

Sermon for March 13, 2016 – Lent 5

Isaiah 43:16–21 (ESV)

Theme: Don't you perceive what the LORD is doing?

- 1) *Let the mighty deeds he performed for others. . .*
- 2) *. . .direct your hearts to the even mightier deeds He is accomplishing for you.*

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: 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. 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.

Do you ever wish you were back in the good old days when life was simpler and better? It's human nature to think that way – especially when we are suffering the consequence of some sin we made in the past. Oh, how we wish we could go back to change things. But we can't. “What's going to happen now?” we wonder. “Did I just ruin the rest of my life?”

Remembering the past can be a good thing, but it can also be dangerous. How so? Because, dwelling on the past may prevent us from perceiving the LORD's present work in our lives. It can also hinder the hope we have for the future by taking our eyes off of God's promises.

Let us consider the proper way God wants us to view the past, present and future, under the theme: **Don't you perceive what the LORD is doing?** 1) *Let the mighty deeds he performed for others* 2) *direct your heart to the even mightier deeds He is accomplishing for you.*

Part One: *Let his mighty deeds he performed for others. . .*

Our sermon text was originally written for the Jews exiled during the Babylonian captivity. Remember how I said that rough times caused by some sin may make you long for the past? Well, this is exactly how the Jews felt during their captivity in Babylon. One of them wrote: “*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.* (Psalm 137:1 NIV84)

Yes, Zion – the hill on which the temple once stood - was now covered with ruins. Their sins caused that destruction. For decades God warned his people to repent of their idolatry and selfishness. You see, the Jews wanted to be like their heathen neighbors who lived openly sinful lives. Their gods didn't have all these clean and unclean laws like the LORD had. Their laws didn't command a Sabbath rest. Their religions didn't forbid sexual immorality.

The selfish desire to be like the nations around them led the Jews to break the covenant they had made with the LORD at Mt. Sinai. Even though God could have destroyed them for their sin, He didn't. Rather, he patiently sent prophet after prophet – calling them to repent. But they didn't. Therefore God made good on his threat, allowing Babylon to conquer them.

In that foreign country the Jews now sat, mourning over their sin and thinking back to the good old days when they had a great relationship with the LORD: when He chose them be his special people and miraculously delivered them to the land of Canaan. Those days are gone for good. All they had were memories.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: have you ever felt the way the Jews did? Has God allowed some hardship or consequence of sin to affect you to such a degree that you have almost given up hope? When this happens, don't despair; rather look to the LORD in genuine repentance and faith. God's word says: *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.* (Psalm 51:17 ESV) And in another place it says: *"Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up."* (Hosea 6:1 ESV) That is what God promised to do for the Israelites, and this is also what the LORD promises to do for us.

The Jews had come face to face with the reality of their sins, and were on the brink of despair because of them. But listen to what the LORD says: 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:* 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?*

In other words God is basically saying: "Do you remember the Exodus, when I delivered your forefathers from Egypt by performing that great miracle at the Red Sea – when they walked through it on dry ground with walls of water on either side of them? Do you remember how I incited Pharaoh, who had the most powerful army in the world, to pursue your fathers, only to destroy that army so that they could never harass them again? I am the same God today as I was then – possessing the same love for you as I had for them. Don't, therefore, look at the past with longing. Stop dwelling on the past and look and what I am doing now. Just as I saved them, so I will save you; but I will do it with an even greater deliverance."

Brothers and sisters in Christ: do you get the point God is making? The past serves as a reminder of what God can do – how he faithfully loved and powerfully saved his people. Look at that deliverance and remember that the God that so mightily saved his people back then is our same God today. He has not changed. He will keep his promise to deliver us, just as he did for Israel. Don't dwell on the past, but keep your eye on the present as you hold on to God's promise for the future. *Let the mighty deeds he performed for others direct your heart to the even mightier deeds He is accomplishing for you.*

Part Two: . . . *direct your heart to the even mightier deeds He is accomplishing for you.*

The LORD says: 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.* 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.*

There is a twofold fulfillment to this prophecy. On the one hand God is reassuring the Jews that He will bring them from Babylon back home to the Promised Land of Canaan. He had their rescue all planned out and, later on in Isaiah, even gives them the very name of the person who would free them from their captivity: Cyrus the Persian.

If Israel would just cling to his promised redemption in faith, they would perceive God working in all things to bring about this great deliverance. Not only that, but they would also perceive the greater deliverance their restoration from Babylon would signify.

And this brings me to the second purpose of this prophecy: it describes the way God delivers all believers from their slavery to sin and brings them home to himself in heaven.

“*I will make a way in the wilderness,*” the LORD says. I am certain that when we hear these words, God wants us to think about a prophecy Isaiah recorded just three chapters earlier: *A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* (Isaiah 40:3 ESV) That is a clear prophecy about John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus

God says, “*I will make a way in the wilderness.*” Jesus once said: “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” (John 14:6 ESV) Yes, Jesus is our only road to God – delivering us from sin death and the power of the devil. The LORD says in our sermon text: *I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people.* Jesus himself said: *whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*” (John 4:14 ESV)

As you can clearly see, our sermon text is all about Jesus, and the great deliverance from sin that he would accomplish for us. He won forgiveness for all people through his perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection. Everyone who looks to him in repentance and faith has eternal life. Because Jesus accomplished this great salvation when he first walked this earth, all creation eagerly looks forward to his coming again. Then it will be liberated from the curse of sin that encompasses it. This is the greater deliverance God has planned for us – a far more miraculous one than Israel experienced when it crossed the Red Sea.

When we see all the bad things that are happening in this world - Christians being physically persecuted in some areas and many Christians falling away from the faith in others – we might look to the past and long for what we considered the golden age of Christianity. Instead of dwelling on the past, however, God wants us to look into his word. *Don't you perceive what the LORD is doing?* Jesus prophesied that all the bad things we are now experiencing would happen. They are signs telling us that our redemption is drawing near.

Let us then learn to use our time wisely on this earth: not by lamenting because of how bad things are getting, but by sharing the Gospel with whomever we can. God saved us for this purpose, calling us *“the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.”*

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Is the guilt of some sin wearing on you that you don't know how you can go on? Turn to God in repentance and faith. He is the same merciful LORD who forgave and delivered the Israelites; and he promises you use his almighty power to forgive and rescue you as well. Don't despair, but trust in his promise to work in all things for your eternal good. Study the Scripture to remind yourselves of his promises, and then wait for their fulfillment by using your time and energy to encourage others with the Gospel. This was God's will for his people held captive in Babylon as they awaited their restoration. This is God's will for us too as we wait for his 2nd coming, when he will deliver us home to the promised land of heaven. Amen.