

Fifth Sunday in Lent

PERCEIVE THE NEW THING

Isaiah 43:16-21

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

16Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, 17who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 18Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 19I 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. 20The 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, 21the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Exegetical notes: Although biblical scholars are divided on how the text of Isaiah came to be, nevertheless, there is growing consensus that it was written by three different authors in three different stages of that period in Israel's history of national decline and exile. What these authors hold in common is a theological outlook or school of thought that can be described as "Isaiah." Following William Holladay (Isaiah: Scroll of a Prophetic Heritage. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), Isaiah 1-39 presents the message of the "original Isaiah of Jerusalem," or First Isaiah, as he is called. Dating from the last half of the 8th Century BCE, Isaiah of Jerusalem announced God's word of judgment operating through haughty Assyria (see Isa. 10) on Israel (the Northern Kingdom which falls to Assyria

in 722 BCE) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom, which stands until Babylonians conquer all in 587 BCE). Isaiah 40-55 (the Book of Comfort) presents the words of so-called "Second Isaiah," who preaches words of hope to the exiles in Babylon. Isaiah 56-66 is so-called "Third Isaiah." It is a collection of writings, perhaps from several hands, that give words of instruction in the wake of the exiles return to Jerusalem. The text for this Sunday comes from Second Isaiah, whose prophecies and oracles formed the seedbed for early Christian proclamation concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ. That context is very important for understanding the oracle.

DIAGNOSIS: God's Old Thing-Exodus from Egypt

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Thus says "Who?"

Isaiah 40-55, the corpus from which Sunday's text comes, is addressed to Israel at the nadir of its life: the Babylonian Captivity (ca. 587-538). Years earlier, King Hezekiah of Jerusalem (715-687) was told by First Isaiah that, because of his prayer to the Lord, the Assyrians, who conquered Samaria as part of God's judgment upon Israel for its sins, would not conquer Jerusalem (see Isa. 37). In the intervening years between Isaiah 39 and 40 (ca. 687-546), Babylon became the regional powerhouse and Judah became its client state. According to Jeremiah (ca. 609-598), who prophesied at this time between Isaiah 39 and 40, Judah's submission to Babylonian rule was God's will and was to be accepted. "First Isaiah" also hints at this in the way the sick and dying King Hezekiah welcomed envoys from Babylon (Isa. 39:1-2). However, years later (ca. 597-587), King Zedekiah (Judah's weak puppet king put into power by Babylon) got the idea that he could mount a revolt and break free from Babylonian control. The result was devastating. Jerusalem was destroyed and all but a handful of its inhabitants

were exiled to Babylon (ca. 587-538). Not only did this present physically hard times for the people of Israel, but it raised questions in their minds about the strength of their God and the nature of their election. "How could the God who is said to have elected them from among all the peoples of the earth allow such destruction to happen to his people?" they asked. (The dates are from Claus Westermann, *Handbook to the Old Testament*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976)

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Remembering Things of Old Wrongly*

Of course, Israel's pious answer to that question is the presumption (a false faith in the heart) that God was the guarantor of Israel's political prowess regardless of righteousness (see Ralph Klein, *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, p. 3.) At least that is how Israel was prone to read its history or, as our text says, "remember the former things" and "consider the things of old" (v. 18), meaning, the story of the Exodus. Israel loved to tell the story of how the Lord "extinguished," like "a wick," the mighty forces of Egypt—haughty, presumptuous Egypt—and saved Israel (v. 17). This is the God they remembered and looked to in their presumptuousness to restore their political prestige, as though that's why this God chose them in the first place, for political advantage. True, Isaiah knows of this God and writes eloquently about him. This God is the Lord of history who uses one presumptuous client to punish another, giving history an ironic character. This is the God that First Isaiah saw directing the course of nations with unspeakable majesty and foreboding awe (see Isaiah 10). Indeed, in Isaiah's mind the very thought of this God ought to strike terror in Israel's hearts. But instead, they are so filled with the presumptuousness concerning their own righteousness that they can't begin to fear this God of power and majesty and awe. First

Isaiah's call (Isa. 6:1-13) is exemplary of how one should regard oneself before this God; Israel is the antithesis of this.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Exile Means Estranged from God by God*

