

Psalms 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”
The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

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.

The grass withers; the flower fades—the word of our God endures forever.

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.*

When Disney announced they were launching a streaming platform last year... I first thought, really, ANOTHER streaming platform? But then I thought, well actually... it will be really nice to be able to watch all the Marvel & Star Wars content whenever I want.

It's no surprise, then, that when Disney+ launched last November, I immediately bought a year subscription. I'd be able to watch these movies anytime and anywhere! When the streaming service finally went live, though, it actually wasn't a Marvel or Star Wars film I watched... it was an old movie that aired on the Disney channel when I was a kid... it's called Johnny Tsunami. It was great. Watching that movie from my younger years, gave me a certain "feeling" – it invoked something deep within me.

Almost like a time-machine it transported me to a different moment in life, it brought me to a different place
-- where I was a kid again,
-- when I had much less responsibilities,
-- when my siblings all lived at home,
-- when all my tios y tias, primos y primas,
gathered together at my grandparents' home every weekend,
-- when life seemed so much simpler to my young self,
-- when I felt safe.

Does that ever happen to you? Are you ever transported to another time - another moment in your life?

There are times when this feeling comes all on its own, un-called for ... it just bursts, from out of nowhere, sometimes it's a film or picture that brings me back but then there are those other times when I yearn to feel like I was a kid again - transported to a different time.

There's a word we have for this -- Nostalgia.

The funny thing about nostalgia, is that it doesn't only happen to us as individuals. There's a collective nostalgia too. I can't tell you about how many times I've heard someone say, well in the good 'ol days – pointing toward a time when things "were better."

I can't tell you the times I've heard this in churches, or in conversations reflecting on this country's past.

In the movie, *Midnight in Paris*, one of the characters reflects on the erroneous "golden-age" thinking, where one believes a different age was better than the one they were currently living in. He says, "Nostalgia is denial. Denial of the painful present."¹

You see, memory is a fickle thing.

I often find that it is easier to remember the good moments and then try and forget the bad—one might call it, selective memory.

¹ Sony Pictures Classics presents a Mediapro, Versátil Cinema & Gravier production ; written and directed by Woody Allen. *Midnight In Paris*. Culver City, Calif. :Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2011.

"I love this picture of our family, all together smiling, but what people don't know, is what happened after that photo – or earlier that day."

You see, not only do we remember what we want to remember. But often certain "feelings" can distort what we remember.

As a society, our collective narratives of history have **also** become selective. They are often tainted, having been filtered through the lens of power and privilege -- where our selective memories seem to push aside those painful and dehumanizing stories – of colonization, slavery, misogyny, and internment to name just a very few.

It often seems that the selective memory for some has shaped the narrative for all, so much in fact, our society seems to have developed an amnesia. The good 'ol days, becomes a cry for a return to what is known, what is comfortable, what is safe, at least, perhaps, for the privileged. All the while ignoring the plight, these same days brought to those marginalized.

*Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*

In the psalm we heard this morning, the first three verses look back on their history with joy and happiness, declaring, the Lord has done great things. But did you notice that there is a shift half-way through the psalm. Their joy seemingly taken away from them, as they long for God to restore them to better days.

In many Bibles, there's actually a literal space between verses 3-4. A space that perhaps gives us PAUSE to wonder what has happened to the people of Israel. What has taken away their laughter and shouts of joy?

In our passage from the book of Isaiah, we encounter the prophet's words to a people in exile. Jerusalem had been razed and the temple destroyed, the Babylonians ruled the land, and God's people had been deported, displaced, and scattered in exile. So the prophet's words begin by reminding the people, of God's faithfulness in their history.

*Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters.*

Words that would have brought to mind, God's saving acts.

But then, the prophet does something so out of character – contradicting words that came before and words that follow.

*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?*

Like the people of Israel, we are a people of the book. And throughout this sacred book, are the stories that animate our faith. Stories that we return to again and again, "re-member" who we are – and whose we are. But in this moment, the prophet does something.

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Scholars suggest these words were used as a rhetorical device. One scholar even goes so far to say, that Isaiah knew the people needed to be shocked out of an exile-induced comfort and lethargy.

“At the point where a nostalgic relation to tradition threatens to tie the people to their past and to stultify alertness to present realities, responsiveness to new opportunities, and the potential for growth into yet-unrealized possibilities.”²

Yes, we are a people of the word – Called not only to remember these stories, but to be formed by them, because God’s story is so intimately woven with ours. But the prophet here warns us and cautions us against a remembering that becomes an idolatry. A remembering that fails to perceive God doing a new thing. A remembering that fails to imagine what God could be up to.

