

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Pastor Michael D. Archer

3-25-07

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

It is good to be back! I missed you last Sunday, although I was here in spirit. Some have asked where I was last week, so I'll take a moment and fill you in. After meeting with the chairman of the Commission on Ministry, I spent some time away last weekend working on a paper that will be used in assessing my preparation for ordination in the Episcopal Church. There are clearly no guarantees. That much has been made crystal clear, but if everything falls into place, I could be ordained a Deacon as early as June of this year. Thank you for your prayers!

I was also in Auburn last weekend, where I was able to spend some time with my daughters. One of the reasons I was there was to see my youngest daughter, Angela, participate in her last Teen Bible Quiz tournament of the year. Now, if you happened to be here the very *first* time I preached in this place, I told you what Teen Bible Quizzing is like. It is a very competitive sport. Just as a word of warning...should you ever have the opportunity, don't get into a debate over scripture with a Bible Quizzer!

The teens quizzed on Saturday, but on Friday night they held an exhibition quiz with adults. Yes, I got lassoed into being one of the adults on the jump seats quizzing. I have to say from the bottom of my heart... I'm *glad* I'm an *Episcopalian*. I didn't embarrass myself or Angela, but it is clear that I have been away too long! I'll talk more about my trip this past weekend in just a few moments, but it truly reinforced for me a theme found in our readings this morning, both from Isaiah and again from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi.

In our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah writes, "*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing.*" Paul's letter to the church at Philippi contains a similar theme when he writes, "*This one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining towards what lies ahead, I press on towards the mark of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*" Forgetting what is behind, straining towards what is ahead. Do not remember the former things, see, I am doing a new thing. Let's now put these two passages into some context.

Isaiah was a prophet sent to the people of Israel prior to their Babylonian exile, prior to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Isaiah, and other prophets at that time, had been sent to the people of Israel to shine the light of truth on the fact that the state of their relationship with God was suffering. God was neglected in their personal lives, in their family lives, and in their national life. These prophets, particularly Isaiah and Jeremiah, looked into the future and saw what was going to take place if the people of Israel did not return to God. They prophesied the destruction of the Temple, the desolation of Jerusalem, and the exile of the remnant of Israel.

This morning's reading from Isaiah is actually written to address the people of Israel *after* the exile, *after* the destruction of the Temple. God, speaking through Isaiah to them in the midst of a

very dark wilderness kind of place, says, “*Do not remember the former things.*” Given the particular point in their history that Isaiah paints in his prophecies, what might those “former things” be? If I’m among the people of Israel in exile, the former things might include the Temple now destroyed... Jerusalem, the city of God, devastated... and we’ve been carted off to Babylon in exile. I would tend to look back and ask all of those “what if” questions, or make “if only” statements.

“What if... we had listened to the prophets?”

“What if... we hadn’t ignored God?”

“If only... we had turned from our rebellion and honored God!”

“If only... we could go back and do things differently.”

Regrets would be plentiful. “God, after all, did send the Prophets to warn us and we failed to listen. We are getting what we deserve.” Despair and hopelessness would be abundant as well, looking back... if only.

Are there episodes in your life that you wish you could erase? Chapters that you wish had never been written? Memories that you wish you could just forget? When reminded of those chapters, you ask yourself those “what if” questions. You chastise yourself because *there were warnings*... but you didn’t heed them... and now you are reaping the consequences of the choices you made. It is very easy, once we are in that “looking back” mode, to locate our greatest failures and to focus so fully on those failures that we paralyze our present and imperil our future. *Time spent regretting yesterday’s choices or mourning what might have been is time stolen from today that only compounds our regret and deepens our mourning tomorrow.*

As the people of Israel listened to the words of Isaiah, “*Forget the former things. See, I am doing a new thing. Can’t you perceive it?*” they likely were very reticent to look forward to a better future when the future they had previously envisioned had been so ruined by their past choices.

“*I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert,*” God says through Isaiah. It’s interesting to me that God’s “new thing” is screaming out in the midst of Israel’s wilderness. If I’m in the wilderness part of me is saying I’d rather go back to that place of old where the temple existed and God’s presence was so real. In the wilderness the past cannot be reclaimed and there isn’t much of a future to envision at all. “*Forget the former things. See, I am doing a new thing.*” In the midst of the wilderness, when Israel couldn’t see the way forward, Isaiah’s message was that *God* knew the way forward. In the wilderness God called Israel to simply trust, to be in relationship with Him, and to follow where He would lead.

We heard very similar words from the Apostle Paul, “*This one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, and straining towards what is ahead, I press on.*” What might that mean for Paul? If you are familiar with the Apostle Paul, you are likely aware of his very dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus, and you are likely aware of the man he was prior to that experience. The opening verses of our reading from Philippians contain, essentially, Paul’s resume’. These are the things he had accomplished in his life prior to his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Hear again some of the things that he lists: “*I was circumcised on the*

eight day... of the people of Israel... of the tribe of Benjamin... a Hebrew born of Hebrew...; as to the law, a Pharisee.” He knew the law inside and out. “...as to zeal, I was a persecutor of the church... as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Think about that. He’s the first century equivalent of an attorney. He knows the law. In regard to the law he says quite boldly, “If you examine my life, comparing it side by side with the law, you’ll see that I have kept the law in every detail. I’m faultless.”

Could anyone here say that?

