

“Perceive a New Thing”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
V Lent – 25 March 2007
Isaiah 43:16-21; Luke 20:9-19

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” The question God asks through the prophet Isaiah implies the answer, and the answer is, “No.” The people of Israel did not perceive the new thing springing forth. Otherwise, why ask the question the first place.

What was that “new thing?” It was their release from captivity in Babylon. God, through Isaiah, was foreshadowing Israel’s return to the Promised Land after generations of exile. Only a prophet of exceptional vision, one inspired by God, as Isaiah was, could perceive what was about to happen.

It is easy to be critical of Israel’s ignorance, of their lack of perception, but it is hard to decipher the intricacies of international relations. There are always so many factors in play. Just consider the complexity of our contemporary geopolitical drama. Who here knows what the world may look like five or ten or even a single year from now? So let’s be careful how critical we are of our Israelite ancestors. How could the average person have known that the hammer was about to fall on Babylon, or that the conqueror Darius would free the Israelites and send them home?

If you think forecasting wars and their outcome is difficult, try your hand at the mystifying work of determining whether somebody is the Messiah or not. Of course, that work has already been done for us by the authors of scripture and by many generations of Christians who have explored and explained with greater clarity the identity and purpose of Jesus Christ. But each person still needs to accept and affirm the truth that Jesus is the

Christ, and each of us inevitably struggles – as our ancestors have done – with precisely what it means to say that Jesus is the Christ.

However, for the moment, let's bracket what we know – or at least what we think we know – and set it aside, and use the fertile imagination God has given us to consider what it must have been like for people in Jesus' day. Lots of people were making claims, or had claims made for them, that they were the Messiah, not just Jesus. Evidently, lots of people were also able to work wonders that seemed supernatural. And, perhaps most importantly, lots of people fit the expected mold of Messiah better than Jesus did.

You see, most people back then anticipated the arrival of a Messiah who would liberate Israel from foreign occupation and restore their greatness as a nation. The scriptural prophecies largely pointed in this direction, made as they were in the context of the original exile and return. Post-Jesus, we interpret these prophecies differently, confident that they refer to Jesus. But if you have the imagination to place yourself in a pre-Jesus moment, and you look at those same prophecies again, you might not be so sure.

It was not inevitable that people would come to the conclusion that Jesus was Messiah, and this is evidenced by the fact that Jesus drew large crowds, but had a relatively small core following. It was not obvious that Jesus was Messiah, and this is shown by the fact that the crowds cheered his entry into Jerusalem on a Sunday, but later in the same week the crowd was convinced it was time for Jesus to die.

With all this in mind, let's give some thought to the parable of the wicked tenants, left to their own devices by a long-absent owner. The owner sent servants to collect the rent, but the tenants clobbered the first three and sent them back with nothing. So the

owner decided to send his son, expecting that the tenants would show greater respect and fork over what they owed. Problem is, the tenants misinterpreted this gesture, believing that the original owner had died and left the vineyard to his son. Kill the heir, they thought, and the vineyard will be ours. Unfortunately, their perception of reality was wrong, and they paid a terrible price for their error.

Of course, the parable is an allegory. The vineyard owner is God, the servants are the prophets, the son is Jesus, and the tenants were the religious elite of Israel who rejected Jesus as Messiah. It's easy for us to see, but Jesus' original hearers would have missed the point entirely if he hadn't included a verse from Psalm 118 to clarify the parable. The piece about "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." That's from Psalm 118. After he included that as a lens, if you will, the parable came into focus for them, and they got angry enough to kill Jesus on the spot, which ironically set them up to fulfill the prophecy embedded within the parable.

At its core, this parable is about a group of people who got complacent, and their complacency led them to become selfish, and their selfishness skewed their perception, and their faulty perception led them to violence, and violence led to their destruction. The message of the parable: don't do that; wake up; open your eyes. The parable resounds with the voice of the prophet Isaiah: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Now we might feel safe, believing as we do that Jesus is Messiah, but do we really believe that? How does that belief inform our daily lives, the way we do business, or handle family matters? Perhaps a more incisive question is, of what does that belief consist?

I don't think we are immune to the misperception that afflicted Jesus' contemporaries. Some saw him as Messiah, or at least as a prospective Messiah, but when he failed to fit their prior conception of what Messiah was, they rejected and abandoned him. It seems to me that such faulty perceptions might be alive today, giving a partial view of who Jesus is, and what he means, and what he wants. And that partial view may lead people to complacency and selfishness and misperception.

For instance, many people believe that Jesus is their ticket to heaven; nothing more, nothing less. I too believe that Jesus came to reconcile us with God and provide us with eternal life. But is that all Jesus came to do? The idea that Jesus came primarily to haul our fat out of the fire seems like a slightly selfish spin to put on his mission, especially when you consider how Jesus himself described that mission.

In Luke 4:18, Jesus entered the synagogue, read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and applied the reading to himself. This occurred at the very beginning of his ministry in the Gospel of Luke. Here is what Jesus read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Notice that there's nothing there about sin or heaven. It's not that Jesus wasn't interested, but it appears his focus may have been elsewhere. To hear some people tell it, though, having our fat hauled out of the fire is the primary if not sole purpose of Jesus' Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Judging from what Jesus had to say for himself, the scope of his mission is actually much broader; oriented less around us, and

more around others – the faceless, nameless them; the outsiders: the poor, the broken, the neglected.

Not surprisingly, those who seem most focused on Jesus getting their fat out of the fire are often most prone to be merciless toward the very people that Jesus himself said he came to help. These folks seem to believe that people categorically get what they deserve in life, and people will hijack the gospel of Jesus Christ in support of this vicious unchristian, attitude.

I wonder what Jesus would have to say about the dominant religious perceptions of our day. I wonder if he would tell a parable about a complacent bunch of tenants who aspired to control their own destiny, regardless of what it took. I wonder if those tenants might claim ownership to things that don't belong to them, like the Truth. I wonder if Jesus walked through the door this morning, might he tell a parable about selfishness, about misperceptions born of long-held tradition. I wonder if Jesus would quote the prophet Isaiah: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

It is tough to see how God is working in the world in real-time. Often, we don't get it until long after the fact. Most Israelites had no clue that God was about to release them from captivity, despite the witness of the prophets. Likewise, most people didn't realize that Jesus was Messiah until after the resurrection, and even then, many could not accept that their traditional models of Messiah were simply wrong.

What makes us think that we are that much different from or better than our ancestors? What makes us think that we are immune to complacency and selfishness and

misperception? What makes us think that God stopped springing forth new things round about 33 A.D.?

I ask these questions because I sense that God is continually bringing forth new things. The most casual glance at the Church's history would show that. For example, Ann would have been forbidden from celebrating Eucharist at this or any altar a mere 32 years ago. God is continually bringing forth new things in the life of the Church.

I also raise this issue because I believe that God may be preparing something truly amazing for us and for the world. I wish I could be more specific, more definitive, but I have no clarity on what this new thing might be. However, I do think we can learn from the past where to look as we seek out God's new thing.

We can look toward those who have the most to lose by the emergence of the new thing. We can look toward those who howl the loudest and resist most fiercely the new thing. We can look toward the complacent and the selfish and see the new thing reflecting off their tightly closed eyelids. Most of all, we can look at Jesus afresh with an eye not for what we stand to gain but for what we might be able to give. "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Is that sentence a dead letter, or a living Word? Look hard. Pray harder for the gift of insight and perception. God only knows what there is to see, but God seems eager for us to perceive it. Amen.

