

## ***From Scarcity to Abundance (Lent 3)***

Isaiah 43:16-21

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

April 3, 2022

*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.  
(Isaiah 43:16-21, NRSV)*

A number of years ago,  
I attended a church leadership retreat  
at Camp Amigo in Sturgis, Michigan.  
On our second day there,  
we were invited to an extended time of silence.  
There were different stations set up for us to pray and to reflect,  
but we were told to use that time as we wished.  
Except of course, for talking.  
From 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., silence.  
This is not what I had envisioned for my weekend.  
After about an hour,  
I put on my coat and walked down  
from the retreat center to the lake below.  
It was cold, and I shoved my hands in my pockets  
as I stood on a dock at the water's edge.

I casually glanced into the water.  
and I saw only the muck of decaying leaves.

Now, I'm going to be vulnerable with you.  
I'm going to reveal to you one of my character traits  
that just might maybe seem a little bit compulsive.

Possibly. Here it is.

I tend to make little games for myself,  
little tasks that I have to accomplish  
before moving on to something else.

It's all stupid stuff.

Like not leaving a basketball court until I've swished my last shot.

I've done that for as long as I can remember.

Or not continuing on a walk  
until I've hit a certain tree with a walnut or snowball --  
I will keep trying until I hit it (or until Sarah tells me that I hit it).  
(It's safe to say that I did not woo Sarah with this particular trait).

Well, on that dock, staring into the water, I thought,  
"I'm not leaving this spot until I see something alive."

It was just a fleeting, frivolous thought -- not a blood vow --  
but I began looking for life in the muck.

As I did so, I made three simple rules.

First, I had to stand in the same spot --  
I couldn't move somewhere else that seemed more promising.

Second, I had to see an actual creature in the water.  
Not a plant. Not bubbles.  
A fish, a bug, a frog, a creature.

Finally, I could only observe.

I couldn't throw or put anything in the water  
to scare or lure something out of hiding.

Clearly, that would be cheating.

I stood there, searching the water for life.

And there was nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

And again, I can't explain it, but my silly little vow  
quickly became something more significant  
than a basketball shot or a thrown walnut.

Probably because of the things that I was going through at that time,  
it was as if I *needed* to see something alive.

There had to be, right? Don't lakes teem with life?

In silence, I stood in that spot for two and half hours.

Where is the God of life when all is still, silent, and stagnant?

Where is the God of creation and liberation

when we find ourselves in the pit of our own existence  
caught in an endless loop leading to despair?

Wake, work, wait for sleep.

Same obstacles, same pain, same fears, same worries, same routine.

Same stuff different day,

reaching for, praying for, expending and earning  
the scarce resources to sustain our existence.

Nothing new in the unmoving water.

According to the best evidence,

the words before us from Isaiah

were written after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians.

The temple was lying in ruins,

the most prominent Jews had been carried off to Babylon as exiles.

When they heard these words, the people of Judah

dwelled as captives and exiles along the banks of the Euphrates  
in a land of strange gods named Marduk and Nebo.

These were people who had questions.

Where is the God of life when all is still, silent, and stagnant?

Where is the God of creation and liberation

when we find ourselves in the pit of our own existence  
caught in an endless loop leading to despair?

The Babylonian Empire was like all empires.

In empires, the privileged few rule the majority

who dwell in marginal spaces, subjugated territories.

Empires set out to transform the cultures of the conquered

by systematically penetrating and dominating those cultures.

Art, literature, and religious symbols play a role in this domination,

but one of the primary tools is education.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most challenging difficulties facing those exiles in Babylon, then,

was the continuing enculturation of themselves and their children  
into Babylonian beliefs, customs, and religion.

They did not have the temples, the worship spaces, the land

to help them educate their children, to observe the rituals, to pass on the faith.

Now, one way that subjugated peoples attempt to maintain their identity

is to tell and retell their story

by practicing the traditions of the past.

And here comes Isaiah,

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<sup>1</sup> "Judah under the Neo-Babylonian Empire." Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism. Perdue, Leo G., and Warren Carter, Baker, Coleman A., eds. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015. 69–106. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 2 Apr. 2022. . Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, [www.bloomsburycollections.com](http://www.bloomsburycollections.com), 2 April 2022, 15:00 UTC.

alluding to the story that everyone was grasping to remember:  
Thus says the Lord, God says through Isaiah,  
    you know, the One who makes a way through the waters,  
    the One who causes the chariots and horses,  
        the armies and the warriors to lie down,  
        to be extinguished like a wick.

You know, the God of the Exodus from which your very identity comes,  
    that One says, forget all that --  
    *Do not remember the former things,*  
        *or consider the things of old.*  
    *[Because] I am about to do a new thing;*  
        *now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

And then, Isaiah goes on to tell those exiles that this new thing  
    that God will do looks very much like what God already has done  
        and just told them to forget:  
    making a way in the wilderness,  
    giving them water to drink,  
    protecting them from threats like wild animals,  
    and nourishing them in the desert.

I take this all to mean that those exiles should know  
    that the story that God has invited them into  
    is not to be held like a relic from the past –  
        they should forget it if that's how they're holding it.

No, the story that is central to their identity  
    will continue through them wherever they are found,  
    and whatever circumstances they find themselves in.

The God of the Exodus who liberated the Israelite slaves from the Egyptian Empire  
    is the God of the Exodus who will liberate the exiles from the Babylonian Empire.

An hour passed as I stood at that dock.  
The bell rang calling us in for brunch,  
    but I wasn't ready to give up.

