

A New Thing

Isaiah 43:16-21

Dr. E. Stanley Ott, Teaching Pastor - Vienna Presbyterian Church, Vienna, Virginia
Sunday, August 17, 2008
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

It is an immense pleasure to be with you this morning. I have attended services here at National on and off for nearly forty years. When I was led to faith in Christ while I was in college, I began to attend the 9:30 a.m. worship services over at the Fourth Presbyterian Church where Dick Halverson, later Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, was preaching. As soon as their 9:30 service was over, I'd jump into my car and race over here to listen to Louis Evans, Jr. It was a rich time. I have loved this sanctuary ever since. Craig Barnes and Gareth Icenogle are friends, as are your former associates, Harry Winsheimer and Jeff McCory. It is a delight to be with Junior and with you this morning.

While pastoral ministry has been my calling in life, my primary work today is with presbyteries and their congregations around the country leading them to grow in the fruitfulness and energy of their ministries. As you might imagine, I see congregations in all kinds of situations. What is clear is that whether a congregation is thriving or just surviving, or any of us personally is thriving or surviving, often centers on the degree to which we are aware of what God is doing in us, among us, and through us.

Our text for this morning is remarkably short and immensely significant. The heart of it begins by saying, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past," Isaiah 43:18. You and I have an incredible ability to fixate on what has happened in our own past and in the past life of our church, yet God says through the prophet Isaiah, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past." The issue here isn't to deny the past. Just don't dwell on it. In fact, we are encouraged throughout the Bible to remember the works of our God in the past so that we would expect God to work in our lives today and tomorrow. It is so easy for us to experience a really tough or hurtful situation and spend the next years dwelling on our hurt and become captive to our past. Or to focus on what we imagine being some past heyday in our life or in the life of our church and look at the struggles of the present and say, "Oh, if we could only be the way we were." However, our past is not our future. The Apostle Paul said, Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13b-14). So, we turn from our past and hear God saying through Isaiah, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland." Our God loves to do the new thing. God is giving you the opportunity to be open to the new thing God wants to do in you, among you and through you.

Did you see the movie Groundhog Day? I did not see it when it played in the theater. One evening when my wife, Ann Marie, was out of town on a business trip and the kids were all involved in their activities, I rented the movie. Bill Murray plays the role of a television weatherman who was something of a jerk. He covered the festivities on Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, along with a co-anchor, played by Andi McDowell. Every morning Murray wakes up, he discovers that he is still in Punxsutawney; it is Ground Hog Day all over again...over and over again, the same day repeats. It dawns on him he can do anything he wants, wonderful or sinful, and get away with it, and he does because he knows that the next day will be Groundhog Day all over again. He becomes depressed, trapped in endlessly repeating days and tries to commit suicide and wakes up the next morning, and it's Ground Hog Day all over again! It's rather mystical in the movie, but somehow he has some kind of conversion experience. He decides to better himself. He learns to speak French. He learns to practice medicine. He learns jazz piano. He learns the art of ice sculpting. He learns how to court and to win the woman he has come to love and respect.

The movie ends. I'm sitting on the sofa watching the credits roll by. I am too stunned to hit rewind and not because of the charming romance of the movie. I am thinking of the congregation where I was pastor. Our philosophy was sustain and advance; sustain what we are doing this year and advance with the new and sustain all that next year and advance with still new ministry. Bless the past, add the new. But in my own life, for the previous ten years at least, the alarm would go off at six in the morning. I'd get up six

a.m., take a cup of coffee to Ann Marie, work with getting the kids off to school, have a devotional time of Bible reading and prayer, and go to work. Eat lunch with somebody. Go back to work. Go home. Eat dinner. Go back to work for a meeting. Go home. Watch TV. Go to bed. Get up at six a.m. Take a cup of coffee to Ann Marie. Work with getting the kids off to school and so on. I realized that in my own life, I was living Groundhog Day for real!

