

2017 New Year Message - Doing A New Thing

Scripture Text: Isaiah 43:14-21

Introduction

What does a “New Year” really mean? What is so new about it? In a way, it is simply a way to mark the passage of time. It does afford us an opportunity to reflect on what has happened in the past year and a chance to commit to new things for the future. Many people are accustomed to making resolutions when a new year begins. They commit themselves to doing something differently, stopping some bad habit, or starting a better one. This message, however, is not a message on making or keeping resolutions. I think resolutions are fine, but I believe they are things you can and should make at anytime of the year, especially when the need for a change calls for it. Sometimes, we may call this repentance, or turning from some bad behavior and committing oneself to doing the right thing. In a sense, this message is about that; but more than that, this is a message about God’s faithfulness to us and an encouragement for us to trust Him to remain faithful to us. I would like for us to consider this: Do we believe God has helped us and is still helping us? Does God have something new planned for us?

For instance, put yourself in the shoes of Israel when the prophet Isaiah was preaching, sometime in the eighth century BC. Israel was harassed by other nations, particularly the Assyrians who invaded the northern kingdom. Not only did Isaiah speak to the current affairs of his time, he also prophesied about things to come hundreds of years later for God’s people, such as their Babylonian exile. Put yourself in the shoes of the Jewish people, hundreds of years after Isaiah, who were in exile in Babylon. Perhaps, they were worried about what was going to happen to them. Perhaps they wondered about their relationship with God, about God’s faithfulness to them, and whether God would save them in the future. How do God’s people at any time know that He will help them? Isaiah’s message is for his people in his time, as well as for the Jewish people after him, and it is for us today. It is a message that God is always faithful, that He has not left us, and that He will continue to help us. Isaiah assures us that hope is never lost. How do we know that is true? How do we know that God will continue to help us?

Remember Who God Is

When considering what God may do for His people, it is important to remember who He is. We must consider who God is and who we are in relation to Him. How would you know if you could trust anyone to do something for you, such as to help you, without knowing something about that person’s character? For us to trust anyone suggests that we know something about who that person is. The same is true for God, and fortunately, God has revealed who He is to us through His Word. Look at the following verses.

Isaiah 43:14–15 ¹⁴ Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: “For your sake I send to Babylon and bring them all down as fugitives, even the Chaldeans, in the ships in which they rejoice. ¹⁵ I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.”

These verses were primarily written to encourage the Jewish people who lived after Isaiah. God promised His people that their future Babylonian conquerors would themselves be conquered and exiled. Though God would punish His people for their unfaithfulness and they would endure hardship as exiles in a foreign land, God would still help them. God would rescue them just as He rescued them before. Notice how God addressed His people in this passage, though. He referred to Himself by His personal, covenantal name, Yahweh. He also referred to Himself with several different titles — *your Redeemer*, the Holy One of Israel, *your Holy One*, the Creator, *your King*. These titles were intended to reinforce the extent of God's power and to demonstrate just how faithful He was to His people. The verdict from this divine testimony was that there are no other gods like God. God even made it personal by calling Himself, "*your Redeemer*" and "*your King*". While other religions worship some impersonal deity, God is not some impersonal and distant Savior. He is very personal and He cares deeply about His people. God can make the promises He makes to us because of who He is. Do you know God in a personal, intimate way?

Remember What God Has Done

It is important to know who God is. It is also important to realize just how much God has done in your life. Has God helped you in some very significant and memorable way? For the Israelites, there were many ways in which God had helped them throughout their history, but there was always one event that was perhaps more memorable than all others. That event was when God freed His people from Egypt and He led them to safety through the Red Sea. If we had experienced that miraculous deliverance, we might remember it and pass it along to our children and our children's children. In fact, the Passover Feast was instituted to remind the Israelites of God rescuing them from Egypt. In this passage, God reminded Israel how He had saved them in the past.

Isaiah 43:16–17 ¹⁶ Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

Some scholars suggest that these verses were intended to remind the Israelites of how God had led their ancestors through the Red Sea (Exodus 14). The Red Sea event was certainly a sign of God's miraculous ability to save His people. Isaiah also compared the destructive invasion of the Assyrians to a great flood of water (8:7–8) that was about to drown the Israelites. In addition, Isaiah described the sound of many nations attacking Damascus to "the raging sea...the roaring of great waters" (17:12–13). Whichever it is, the defeat of Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, or the Assyrian invasion, Isaiah's point here was that God was there for Israel and He made a way for them in their most turbulent and troublesome times. That God "makes a way" shows that these verses represent what God *continues* to do. He has not stopped making a way. This was intended to inspire faith in the power of God so the Israelites would trust God to deliver them from their enemies, present and future. We should note that when God saves, He saves completely. His enemies are absolutely defeated, as they lie down, cannot rise,

are extinguished, and quenched like a wick. How has God worked in your life? Has He made a way for you in the raging sea?

Trust God To Continue Working For Us

At the beginning of Isaiah chapter forty-three, God told Israel about “when you pass through the waters,” pointing to many difficult events His people were going to endure. God told Israel to not be afraid and that He would be with them (Isaiah 43:1-2). God encouraged His people by telling them that He would be with them in the midst of their difficult circumstances and that those events would not totally destroy them. God was encouraging His people to respond to those times with faith, for He had already proven His ability to overcome similar events in the past. God’s faithful demonstration of His sovereign power in the past is something of a guarantee of His future intentions to graciously intervene on behalf of His people. Therefore, God told Israel to trust Him and to expect something new. Look at the following verses.

