

SERMON: New Things
TEXT: Isaiah 42:1-9

Words matter. We all learned way back in our school days that many words have positive or negative connotations. My brother has always been kind of a geek about words. I remember my mom getting upset with him when he was in college because he would teach his younger siblings - still in elementary school - how to swear. The S word, in particular, he argued was “just a word” and there was no reason anyone should be offended by it.

I also remember a comment from him years later. In a family conversation, someone said something about being *anxious* for some sort of event in the near future. In other words, they were looking forward to this thing to come. My brother, of course, had to chime in with the comment that the use of the word *anxious* was incorrect. If you’re looking forward to it, if it’s a happy thing, then you’re not *anxious*, you’re *eager*. *Anxious* has a negative connotation, with an element of worry or concern, whereas *eager* has a positive connotation, indicating excitement and anticipation.

Clearly, his argument was enough to convince me, to the point where I have remembered his lecture years later, and I'm always very careful about using those words correctly.

Well, it occurred to me recently that the same thing is true about how we talk about *change*. When you bring up the subject of change, people get anxious, nervous, worried. Typically, we don't like change. When things around us change, it means we have to change, and change is hard.

But then I read today's scripture lesson from Isaiah, and that last sentence especially jumped out at me. "See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them."

At the thought of *new things*, we kind of perk up. If there's a new baby in the family, everyone wants to see pictures. When we get a new house or a new car, we share our excitement even with the clerk at the grocery store. We feel more confident in our new job if we're wearing new clothes! One of the most exciting days of the year for me as a kid was going to the shoe store to get new shoes. I mean, it was right up there with Christmas and my birthday.

Of course, these are all tangible things I've mentioned. But it rings true for the intangibles, as well. If someone reports that she has a new outlook on life, we would respond positively. "Oh, good for you! I'm so glad to hear that." Or if we have a new way of thinking about our past, or a new way to do that job, or we found a new way to get where we're going... it's all good.

Now, obviously, it's not always true. Sometimes that new way of doing things turns out not to be so good after all. Remember New Coke from the early 80's? Epic fail. That's where another old adage applies: *if it ain't broke, don't fix it.*

"See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them."

The NEW THINGS that Isaiah proclaims "spring forth" when Jesus is baptized and begins his ministry. Matthew's version of the event is brief, especially considering it's significance. "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, *I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?* But Jesus answered him, *Let it be*

so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*

Now, maybe this is just my imagination, but I sense a change - a new tone - in these words as Matthew moves from the dialog between Jesus and John to immediately following the baptism, as Jesus comes up from the water. It moves from “what is proper” to something paramount. It feels to me like when the sun finally breaks through on a gloomy, cloudy day. It feels like a weight has been lifted, and a new day is dawning after a long night. And the voice of God introduces Jesus to the world, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The Isaiah passage is also an introduction, describing a Servant and the task to which that servant is called. “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a

bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.”

Most of us with even a basic understanding of the Bible would assume that this servant is the expected Messiah, the One who is to come, ultimately Jesus who was baptized by John. However, you may be surprised to learn, as I was, that Biblical scholars do not necessarily jump to that conclusion.

In one commentary I read this: “We suspect that [original readers of this passage] also found in the description of the Servant’s vocation an invitation to reflect on the responsibility of all those who acknowledge God’s sovereignty and recognize the dependence of all creation on God’s order of justice. It is reasonable to assume that such reflection could at times focus on godly individuals, at other times on the vocation of groups within the community or even on the ultimate purpose of the entire nation.” (Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)

While this news may be concerning to some, I’ll admit that when I discovered it, I had to pump my fist and voice a hearty *YES* in celebration of the Holy Spirit, who continues to open God’s word to me in new ways. This new thing that we’re learning isn’t really new at all. It’s a demonstration of yet another old adage: *everything old is new again*.

While Isaiah certainly gives a clear description of the Jesus we know and worship, the task and the vocation of the Servant falls to those who seek to follow him, past, present, and future.

It's not a new thing, but it IS a new thing: the church, the Body of Christ, and we who are individual members of the Body, are called to servanthood, to "bring forth justice to the nations."

While we who claim First Presbyterian or Westminster Presbyterian as our home may feel *anxious* about the changes that come with being newly yoked congregations, I hope that we can also feel *eager* for the NEW THINGS that God has in store for us. It's a new year and a new decade, and we are entering a new phase of our lives. We are defining and shaping a new identity. We welcome new leadership on our Sessions. We are building new relationships as we explore new ways of serving and worshiping together. We have new vitality, energy, and enthusiasm from the Spirit, and a new focus for bringing forth justice in our community.

We are God's beloved servants. May God be well pleased with us as we minister and grow together.... To the glory of God!

AMEN.