Obviously, Israel, in "remembering the things of old" as they did, wrongly, forgot why they were in exile. Exile was the very judgment of that God (the God of history and majesty and awe) upon them for the very kind of pious but presumptuous "remembering" and "considering" they were clinging to. Throughout his ministry, First Isaiah minced no words in his description of this judgment. His opening vision is but one example: "Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who had despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!" (Isa. 1:4) It is precisely the God of those "former things," the God whom they saw "extinguished" the Egyptians, who is extinguishing them. No wonder Second Isaiah pleads: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old!" (v. 18) At least not in the way you are remembering them, as though you are righteous. That God destroys the presumptuous and the haughty-impartially!-and relegates them to historical oblivion. And that includes even those who at one time faired favorably from his awesome exercise of nation construction and deconstruction-Israel in Exodus.

PROGNOSIS: God's New Thing-Death and Resurrection in Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The New Thing*

Just because Israel's hope for renewed favor with God does not rest in the God who gave them Exodus (the God who constructs and deconstructs nations)-that does not mean that their hope does not rest in that God. Paradoxically, it does. But it rests in

that God doing a radically “new thing,” an otherwise unprecedented thing. Hope for Israel, and all who are estranged from the God of majesty and awe, is not had in God as he engages in nation construction and destruction. Quite to the contrary, it is had only as that self same God submits himself into the hands of the unrighteous and he, himself, becomes deconstructed and reconstructed for their sake, for their forgiveness, for their rescue from divine estrangement and historical oblivion. If that sounds incomprehensible, then you’ve got a glimpse of just how “new” (meaning, unprecedented!) this thing is. Moreover, Second Isaiah is totally absorbed with this “new thing,” offering numerous metaphorical descriptions of it, most famously, Isaiah 53, the Suffering Servant Song. Of course, Isaiah and Israel-in-exile didn’t see this “new thing” happen in their history. Nor is it the thing God did through Cyrus, when Israel was led back to its national homeland. Though a marvelously unexpected gift for Israel, that event was still the work of the God who in his inscrutable will and ways constructs and deconstructs nations (see Isa. 45:1). Rather, this “new thing” doesn’t happen for another 500 years when God (or more precisely, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, for God is more complex than could have been imagined) became incarnate in human history as the man Jesus, and is deconstructed (crucified and buried) by the hands of sinful humanity and reconstructed (risen from the dead) for salvation of the same. In Jesus, God is doing his “new thing,” his otherwise unprecedented thing of reaching out to save those who are estranged from the God of majesty and awe.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Perceiving the New Thing*

While it is true that this “new thing” happened 500 years after Second Isaiah wrote to Israel in exile, and two thousand years before I now write to present day exiles, nevertheless, the way

Israel of old and we now participate in this “new thing” is by “perceiving” it (v. 19). To “perceive,” in this instance, means to believe and trust that God, the Suffering Servant, is dealing with us presumptuous sinners in a new way. Our new “presumption,” so to speak, is that we perceive God in a new way, in Christ, who forgives sinners—deconstructing and reconstructing us anew through Christ’s own death and resurrection. To perceive this new thing is to believe that we are not relegated to historical oblivion but will live with Christ forever. Indeed, to perceive this new thing is to now, already, be living in it: in God’s favor and grace, even though our outward exile may continue for the time being. As Second Isaiah says, “Now it springs forth, do you perceive it?” (v. 19). And we say: Oh, yes! I believe! I perceive it!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Declare God’s Praise*

This faith or perception of God’s new thing not only changes everything about us inwardly, but, also outwardly. By means of this perception, we also begin approach the outward living of our exilic lives differently. That is, we in the midst of our exilic lives “declare [God’s] praise,” and do so quite freely and naturally, for that is the reason why God has formed us (v. 21). No longer do we question “thus says Who?” But we say “thus says the Lord, who is doing a new thing in Christ Jesus.” No longer do we question our election, but we simply praise God for choosing us—for choosing us without any worthiness or merit on our part, for turning our estrangement into fellowship for which we offer our thanksgiving and praise. Such praise is bound to have a deep effect on the exilic world in which we live. Who knows which “wild animals” may begin to “honor God,” or where in our desert lives waters may spring up (v. 20). But when we witness such things, we will do that for which we were formed: We will declare God’s praise.