Isaiah 43:18-19 ¹⁸ *Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.*
¹⁹ *Behold, I am doing 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.*

It is worth noting the first thing Isaiah wrote here was about *not* remembering the things of the past. That sounds contrary to what we have heard. It is good to remember what God has done for us. It is good to remind ourselves of who God is, who we are in Him, and what He has done for us. Sometimes, we can remember so much what God has done for us that the memory overshadows what God *is doing* in the present or *will do* in the future. In this passage, God was turning His people’s attention to something new He was doing. The original exodus did not exhaust God’s power. God was still willing and still able to help His people in need. What I think God was telling Israel here was that they should not *live* in the past. Israel should look for God to “make a way in the wilderness”. If God could save His people from Egypt, then He could certainly be trusted to do a “new thing” to help His people in their current situation, or any situation. The new thing is described as something that “springs up” suddenly, just like the desert plants that surprisingly sprout in a completely barren area after a rain. Almost in astonishment God rhetorically asked the people, “Do you not perceive it,” implying that they should.

We should note that this is not necessarily a promise for Israel to return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. Although that did happen, God did not explicitly say in this passage that there would be a second exodus, this time from Babylon. Isaiah did write in verse fourteen that God would turn the Babylonians into fugitives, suggesting that their cities would be defeated and they would wander from place to place. This indicates God overpowering Babylon, but this does not mean the return of any Jewish exiles. What God promised for His people here was that He would create a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Essentially, where it appears that there is no clear path forward, God will create one. Where there is no natural relief or refreshment, God will provide it. While these verses are a reminder of God’s past deliverance of His people as a proof of His redeeming power, the real aim is to point to a greater work of

God when He will marvelously redeem all of creation in the future. That is why Isaiah mentioned about the animals honoring God. Look at the following verses.

Isaiah 43:20–21 ²⁰ *The wild beasts 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,* ²¹ *the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.*

The image in these verses is of God redeeming all of His creation. Even nature itself will praise the Lord. The lesson the Israelites should have learned and the one we should hear is that if God can completely make something new, like saving His creation from the disastrous effects of the Fall, certainly God can be trusted to solve all of His people's present problems. Certainly we can trust God to do a "new thing" in our lives. Maybe you have felt that you have been living in a wilderness, like the Israelites long ago. Maybe you have struggled to find the way forward. The year 2016 has certainly been a difficult year for many of us. Some have struggled with medical conditions. Some have faced a loss, either the loss of a loved one or the loss of a job, or a change in finances. The good news is that God is faithful and will carry you through. Do you believe that He will bring you through your current situation or any situation in the future? Do you believe that God will do a new thing in your life? Or, are you living in the past? Are you living in what God has done and resisting what He will do? Trust that God is still helping His people and He still leading His people through troubled waters.

God Is Faithful Even When We Are Not

One of the most assuring things about God is that He is always faithful, even when we are not. After God told the Israelites that He was going to do a new thing in providing a way for them, He reminded them of His faithfulness even though they had not been faithful to Him. The people were weary of God so they did not offer Him the required sacrifices. This was not God's fault—the purpose of the sacrificial laws was not to weary them but to free them from their sins. Since the people refused to see this and obey Him, God was instead wearied by the sins of His people. Basically, even though God had proven His character and demonstrated His providence by rescuing them, His people did not worship and serve Him faithfully (Isaiah 43:22-24). Therefore, the reason for Israel's salvation was not their steadfastness or their faithfulness, but rather God's faithfulness to His promise. God was still faithful to forgive His people and to save them. Look at the following verse.

Isaiah 43:25 *I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.*

Rather than despising the people of Judah or completely giving up on them, God values His people, treating them as special and precious. This would give God's people confidence that He would again do something great on their behalf. Because God loves them in spite of their failures and He wants the best for them in the future, He would make a way for them in the midst of trouble. What is significant is the depth of God's love and commitment to His people. In faith Israel could believe God's promise and put

their trust in Him. The same is true for us. God has provided His very own Son for us and has promised to forgive and to save any who call upon Him. God has also promised us that He would be with us, even until the end of the age. No matter what trouble or raging storm we face, God has promised to carry us through it. Do you trust Him?

Opportunity For The New Year

In a way, this chapter of Isaiah is like a courtroom proceeding. God brings before us witnesses to His character and His actions to remind us of how faithful He is to us. The verdict of the case is that because God is faithful and He has proven Himself faithful to us, we can trust Him to act faithfully now and in the future. Do you believe God is faithful and He is still working in your life? Is God telling you to trust Him today to lead you through troubled waters? Sometimes, God does a new thing but it involves change that is not pleasant. Just as things changed for Israel throughout their exile in Babylon which proved to be very difficult for them, so it is with us. Perhaps, God desires to do a new thing in our lives and in the life of His Church, and He only asks that we trust Him to accomplish it. This requires faithfulness and it requires a willingness to follow the Lord wherever He shall lead. Are we willing to trust God this year? Are we willing to follow Him and to receive whatever He gives, even if it calls for something difficult? May it be so! Let us go forth this new year remembering how great our God is, how good He has been to us, and how much we can and should trust Him to do great things in the future. May God help us this year to love Him more deeply, to serve Him more faithfully, and to share Christ with more people. This is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!