Spring Forward
A Sermon preached for North Presbyterian Church
on March 17, 2013 by Cathy M. Kolwey

Lectionary Readings, 5th Sunday of Lent

Isaiah 43:16-24 * John 12:1-8 * Philippians 3:4-14

We love to hear this morning’s Older Testament scripture. When Isaiah’s poetry proclaims God’s promise to do a new thing, we are ready to spring out of our chairs. God is promising two things: liberation and total restoration. The poetry of Isaiah here recalls the exodus tradition, and also offers new life. In it, it beckons the Israelites not to dwell on the things of the past, but to ponder deeply the new thing that is about to happen.

Isaiah 43: 16-24

This is what the LORD says—
he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
17 who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
18 “Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
19 See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.
20 The wild animals honor me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
21 the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.

22 “Yet you have not called on me, Jacob,
you have not wearied yourselves for[1] me, Israel.
23 You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings,
nor honored me with your sacrifices.
I have not burdened you with grain offerings
nor wearied you with demands for incense.
24 You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me,
or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices.
But you have burdened me with your sins.
We love to hear that God is doing a new thing, don’t we? We are a culture that is obsessed with needing something new. We stand in lines, waiting for the latest version of the iPad 5.0, the newest iphone or itouch, the latest app. We are riveted at our television sets, waiting to see “who will be the next American Idol”. We want to know who the next big thing is. We even want to be a part of choosing who it will be. We stop everything when we see the white smoke…. We want to know who the new Pope is going to be. We chase after the latest in fad diets and exercise programs. The South Beach Diet, the Mediterranean diet, PX90, Tae Bo, or Zumba. And if you are anything like me, you can’t wait to see what is coming down the runway for the last in fashion trends. What are the hot colors in fashion for Spring of 2013. We are a culture obsessed with getting the latest and the greatest, the newest and the most fashionable, and so we love to hear that God... GOD!... is doing something new.

But then we start to hear a little about what this new thing really is. Our Lenten journey takes us closer and closer to a cross and a crucifixion. Hold on a minute. New life in Christ means... what? We have to lose our lives? Become like servants? It is like that moment when we realize the miracle diet is not going to have miraculous results, and we are still going to have to go to the gym. We still have to do the hard work; maybe even harder work than before. It is like that moment when we realize we have accidentally erased all of the apps on our brand new gadget. The newness wears off quickly. In Philippians, Paul explains that the fulfillment of this promise that God made in Isaiah is the resurrection: the new life in Christ. The excitement wears off when we hear just what that means for our lives. Really? We are being asked to give up everything?

Philippians 3:4-14

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, 10 the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ[b] and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal;[c] but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved,[d] I do not consider that I have made it my own;[e] but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I
press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly\textsuperscript{[f]} call of God in Christ Jesus.

Just like in Isaiah, Paul also calls us to forget the past and to look ahead – to spring forward – to the goal of life transformed. We try to wrestle with the idea that when we lose everything, we count it as gain; and our gains are somehow counted as losses. And at the end of the day we don’t want to suffer the loss of all of our things. Our stuff is important. It gives us security. If gives us the false sense that we are in control. But Isaiah clearly points out that God is the sovereign one.

I think that ultimately the passage in Philippians is calling us to a paradigm shift. We are to move away from being consumers of the world, and to instead think of ourselves as stewards for the world. Instead of getting, getting, getting, we are to give, give, give. This is incredibly hard, for everything in our culture tells us we need to get more, that our assets define who we are. Waiting in line for the new iPad 5 means we are successful. Have that uber hip Moroccan-blue pant suit for Easter means that we are savvy, fashionable, smart. But Paul calls us to think about a world where our assets weigh us down, hinder us, keep us looking back. They keep us from the ultimate prize. This paradigm shift is one of the toughest scripture in the Bible to wrestle with. And I don’t claim to personally do it well.

I can say, I have tried to follow these words of Philippians, and to give up some of the unnecessary luxuries. A couple of years ago, my family gave up having a television in our home. We wanted to live more simply, and it works for us every year until March. Then the ACC basketball tournaments come on, and I miss the opportunity to see the Maryland Terps upset Duke on live TV, and I question whether or not I like this simplicity that God is calling me to. Really God, THIS is what you want from me? What is the real harm in one good ACC showdown? Paul is challenging me to think that is not about being part of a great game, but living in a culture where I feel like I am entitled to consume everything.