*I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.*

Would you believe me if I told you, that in 1966, 63 percent of Americans had a negative opinion of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and that his assassination “sprang from the deep hostility with which he was viewed, not by a fringe radical minority, but by the majority of American citizens?”³

Dr. King marched forward, **literally**, regardless of what others thought because he believed in something – in someone, that moved him towards a greater vision. Something unimaginable in his time.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks to seeing God do a new thing is thinking that God’s always going to show up the same way as before... So often in life, we find ourselves held captive to selective memories that hold us back, that put our vision for who God is, and what God is capable of, in tiny little boxes that we can store on a shelf.

As we ponder our lives in this unusual moment, marked by a global Pandemic, a climate crisis, racism and white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia and sexism, hatred and violence, the prophet Isaiah invites us to let go of the little boxes we’ve constructed.

It can be scary. It can be hard. But think with me about the image the prophet paints... *water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.*

It’s life abundant. For you, for me, for them, for all of creation.

It’s an image for life sustained and nourished by the steadfast love of God, a love that knows no bounds. And this image tells us that this world, and our current reality, is not the way things are supposed to be. The biblical vision imagines a movement that flows like rivers in the desert, bringing healing, restoration, and renewal. And it begins with us.

² Paul Hanson, *Interpretation Series: Isaiah 40-66*; John Knox Press, 1995, 73.

³ Coates, [Civil Rights Protests Have Never Been Popular](#), The Atlantic, October 3, 2017.

*I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

Like the psalmist, we lament, and we cry out to God – to restore us. Rev. Khayla reminded us a couple weeks back, that hope arises out of our lament.⁴ But this hope, it isn't stagnant. As the wise-teacher & theologian Dr. Willie Jennings remarks, "Hope is not a sentiment; Hope is a discipline."⁵ With the prophet's words that speak to us today, and the Spirit guiding us, urging us, moving us, and inviting us, to imagine not only restoration, but renewal and resurrection. In short, to practice the discipline of hope.

*And those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

My friends, we are, after all, resurrection people, marked by something so unimaginable, so unthinkable -- from death, life. Jesus' death and resurrection, isn't just a story in a book, it's a reality, a power, we are called to live into and claim, as followers of Christ.

God is doing a new thing all around us. We just need to imagine the unimaginable, and join God's movement in the world.

I lean into the words of the poet, Aurora Levins Morales, as she reimagines the sacred Hebrew text from her Jewish roots in a new way of justice and hope by sharing a selection from her poem, *V'ahavta*⁶.

*"Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up,
when you go out and when you return. In times of mourning
and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts,
embroider them on your garments, tattoo them on your shoulders,
teach them to your children, your neighbors, your enemies,
recite them in your sleep, here in the cruel shadow of empire:
Another world is possible.*

*When you inhale and when you exhale
breathe the possibility of another world
into the 37.2 trillion cells of your body
until it shines with hope.
Then imagine more.*

*Imagine rape is unimaginable. Imagine war is a scarcely credible rumor.
That the crimes of our age, the grotesque inhumanities of greed,
the sheer and astounding shamelessness of it, the vast fortunes
made by stealing lives, the horrible normalcy it came to have,
is unimaginable to our heirs, the generations of the free.*

⁴ Rev. Khayla Johnson, [Sermon preached on 06/07/20](#), First Presbyterian Church, Ann Arbor, MI.

⁵ For the Life of the World, Yale Podcast, [My Anger, God's Righteous Indignation](#), Willie Jennings.

⁶ Aurora Levins Morales, [V'ahavta](#).

Don't waver. Don't let despair sink its sharp teeth
Into the throat with which you sing.
Escalate your dreams.
Make them burn so fiercely that you can follow them down
any dark alleyway of history and not lose your way.
Make them burn clear as a starry drinking gourd
Over the grim fog of exhaustion, and keep walking.

Hold hands. Share water. Keep imagining.
So that we, and the children of our children's children
may live."

My friends, God is doing a new thing so that we may praise God. May we be open to this Spirit's movement.
May we embrace the unknown with confidence, in the one who again, and again, shows us how deep and wide
the love of God reaches.

Imagine the unimaginable. It's happening all around us – even **WITHIN** us.
Do you not perceive it?
In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Closing Sentences

My friends, God promises...
to make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert,
to give drink to God's people,
so that they might declare God's praise.

As we go from this moment,
seeking to be human together,
may we share the things that do not fade:
generosity, truth-telling, grace, respect, and love.
And may the power we share, seek justice.
And may we honor God, the source of this rich life.
And may we honor each other, story-full, and lovely.

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace
Through the power of the Holy Spirit
Amen.

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