



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Reverend Denise Weaver
July 22, 2018 Sermon

Journeying Toward New Life

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 43:16-21

In his book *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, Tom Sine tells the story of his parent's friends who loved to gather wild mushrooms. One weekend the couple gathered several baskets of mushrooms. Realizing there were too many mushrooms to eat themselves, they decided to invite family and friends over for a mushroom feast. The turn-out was terrific and everyone had a wonderful time eating mushroom crepes, omelets and soufflés. They ate until they could not eat another bite and then scraped the leftover mushrooms into the cat's dish.

Around midnight, as the guests were getting ready to leave, someone went into the kitchen and saw the cat sprawled out on the floor in convulsions. Next to the cat was an overturned dish of mushrooms. The guest screamed, "the cat!" and everyone ran into the kitchen to see what the commotion was about. After seeing the cat, they decided to call the doctor, fearing they would meet the same doom. The doctor informed them they should not take any chances and immediately drive to the hospital to have their stomachs pumped.

About 1:30 in the morning, everyone dragged back to the host's house to get their belongings. They were sick and exhausted. As they half-heartedly thanked the hostess and made their way to the front door, someone asked, "What happened to the cat?" The group tip-toed to the kitchen, quietly opened the door, and found the cat asleep on the floor . . . with eight kittens!

At times, it is difficult to distinguish between dying and giving birth. You would think it would be easy to tell the difference. Yet, experience shows us that the distance between death and birth is not very far.

Throughout our lifetimes, we "die" in a sense in order to give "birth" to something new. A bad habit dies to make room for a healthier one. Close-minded thinking dies in order to grasp a deeper truth. Self-righteousness dies so that true forgiveness can be offered. Radical change, which sometimes *feels* like death, has to be experienced in order for something new to be born.

In today's scripture, the prophet Isaiah strives to help the Israelites comprehend that something needs to die within them in order for something new to be born. The Israelites are broken and despairing. Isaiah encourages them to have faith in God's ability to fix the situation reminding them of God's promise, "*I created you. I will redeem you.*" (Isa. 43:1).

Isaiah reminds the Israelites of God's intervention of parting the Red Sea so they could safely cross as they fled Pharaoh and slavery in Egypt, then closing the waters around Pharaoh's army. That event reminds them of their identity as God's chosen people and of God's identity—the One who makes a way where there is no way. It also demonstrates God is able to overcome obstacles to freedom be they human made or natural creations.

The Israelites continue in a mindset of slavery even though they have been freed. They cannot be truly free as long as the power of the old still grips them. They need a new identity. God promises them a new beginning, a new identity, a new life. God says, *"I am about to do a new thing. It will be a new creation—water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, drink for my chosen people—the people I formed for myself, that they might declare my praise."* (Isa. 43:19-21). What welcome news to people living in a desert!

God is about to do a new thing and because of that, the imagery shifts from water as a barrier to water as a conveyor of life. "Do you not perceive it" the listeners are asked. Do we perceive it? Isaiah reminds us that our God is the God who has delivered us in the past and who will deliver us again. Our God is the God who makes a way where there is no way, who creates streams of living water in the deserts of our lives, bringing new life into parched, dry places. Our God is faithful to God's promises and will never abandon us, no matter how bad things get.

Do we perceive that? Are we open to the new thing God is doing in our midst? Are we open to God's new thing in our lives? Or do we tell ourselves, "I cannot possibly make a difference in the world." "I cannot possibly live a life transformed." "I'm stuck with the miserable fix I am in."

We can fall prey to thinking it is solely up to us to change our situation, to change ourselves. Or we may become comfortable with the way we are, complacent about our comfort zones and we find change, even change for the better, too taxing, too trying. Perhaps that is why we often go kicking and screaming into change even when it is for our own good.

I remember witnessing a protest against change. It happened as a sister and brother, both preschoolers, were being baptized. The oldest child, a girl, received the sprinkling of water and words of baptism without making a peep. The younger brother decided he wanted no part of it, having watched his sister get wet. He put his hand on top of his head moving it back and forth to deflect the water cupped in the pastor's hand exclaiming in a voice people in the balcony heard, "No, No, No!!!" Those children were my children! (Children excel at humbling their parents!)

We resonate with that "No, No, No", do we not? Are we not tempted to say "no" when God's Spirit nudges us toward new life? When the Holy Spirit nudges us to forgive, do we find ourselves choosing instead to nurse a grudge a little longer? When the Holy Spirit reminds us to become more patient, kind or accepting of others do we find ourselves stiff-arming God's prompts? Most of us go kicking and screaming into redemptive change. Isn't

it ironic that we prefer enslavement over freedom? That we feel more at home in Egypt than the Promised Land?

God's plan toward a new identity, a new life, is made possible yet again through water, the waters of baptism. Baptism, often described as "a visible sign of an invisible grace", is primarily viewed as the washing away of sin but it signifies much more. At our baptisms, we are not only cleansed but forgiven, claimed and sanctified, sealed by God's own Spirit and given a new, everlasting identity in Christ.

Southern poet James Autry penned a poem about baptism that speaks of this newness . . . He writes:

*There is something about putting people under the water and
raising them up in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
something that makes people cry.
That makes them want everything to be alright.
That makes them want to leave this place and be better,
to immerse themselves in their lives,
And somehow be washed clean of all the things they should not
have done and still should not want to do.
That's it.
Not the other things,
The star in the east,
The treasures in heaven
Or any of the old stories,
Not even life after death. . .
It's only to be new again.*

To be new again . . . is that what you yearn for? To leave the past in the past and move into the new life, the new identity God desires for each one of us.

Christian author Anne Lamott chronicles an aspect of her journey toward new life for two and a half years as she tried to forgive her mother. She writes and I quote, "*I prayed for my heart to soften, to forgive her and love her for what she did give me – life, great values, a lot of tennis lessons, and the best she could do. Unfortunately, the best she could do was terrible . . . for two years I worked on forgiving her for having been a terrified, furious, clinging maw of neediness and arrogance. I suppose that sounds harsh. I assumed Jesus wanted me to forgive her, but I also know He loves honesty and transparency. I don't think He was rolling his eyes impatiently at me . . . I don't think much surprises Him. This is how we make important changes –barely, poorly, slowly. And still, He raises His fist in triumph.*" (Small Victories, Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace, p.140, 141).

One day Anne Lamott realized about her mother – "*I was definitely not hating her anymore. Grace means suddenly you are in a different universe from the one where you were stuck, and there was absolutely no way for you to get there on your own.*" (Small Victories, Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace, p.149).

God's grace claims us and reclaims us again and again throughout our lives. We who have been baptized struggle just like everybody else to be decent human beings. We are no more or no less tempted than anybody else to be less than God created us to be. Yet from our baptism forward, we have been given the Spirit of God to transform our spirits by the new thing God is doing. We also have been given strength beyond our own, God's divine strength, helping us live for God and God's purposes in newness of life. The Good News is that God remains with us, sustaining us every step of the way as we journey toward new life. Thanks be to God! Amen.