When Ann Marie returned from her business trip, I said, “Ann Marie, I would like to give you a choice. I will either learn to speak Portuguese or I will learn to dance!” If you wonder why those options, Ann Marie spent some growing-up years in Brazil. She still speaks some Portuguese and would love to visit that country. She also loves to dance. She can see a dance step demonstrated and do it perfectly, while I have the gift of dancing of an amoeba. Guess which one she picked. Dancing! So we took lessons. I wound up teaching my daughters how to swing dance, and we had more fun than we should have been permitted to have. Since then, I took my son to Japan and my daughters to Paris. In the last year, I have had fun learning to use an iPod, getting on Facebook, learning how to cook Japanese Miso soup with my daughter-in-law, going indoor rock-climbing with our son, and getting into an in-depth study of the Battle of Britain because, of all things, that is what my mother was into. I do not intend to live in Groundhog Day ever again. Behold, I am doing a new thing, says the Lord. It is likely that you are living in your own Groundhog Day. It is easy for us, personally, and for our churches to live in Groundhog Day, mindlessly repeating last year’s activities and behaviors over and over again. Yet, Jesus Christ has an incredibly powerful vision for you personally and for your congregation. I am doing a new thing in you. Don’t you see it? What thing? A new thing in you, a new thing among you and a new thing through you.

God certainly wants to do a new thing in you – your personal life. It is easy to allow your relationship with God to grow rather stale and ho hum when God longs to draw you close. Many years ago, when I was a student at Georgia Tech, Harry Fifield of the First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta preached one of the greatest sermons I have ever heard. He told the story of Jesus walking along with a huge crowd surging around him and his disciples. The throng pushed, shoved, and bumped as they crowded around Jesus, trying to hear him, touch him, and get a glimpse of him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years....she thought, ‘If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.’ Immediately her bleeding stopped....Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He...asked, ‘Who touched me?’ They said, ‘What do you mean who touched you Jesus. This crowd is pushing and shoving us. You have to be kidding!’Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet.... ‘Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.’” Mark 5:25-34

Our Lord did a new thing in her life, and he will do new things in your life. Then Harry Fifield asked a life-changing question, “Are you crowding Jesus or touching him?” In other words, are you in the crowd on Sunday just bumping into people with smiles and hi’s and or are you connecting with Jesus? It is easy to enjoy the music, the sermon, the prayers, the beautiful sanctuary, and I hope you do. At the same time, Jesus wants you to move beyond crowding around him to touching him, to permit the joy and wonder of worship to move you to deeper relationship with him. He wants to do a new thing in you. As the Scripture says, Any person is a new creation in Christ. Touch Jesus by faith and expect our Lord to do a new thing in you.

God intends to do a new thing in you and a new thing among you. Last Thursday the phone rang and the voice said, “This is Cullen Story.” I was stunned. Cullen Story was my Greek professor a long time ago. Though we have exchanged letters, I hadn’t talked to him in thirty years. I was so surprised. I didn’t say anything, until he said, “Do you know who I am?” I said, “Yes, you are one of the heroes of my life.” He was one of the two or three most life-changing professors I have ever had. He is 92 and suffering from a broken hip. He wanted to know if I would like a copy of a study on the Gospel of Mark he has written. Wow! I remember vividly a Greek New Testament word Cullen used to talk about, the word makrothumia.

The makros part of makrothumia means “long” and the thumia part means temper. So makrothumia is literally a long temper – the exact opposite of a short temper. I was driving down a highway with a pickup truck in front of me when another pickup truck merged onto the highway and tried to occupy the same space as that occupied by the first pickup truck. The two trucks were side by side, each half in and half out of the lane. I could see the drivers lower their windows and offer various gestures of affection to one

another. I decided to hit my brakes. That was not makrothumia! Makrothumia is often translated patience or long-suffering in our English Bible. I think it is more useful to say that makrothumia is the God-given “grace of getting along.”

In our society today, we tend not to practice “long temper.” Instead we often react quickly, sometimes explosively, when we don’t like someone or something that is going on. We express ourselves to our buddies and to anyone who will listen in private and public settings. The grace of getting along is the quality of God-inspired self-restraint in the face of provocation that treats people with love, dignity, and respect. The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love (Psalm 145:8). The grace of getting along will always cost you something, because grace is always expensive to the grace-giver. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ cost him his life, yet in the most profound way, his death and resurrection opened the door to the practice of genuine mutual forgiveness, reconciliation, and the grace of getting along that brings joy to our life together.