Not yet.

A chipmunk chattered close my feet.

A moth darted away from me.

A hawk circled over my head.

From the water's reflection,

    I followed leaves fluttering down from the trees behind me  
    until they entered the water,  
    becoming one with themselves.

I saw many things.

But in the water, beneath and above the surface,  
    I saw nothing.

Nothing moving. Nothing alive.

No waterbug skittering across the surface.  
No turtle coming up for air.  
Nothing.

You know, if you turn just a few chapters forward in Isaiah,  
a few chapters past the prophecy that we've just read together --  
the promise that God was about to do a new thing --  
you get this  
(from Isaiah 63, beginning with verse 11):

*Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea  
with the shepherds of his flock?  
Where is the one who put within them  
his holy spirit,  
who caused his glorious arm  
to march at the right hand of Moses,  
who divided the waters before them  
to make for himself an everlasting name,  
who led them through the depths?*

My feet were freezing.  
My nose was running.  
I was tired standing.  
I thought about breaking one of my rules.  
If I just went over there, I thought,  
I'm sure I could find something.  
I tried convincing myself that a fish-shaped object  
was actually a fish when I knew it was a stick.  
Or maybe I would get mystical --  
perhaps the image that I saw of myself in the water's reflection  
was actually the life that I was searching for?  
Deep thoughts, by Mark Schloneger.

But I couldn't convince myself to do any of those things.  
I might quit, I might fail, but I would not cop out.  
I needed to see something alive.  
There had to be life here, but where was it?

Where is the God of life when all is still, silent, and stagnant?  
Where is the God of creation and liberation  
when we find ourselves in the pit of our own existence  
caught in an endless loop leading to despair?  
*How do we hope for something new to come?*

In his letter to the Philippians, in chapter 3  
the Apostle Paul describes himself as privileged,  
as least when it came to his place in Israel --

a member of the tribe of Benjamin,  
a Hebrew born of Hebrews,  
a Pharisee in following the law,  
a persecutor of the church in his zeal,  
blameless, as far as righteousness under the law.

But Paul writes that he gave up all of those things,  
considers them to be rubbish  
now that he has found Christ Jesus and has been found by him.  
He goes on to say that he wants to be like Christ,  
sharing in his sufferings, his death, and his resurrection.

Verses 13 and 14:

*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14. NRSV)*

Forgetting what lies behind.

Pressing toward the new thing,  
the call of God in Christ Jesus.

This is our common journey, together,  
and sometimes it feels like one step forward and two steps back.

The story that God has invited us into through Jesus  
is not a relic of the past.

It's a story that continues through us.

The God of the Exodus who liberated the Israelite slaves from the Egyptian Empire  
is the God of the Exodus who liberated the exiles from the Babylonian Empire,  
and is the God of the Exodus that will liberate you  
from whatever empire or system that dominates you  
and holds others captive,  
*freeing us, together, to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.*

The Season of Lent reminds us all that our sin is no frivolous matter.

Our sin cannot be scrubbed away and erased  
without our turning to face the awful symbol of our sin.

God makes us face ourselves before we can experience his salvation.

See, on the cross, lifted up,  
the consequence of your turning away from God,  
betraying your own humanity.

See, on the cross, lifted up, God's beloved Son loving God's beloved children.

See, on the cross, lifted up, the one thing that can lift you up.

See, on this cross, lifted up, God's sign  
that you are a beloved child of God

and that all will be well.  
and that all is forgiven.

Because Somebody – the One who created you –  
will lift you up out of the stagnant lifeless pit  
to something new.

A new life, an abundant life, a generous life,  
a life overflowing with the fragrance of precious perfume  
leaving the former things behind,  
pressing on to live the story that God has already written  
and continues to write in us.

I learned something from that time on the dock, and I offer it to you.

I call it the spiritual discipline of standing in one place,  
but I think it's really a journey, a Lenten journey.  
It means peering into the darkness, the muck, the pit.  
and, in the name of Jesus, calling for signs of life  
from the most unlikely places and from the most unlikely people, from within you.  
Sometimes, it means leaving those places where life cannot be found.  
Sometimes, it means staying until you find it.  
May God give us the wisdom to know when to do both.

Oh, and I saw a fish.  
It could have been a tadpole,  
but the point is that I saw a fish-like creature.  
It was definitely in the water before me.  
It was definitely alive.  
And I definitely saw it.  
I don't have the words to express my joy in that moment.  
It was a precious gift.  
It was translucent brown, skinny, and a little over an inch long.  
There may have even been others, but honestly,  
I didn't stick around long enough to look.  
It took me two and half hours, but I found life in a place that I thought was left for the dead.  
The thing is, it was always there.  
I just stuck around long enough to see it.

I close with the words of Rosemary Freeney Harding,  
a Goshen College graduate and a teacher, social worker,  
and civil rights leader along with her husband Vincent Harding,

*There is no scarcity.  
There is no shortage.  
No lack of love, of compassion, of joy in the world.  
There is enough.  
There is more than enough.*

*Only fear and greed make us think otherwise.  
No one need starve.  
There is enough land and enough food.  
No one need die of thirst.  
There is enough water.  
No one need live without mercy.  
There is no end to grace.  
And we are all instruments of grace.  
The more we give it, the more we share it, the more we use it,  
the more God makes.  
There is no scarcity of love.  
There is plenty.  
And always more.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Harding, Rosemarie Freeney (with Rachel Elizabeth Harding), *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism, and Mothering* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2015), ix.