

Keep the Change!

sermon digest

January 15, 2012

Isaiah 43:15-21; Revelation 21:1-7

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A few decades ago, my sister took an art class and got into painting. She was actually a good artist. She mostly painted flowers and things around the house and avoided portraits, but one day she told me about a scene involving our father that she wanted to put on canvas.

After Dad retired in 1976, our parents moved back to eastern Oklahoma where they had met and married. After a couple of years, they moved again, into Arkansas near Van Buren where Dad grew up. When family visited, Dad's favorite entertainment was to load up the car and take the grandchildren to nearby Ozark Mountains where he spent his childhood. Anyone familiar with Dad's story wondered why he wanted to go back home. His mother died with typhoid fever a few weeks after he was born. His father left the baby in the care of his wife's parents to grow up on the side of a mountain near Van Buren. His father remarried and moved away with his three older siblings.

All of us knew the scene my sister wanted to paint. Dad is standing beside the road gazing at his past. The home place has not been lived in for decades; it is beginning to collapse. The barn and a couple of outbuildings have fallen to the ground, and the fence has rotted to a skeleton of what it once was. The yard is overgrown with weeds, and there are new trees standing in the pasture. Dad stands absorbing the landscape, straining to remember the way things were. I don't know what his mental image contained as he looked into his past, but I know that it was not all sweetness and light. Dad's childhood involved a grandfather who became psychotic, whose mental illness became so dangerous that he had to be committed by the family to a state institution. Dad quit school at the ripe old age of thirteen to find work as an adult.

Gazing into the past is a unique scene only because of the persons involved; it appeals to anyone who has lived long enough to remember. The word is *nostalgia*, homesickness; and the experience is common. The longer we live, the more we have to remember, and the more we tend to live in our memories. Eventually, it seems that all we have left is a personal history. All of us are prone to become like Coleridge's "ancient mariner" stopping anyone who will listen to recite our story; or, perhaps, someone will indelibly paint our memory for posterity.

While you are remembering, hold on to the truth. Given where he came from, I have always been amazed at the kind of person Dad became. Whatever else he might have seen in that old farmhouse, I know that he saw that life moves on. If we could have read his thoughts, they might have been very different from the nostalgia that longs for a lost paradise. Instead of "I wish I were still there," I suspect that Dad was thinking, "thank God, life moves on. Thank God for change. I'll keep the change, thank you."

Old Testament scholars are agreed that Isaiah was written by at least two authors, maybe three, and addresses different epochs in Jewish history. Second Isaiah begins at chapter forty and addresses the age of reconstruction after fifty years of exile. We get hints of nostalgia infecting the national memory, a people who dreamed of a golden age when they had possessed the Promised Land. They longed for good old days when their kings ruled in righteousness, the land blessed them with bumper crops, and all of their borders were secure. Their memory resembled Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon days where, "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." The truth in biblical record does not quite match the nostalgia of the people.

When King Cyrus of Persia released the prisoners of Babylon and allowed the Jews to go back home, the good news turned to bitterness. They found Jerusalem's walls in a pile of rubble. The desecrated Temple leveled. The population was fraught with poverty and corrupted by intermarriage with Gentiles. Nothing left in Judah lived up to the stories told by their parents of a land flowing with milk and honey. The people gazed on the home place, and they saw two things. They saw that nothing was like it had been remembered by their forebears. The milk and honey were gone along with the majestic walls and buildings of Jerusalem. Then, they saw red. The anger toward Babylon that had smoldered for half a century sparked new flames of hatred, but the anger was not only directed at their captors. They were angry at God. They had, as Isaiah put it, "received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." The God who had given the promise had taken it away. They

blamed parents for their sins that were visited on the children. They blamed false prophets for telling lies about the political situation. Ultimately they blamed God for taking away the land and reneging on the promise. The lesson learned sounds like a contemporary Jewish reaction to the Nazi attempt at genocide. It appeared that God had broken Covenant. God is not faithful, not to be trusted, not true to God's promise.

