

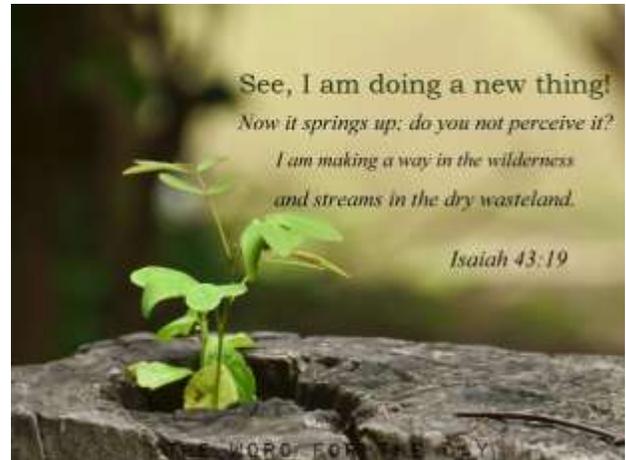
June 28, 2010
Fifteenth Sunday of Online Worship

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Matthew 9:16-17
Isaiah 43:16-21

A reading from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 43:

*Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty water
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 deserts.
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.*



The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

We keep talking about “going back”--- back to school, back to work, back to the life the way life used to be, the life we knew it before COVID. Each time I hear the question, “When?” I answer in my mind, “Soon, I hope it’s soon!” I’m an extravert; social life is the air I breathe. I hope it’s soon. But lately I wonder... is there any going back to the way things used to be?

A friend called last week ecstatic with the news that her husband’s company has made working from home permanent; it’s worked out so well that they’re closing the office. This not only means my friend will see more of her husband (no more commuting!), but the family is now free to live anywhere they choose -- something they’ve been wanting for a long time. I feel for him. I have found working from home to be much harder than I thought it would be, but his family is happy. “Is his job secure?” I asked gingerly. “I think so,” she said. “The one thing I say for certain is that they’re not going back to the way things used to be.”

I don't think we can go back. Oh we can move back into the office and the classroom. We have and we will. But my friend is right; we're not going back to the way things used to be. We've been disrupted, interrupted and changed. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Maybe you remember your happiest interruption -- that moment when you looked into the eyes of another person and realized -- you were in love. Whether that disruption was gradual or sudden, either way, you knew -- the ground beneath you had shifted -- there was no going back. Your old life is gone; everything changed.

Disruption, interruption...that's how COVID-19 hit us -- like a Cat 5 hurricane. It's uprooted the way we worship and work, and devastated the things we thought were solid, invincible. For example, could you have imagined in a million years that Woods would celebrate Holy Week and Easter without a single in-person service? Ordinarily this place would have been packed with people for 10 services in 4 holy days, in addition to the livestream. This year was beautiful, but so very different. Father's Day was different too. I've been around long enough to have seen more than a few major disruptions -- from disease to natural disasters, political upheaval, even revolution. The one thing that is consistently part of every situation, the one constant is change. Disruption changes us; it alters us at our core.

A cancer survivor spoke of disruption when she said:

“For all that cancer took away from me, it gave me something extraordinary. Cancer gave me a new perspective on life. Cancer gave me the opportunity to live my life in the moment, with intention.”ⁱ

Another wrote:

“If you survive ... [cancer] could be the best thing that happened to you because suddenly you are empowered...you have strength now; because you realize that your life has margins... [life] is to be valued and not wasted.”ⁱⁱ

Disruption can destroy us, but if we survive, it can also change us for the better. Crisis is opportunity, the Chinese say. The prophet Isaiah knew this. His congregation had experienced the ultimate disruption. In 587BC Babylon invaded Judah, a strong and hostile power. Their cities were destroyed, their temple reduced to rubble and most of their leaders deported or killed.

When Isaiah spoke the words I just read, more than forty years had passed. He's talking to the people going back. And no one, absolutely no one, believed they were going back to the way things used to be. Israel's normal was what led them into exile in the first place.

Isaiah and the other prophets described systemic injustice: ill treatment of the poor and foreigners, the growing income gap, failure to protect the vulnerable religious practice that served their own interests and ignored God.

Judah was fractious and divided. Their worship was lame -- sporadic, insincere and self-involved. In a word they had forgotten the covenant they made with God.ⁱⁱⁱ God's judgement of their sin was swift and severe. Forty nine years is a long time to wait for redemption. But now, as

Isaiah speaks to them, they are going back. Picking up where they left off wasn't an option. It wouldn't make sense to return to the same life that landed them in exile in the first place.