Paul was saying: “I have been perfect.” What a resume’! Yet even with this very significant, very impressive resume’, Paul found that all the things he had to his credit were meaningless. They are “*rubbish*,” he writes... in the original language it is really much more graphic than “rubbish”... “*Everything that I had to my credit is just a **pile of dung** compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord for whose sake I have lost all things.*” For Paul, “forgetting what lies behind” would mean to forget his perfect resume’, his likely unequalled accomplishments.

But it would also mean to forget the failure that he was so very dramatically confronted with on the road to Damascus. When author Stephen Covey talks about climbing the ladder of success, he often says it’s a terrible thing to finally get to the top rung of the ladder only to discover that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. That’s what Paul is saying. Though his heart had always been set on service to God, his living out that service had been all wrong. He believed that relationship with God was based on his ability to keep the law. Not only did he keep the law personally, but as we know he was also the chief enforcer of the law and the chief persecutor of the church... the judge and jury, if you will. Imagine how he must have felt, discovering that the Jesus he persecuted was the God he served.

“*All of these things I count as rubbish,*” Paul writes... pride and self loathing alike, both left behind that he might “*press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*”

What goal did Paul have in mind? Was it a goal like we might have... a certain type of home... a certain type of vehicle... a certain amount of financial security... a lifetime of good health? No, the goal Paul seeks to reach is an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. “*I want to know Christ,*” he says, “*and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his suffering becoming like him in his death that somehow I may attain to the resurrection of the dead.*” A deep, intimate relationship with Jesus was the goal of Paul. All that he had to his credit paled in comparison. In fact he would sacrifice everything else to have this kind of intimate relationship with Jesus, and his life from that point forward reflected as much.

After encountering the risen Christ, Paul was transformed from an agent of “judgment” into an agent of “grace.” He had spent much of his life trying to keep the church pure, forcing out those who didn’t measure up. But he spent the latter part of his life expanding the church, sharing the grace of God, bringing those into the church, into the family of God that had been previously excluded. Paul championed God’s grace, writing, “*I understand now that righteousness doesn’t come from the law. True righteousness comes from faith having received the grace of God, true*

righteousness by faith.” This true righteousness that he proclaimed to the church at Philippi was a powerful message and it underscored the powerful transformation in this great man of God. “*Forgetting what lies behind*”... a life of zealous judgment... “*and straining toward what is ahead*”... a life of radical grace.

I shared earlier that I spent last weekend in Auburn visiting my daughters. I had the privilege last Sunday morning of attending church with them. The church they attend is the church I served as Senior Pastor from August 2001 until October 2003. It was not the first time I had been back. The church has graciously invited me to attend special functions before – but going back into that place is always emotional for me.

Let me paint a bit of a picture, if I can. The Parkside Church of the Nazarene facility is 56,000 square feet under one roof. They currently worship in a multi-purpose room that seats approximately 600, but the roughed-in hub of that massive facility is their future Sanctuary. Though blue prints have not been approved, it is under roof, the floor has been poured, and if you let your imagination work even the slightest bit you can envision a beautiful worship space that will accommodate 1,000 people. I used to walk into that space on a weekly basis, stand on the platform where the pulpit will one day be, and imagine what it would be like every week to preach in that place to a thousand people.

When I left Parkside Church of the Nazarene, it was without warning to the people of that parish. Discussions had taken place over a period of months with the District Leadership of the Church of the Nazarene, and it was clear that I could no longer function as a minister in that denomination, but the parish at large really never knew what was going on. I stood in the pulpit for the final time on October 19th 2003, finished the sermon, announced my resignation, and, following a time of prayer with my family at the church altar, left. That parish, shaken by what had transpired, wanted immediate leadership. Two months later a new Pastor was installed. He lasted a year or so. He was followed by an intentional interim Pastor, and they now have a new Pastor who has been there all of three weeks. He is the third Pastor to lead that church since I left three and a half years ago.

Standing in that space last weekend, I was overcome by grief... again... feeling that this parish, because of *my choices*, had been left scrambling to pick up the pieces of their shattered expectations and to move forward to an uncertain future. The crisis was not of their making, but without a clear understanding of themselves and who God is calling them to be, they went from Pastor to Pastor to Pastor.

When I think of where St. Wilfrid’s finds itself today, in circumstances not so different from how I left Parkside three years ago, I sometimes think God has assigned me penance. I know this period in our life as a parish is not an easy period and the temptation is to simply say, “Fix it, Vestry! Fix it Bishop!” But without doing the hard work that we are engaged in now, visioning, profiling, prayerfully discerning what it is that God is calling us to be and to do in the future... without doing all that, we may also be destined to move from Rector to Rector to Rector.

Please hear me. I *do* grieve over the chaos I left at Parkside... the good people who suffered because of choices I made. I can’t go back and fix it. For whatever purpose God has in mind,

I've been placed here with you at this time in the life of St. Wilfrid's. There will always be temptations to look back with "what if" and "if only" questions for all of us... but hear again the words of Isaiah, and the Apostle Paul, "*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing.*"... "*This one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining towards what lies ahead, I press on towards the mark of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*"

With God's help, in this pivotal period in the life of St. Wilfrid's, let's commit as a parish to work with our vestry, this staff, and our bishop to build together a place of health... a place with a future that we have together discerned by the Spirit of God... moving forward as agents not of judgment, but true agents of grace in this world... opening our arms as the arms of Christ to the very people who have by our failure to reach out been excluded from that grace.

Though it may feel at times that we are in that wilderness place, remember, the same God who made a way in the wilderness for the people of Israel, has already made a way for us if we will trust and be people (men and women and young people) of faith.

To his glory, in Jesus' name.