The message from God is strange for a people who have centered their understanding of the nature of God in the flow of history: "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?"

The message is not a call to edit history so that it fits comfortably into our wishful thinking. The problem most of us have with memory is the human tendency to modify the facts. I was seduced into participating in a TV interview in Knoxville several years ago. I was set up (the correct word) to be questioned alongside an extreme right fundamentalist preacher attorney on the issue of separation of church and state. When I cited Thomas Jefferson and James Madison as founding fathers who understood the importance of separating religion and government to protect the liberty of both, I was accused of bending the truth of history to fit my prejudice. Then, I was shocked to learn that the founding fathers, whom I had always thought to be deists, were really evangelical Christians. But the truth is, we all have a tendency to remember things the way we wish rather than the way they were.

The message is not the common oversimplification we make of how to cope with the scars from our past. The word is not just "forget it!" The God of creation has made us with minds capable of retaining memories of our past. History is important. History has shaped our lives. We are who we are because of where we have been in life. Furthermore, the God of the Jews is the God who acts in history. God is known through involvement in the creation. We know God through the memory of the ages. The image of God cannot be captured in stone or on canvas, but God is revealed in history. The picture of God is painted in stories about people's lives. We know God through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. Life stories are precious jewels that cannot and should not be forgotten.

Although we cannot forget, we also cannot revisit the past. The Word of God through Isaiah was to quit trying to turn back the clock. The good old days, as much as they were to be qualified as *good*, are gone; and life moves forward.

While you are remembering, keep the change. The Evans family in my church had teen age children in my age group, and I was in their house periodically during high school days. They had a clock in their family room that was bought and hung on the wall as a joke, but it became a regular conversation piece. It was an electric clock with all of the numbers mounted backwards and a motor that ran the hands of the clock counterclockwise. It was a steady reminder that time moves forward, not backward.

Getting that message across is the persistent theme in the story of God's People. Isaiah writes that God is about to do a new thing. Jeremiah shares a vision for a new covenant written on the heart rather than on stone. Ezekiel declares that God will put a new spirit within the people. Jesus proclaims a new order that cannot be contained in the old wineskins or patched onto the old clothes of the past. Paul writes that if any one is in Christ, he/she is a new creation. The old has passed away and all things become new. The final Christian message in Revelation is "I am making all things new."

One of my mentors Eric Rust stated the matter succinctly: "The problem of history is the problem of meaning" (*Towards a Theological Meaning of History*, p. 3). The cynic asks, "Are we just running in circles, killing time until we run out of time?" But people of faith live toward a vision of life in the hands of a loving God, Lord of history. Rust, who was a physicist before he became a theologian, notes that even the evolutionary movement of nature implies a progressive unfolding of time in the direction of some goal or meaningful outcome. The Biblical vision of the unfolding future in the hands of a caring Creator gives us meaning for today as well as hope for tomorrow.

Yet, the Gallup poll report in last week's news indicates that conservatives now outnumber liberals two-to-one. Forty per cent of Americans consider themselves conservative, thirty-five per cent moderate, and only twenty-one per cent liberal. The problem with this poll, like most polls, is conservative, moderate, and liberal are defined by the beholder. I find that most people who claim to be conservative are quite liberal about some areas of their lives and the converse holds for liberals.

Let me assert my definition of the difference between conservative and liberal: conservatives try to hold on to the values and lifestyles that they identify with the past, while liberals are open to new ways of thinking and accepting of radical changes in lifestyle and values. People on both ends of the pole can be rigid as a board and blind as a bat. That is why I disavow labels as being anything more than a way to distort reality or pigeonhole my opponent.

If we are to believe the gospel, it is indeed good news. It is about change, the real change that comes from living in this world where the past is gone and the only hope lies in the future in the hands of the God who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Change is inevitable. Thank God, we are not locked into the past. Let's keep the change.