Our God is doing something new in you, something new among you and something new through you. It’s easy to become so enmeshed in the matters of your own life and in what’s going on in your church life that you lose sight of our God’s basic mission, which is outward, into all the world. All of this really has to do with vision. I love the John Maxwell story of his three-year-old son. He says, “My three-year-old son and I had been through the regular nightly routine: story, prayer, hugs. Then as my hand slid down the light switch, [I heard] ‘I want a gink.’ He can’t say ‘drink’ and I thought it was kinda’ cute, ‘gink’. But, I was firm. ‘You just had a drink when you brushed your teeth. Now it’s time to go to sleep.’ I began to sort through the mail when I heard ‘I want a gink!’ down the hall. ‘No water! Go to sleep.’ Quietness reigned for at least 60 seconds. ‘Daddy, I want a gink.’ ‘Be quiet.’ ‘I want a gink.’ I knew how Moses felt in the wilderness” said John Maxwell, “with a million Jews all crying, ‘We want a gink.’ I yelled, ‘If I hear you ask for a gink one more time, if I hear one sound from you, I’m going to come up there and spank you and I’m not kidding. Now be quiet and go to sleep!’ It was as quiet as a tomb, not a sound. You could have heard a pin drop. Then, in the still small voice of a child smelling victory, ‘Daddy, when you come to spank me could you bring me a gink of water?’”¹ That kid had vision. That kid trusted the father to whom he looked for help. Be open to the new vision, the new thing that our God wants to accomplish through you. The National Presbyterian Church is a church positioned to make a huge difference in the lives of an immense number of people in this city and far beyond it. As God said through Isaiah, “Won’t you be aware of it?”

God wants to do a new thing in you, a new thing among you and a new thing through you. In every case, it is God who is doing the doing. He said, “I” am doing a new thing. It involves us, but it is not about us. It is about the God who moves among us. Our role is to trust in God and cooperate with the new things God is doing. I imagine that you are like me, enjoying the Olympics every night. One of the great memories of this Olympics will be the finish of the 4x100 freestyle swimming relay. Our anchorman, Jason Lezak, was losing by a length behind the French champion, Alain Bernard, as they approached the wall. Jason said later, “I’m not going to lie. When I flipped at the wall I thought, ‘There’s no way.’ Then, in the next instant, I was like ‘No, this is the Olympics. I’m not giving up.’”² Swimming next to a champion clearly motivated him, and he drove past Bernard for the gold.

It reminds me of an incredible contest in Los Angeles many years ago, a mile-long foot race with some of the fastest sprinters in the world. John Landy had come to town as one of the very few sub-four-minute milers. A huge crowd came out to the Los Angeles Coliseum to see him run. Running against him was Jim Bailey, an unknown sprinter from Oregon University. Landy took off at a very fast pace; his first three-quarters time was only 3:01.5. He was on the way to run the mile under four minutes. Back in third spot was Jim Bailey, about ten yards behind. All of a sudden Bailey got an idea: “Maybe I can push John to a new world’s record.” He began to reach out, pumping his legs as he never had before; he closed the gap on Landy and as they hit the backstretch, he was only about five yards behind. Then he got another idea: “Maybe I can tie John Landy!” Blazing down the backstretch, he caught him, and in the middle of the curve, with about 100 yards left to go, another idea hit him: “Maybe I can beat John Landy.” Running with muscle and mental faith that he never had before, Bailey moved out and went by Landy, drove into the tape to win in the greatest performance of his life – 3:58.6 – and experts believe that he could have run 3:56 if he had only thought about it earlier. But the fantastic thing about this story is that until this time, Jim Bailey hadn’t run a mile in under 4:05.6; he just couldn’t seem to get below that.³ So why did he run so much faster? It’s simple. He was running with a champion, and that champion motivated him to dig

deeper, reach further, and have a greater vision for what he could accomplish than he had ever had before.

You and I are also running with a champion. His name is Jesus Christ. He runs with you and in you. You become aware of his wonderful spirit, the length of his stride, the wonder of his voice in your heart. Square your shoulders. Lengthen your stride, touch Jesus, practice the grace of getting along, have great vision. Our Lord's heart's desire is to lift your heart. He is already doing a new thing in you and among you and through you. Won't you be aware of it?

Footnotes:

1. *Dynamic Preaching* (Seven Worlds, Vol. XIV, No. 3) p.40.
2. www.nydailynews.com/sports/2008olympics/2008/08/11/2008-08-11_jason_lezaks_incredible_finish_helps_us_.html
3. Bob Richards *The Heart of a Champion*, Spire Books, 1959.