, and the words used to describe her actions are the same that will be used in the next chapter where Jesus washes the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. After Jesus does that he says, "I am giving you a new commandment, that you love one another," and we hear echoes of Isaiah 43: "I am about to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it?"

What Mary did was scandalous and shocking. First of all, women did not usually come into the room where a Jewish rabbi was meeting with his disciples, but that rule had been bent before. So maybe that wasn't such a big deal. But then Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. In that culture a woman's hair represented her femininity and beauty. Usually her hair was covered and only revealed to her husband. For Mary to expose her hair would be embarrassing and make everyone uncomfortable. But she went even further. Washing someone's feet was the job of a slave, something akin to cleaning toilets in our culture. When Mary washed

Jesus' feet with her hair, she was taking something very personal and private, then degrading it and making it the lowest of the low. The reaction of Judas and others around the table must have been similar to those first listeners of Isaiah 43 presented with the idea of unclean vermin worshiping God. It was foolishness, ridiculous, beyond comprehension.

But Mary did not care. In this little scenario that John sets up, Mary is the only one who truly understands what is about to happen. She knows that within the next few days Jesus will enter Jerusalem, and when he does, it is likely that he will be arrested and killed. Recently she had gone through the experience of losing someone she loved, her brother, Lazarus. Quite possibly, she had said to herself when he died, "I wish I had him back just for a few minutes to tell him how much I love him." Most of us have said something like that when we have lost someone we love. I wish I had another chance. Mary was given that chance, for Jesus brought her brother back to life. She was so grateful and she loved Jesus so much for doing that. Now, she realized that she did not have much time left with him, so she was not going to waste the opportunity. She was going to do something to tell him how much she loved him, and she did not care what other people thought. She did not care if it seemed extravagant and wasteful. She did not care if it seemed indecent and embarrassing. She did not care if it seemed outrageous and foolish. Before Jesus went to Jerusalem and the cross, she was intent on demonstrating her complete love and devotion to him. It was an act of worship and adoration, and the fragrance of that act filled the whole house.

So what does this say to us here today? Well, I think we all realize that the next few months are going to bring some changes for all of us. This church is going through a time of transition and we don't like change. So it is tempting to long for the good old days. We want to start singing, "Give me that old time religion. It's good enough for me." But we need to listen to what God has to say from our text in Isaiah, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" God is not interested in going back to the good old days. God wants to take us forward. God wants to make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Now, what God is going to do in the next few years might seem strange or weird from time to time, as weird as jackals and ostriches bowing down to worship God. But then the Honeywell Kitchen Computer seemed absolutely ridiculous 50 years ago. Who would possibly want a personal computer? What would you do with it? How could you possibly afford it? And yet, here we are today, almost unable to function without our laptops, iPads and smart phones. If we are open to what God is about to do, what seems impossible and strange today may become something routine and normal in the future.

So what do we need to do in the meantime? How should we respond as these changes come about? That takes us to our second text. We need to follow the example of Mary of Bethany. It sounds almost too simple, but it is absolutely critical. We just need to love Jesus, right now, right here, in this very moment. We need be willing to let go of anything we consider important and valuable and offer it up to Christ. We need to pour out our love freely and generously, not caring what others may think or whether we appear foolish. It seems impossible until we start to focus on how much God loves us and all that has been done for us through our Lord Jesus. Then we are able to truly worship and adore Christ. When that happens everything will be filled with a rich wonderful fragrance. May it be so. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.