Paul also challenges us to forget the past, and to press onto the goal of a life transformed. This too is a hard one for me. It asks us to give up old habits of behavior and of lifestyle patterns that help give us a sense of security. I can’t imagine anyone starting out on a new journey without some kind of plan. It’s spring break. Let’s take a roadtrip to Florida. No we don’t need to pack any food, or make sure the checking account has enough money for gas. No we don’t need to mapquest our route or even bring a road atlas. We will just trust in God along the way. Oh, and no, we aren’t supposed to use the rear view mirror along the way. It doesn’t matter where we came from; only where we are going. I don’t think many of us would be comfortable with that (but then again there was that one time I left my parents how in WV, headed to the Pittsburgh airport, telling them I was going to use “the force” to get me there, and that I didn’t need a map. I made it, so maybe it does work.)
Even though I was that reckless once, I can still say I struggle with the combination of the “lose everything” and the “forget your past” messages that are combined in this scripture. The loss of self and the loss of security seem to be a little too overwhelming. But it helps when I read the theologian C. S. Lewis, who describes it this way: “The more we let God take us over, the more truly ourselves we become - because God made us. God invented us. God invented all the different people that you and I were intended to be. . .It is when I turn to Christ, when I give up myself to His personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own.”

These words from Lewis start to make some sense of Philippians, but they still seem counter-intuitive. How can we only become who we are intended to be when we stop being ourselves? It is so hard to imagine losing everything, and counting our losses as our greatest gains. The best example I can think of, for a life like Paul describes, is the story of Mary.

We all know the story of Mary. Most people think she’s a whore. But she has had a Jesus experience. She has had a conversion moment. She has forgotten her old life, and so should we. Full of the joy of new life in Christ, she is looking ahead -- springing forward -- unable to contain herself. And so she crashed the dinner party. The hosts wanted to throw her out, but the guest of honor recognized her, and said “No, it is Mary, let her stay.” The hosts obliged, even though they thought her behavior was altogether reckless and inappropriate.

In sheer exuberance, she took all that she had – a bottle of perfume (one that may have been worth more than her entire retirement fund). And she poured it out. All of it. Others said was a total waste. In that moment, she was truly suffering the loss of all things, for that oil was worth more than she would ever own. She poured it onto Jesus feet. She anointed him with the oil, and washed his feet with her hair. This was her way of showing all of her losses would be gains. She was celebrating her new life of transformation. The party was speechless. Except for Judas, who kept saying what a waste it was – to be wasting all the resources on Jesus when the money could have gone to the poor.

But Mary was doing exactly what Paul commands each of us to do. She was forgetting her past – a past that said she didn’t belong at the party, or anywhere near Jesus. Losing all that she was and all that she had, she was counting her loses as gain. And she was keeping her eye on the prize: a life with the Savior. She got it, while everyone else was still clinging to the idea that the perfume was somehow worth more than a life with Jesus. But Jesus corrected them. He said that she was right; because in her loss of earthly treasure she was receiving the extravagant gift, even as she was the one pouring out that extravagance on Jesus. Losing herself, she was gaining all.
Isn’t it interesting, that the Isaiah verse – where God is promising liberation and restoration – ends with a lament that the Israelites are not being faithful? It says “You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, you have not lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins”. But here, in the gospel story, that has changed. We are given an example of how we are to worship God for the new thing that is happening in our lives. It is with the story of Mary, that these seemingly unrelated verses come together to make sense for us, that we are shown how we should respond to God’s grace in true Philippians fashion. Mary shows us how to spring forward to do a new thing -- to lavish Jesus with the extravagance that he deserves. While the others are still burdened (and burdening) with their sin, like it says in the end of Isaiah.

On this Lenten journey, God is doing something new. Now it springs forth, can you see it? Watch out. It is not what you expected, but if you lose yourself in it, you will spring forward in ways and to places you have never imagined. It is even okay to be a little reckless and inappropriate along the way – that’s what happens when you are so full of joy that you can’t contain yourself. Paul calls us to this joy telling us to lose our very lives, and Mary shows us how to do it. May it be so, Amen.