No. God never lets us look back for very long. Or to put it another way: there's a reason why windshields are a lot bigger than rear view mirrors. We are supposed to look forward, not back. Listen to Isaiah speaking for God:

*Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing [says the Lord]
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.*

In the Bible the wilderness has a dual meaning. It is both the literal place – a punishing land that the exiles had to cross, and a metaphorical state of being in between a period of reflection, self-examination, and repentance.

The wilderness is often the Bible's metaphor for disruption, the difficulties we face...lessons learned the hard way, and times of grief, trouble, or isolation. Kind of like where we are now... in the wilderness.

This is no camping trip we're on; the wilderness is rough, once you're in it, you know that your job is not to pretend it isn't there but to get through it as safely and quickly as possible. The wilderness is a frightful place.

But there's good news too. God is there, in the wilderness. God is especially present in our wilderness moments, like the one Jacob described last Sunday when Hagar and Ishmael were cast out into the desert. Hagar prays to the God who Sees, and God helps her see – a wellspring of hope.

Isaiah is similarly clear on this point. God is going to make a way for us through our wilderness by personally leading us in our going back. When? I don't know.

Just like the Israelites in Babylon our waiting seems to drag on forever. We are tired of isolation – at least I am. I am proud of Woods and Maryland. We have followed the leadership of the church and the orders of our governor and our county executive. We have worshiped online, worn our masks and stayed home. For many of us this has been really hard, a huge disruption – but our efforts are paying off. We are coming home. I don't know when. It will depend on you and me and what we are willing to do together.

Many of you know that Woods has a Reopening Task Force made up of elders, staff, and medical professionals working prayerfully, diligently to create a reentry plan. We are reimagining church life, for everyone from our small children to our seniors: in worship, education, staff, the Child Development Center, property, community, and care. We are creating a path through this wilderness, a path we will follow until such time as a vaccine or effective

treatment for COVID is available. Although I'll be on sabbatical for the next 6 weeks, I'll be staying in close contact with the Task Force. Our goal is to make in-person worship and other ministries available as safely and as soon as possible. The Woods situation is more complex than most churches because of we are a church blessed with a broad diversity of ages. We have many families with little children and many seniors – thanks be to God! We also have a large church program and a campus we share liberally with the community. All this makes for a great impact. We are thankful for our place in this community, and we must be responsible for protecting community health.

When we do return I'm certain we're going to have a renewed appreciation and love for one another. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Yes, it does. I for one will never again take the freedom to worship for granted nor our ability to gather in this space, to sing and praise. When we return I want to see our choirs double to twice their size when we can sing together again, and our Sunday school and youth groups explode with enthusiasm. I want love to pour out of every door – love for God, love for our community, love for each other. I know it's not going to be smooth sailing. Like the Hebrew people we'll struggle and chafe and learn.

My sabbatical is a time for very intentional prayer and discernment, and I'm asking you to pray for me, and all our church leaders...support Pastor Jacob and Pastor Nancy and for all our church leaders. If you are able to return to in-person worship or any other part of church while I'm away, I'll celebrate that. Do it both enthusiastically and carefully. Put others first.

Jesus' word to us about the need to make new wineskins is important. We must keep our eyes and our hearts open to the new thing that God is doing among us. Like my friend's husband's company, we're not going back to the way things were. We can't. There is no way God is going to let us come out of this unchanged. By God's grace we've hit a tipping point. Life's been changed, disassembled, rearranged. It's pointless to look back. We're going forward! When we will arrive I can't say. Now is the time for the critical work, discernment, and prayer.

A man came home one day to find that his wife had hung a plaque on the wall which read, "Prayer changes things." Within 24 hours the plaque was gone. "What's wrong?" She asked. "Don't you like prayer?" He said, "Sure, I like prayer. I just don't like change."

Most people feel that way. But change is not optional, particularly now. Neither the Church of Jesus Christ nor the nation or this world is where we ought to be; they are not where God is calling us to be. We have some growing to do. This in between time, our wilderness days, will hone us, as disruption always does.

Do you remember that scene in the gospels when Jesus came into the Temple in Jerusalem and turned over the money changers' tables? He disrupted the status quo. He did that over and over again in different ways. That's what's happening to us now...Holy disruption.

We have a choice. We can respond in anger and fear, or respond in hope. We can pray, dig down deep in prayer and ask God to show us where we are part of the problem, where we, individually and as a world community, need to be re-formed and re-shaped in faithfulness.

I want to ask...what needs to be disrupted, flipped over, and cleared out in me? What is it about the way I live that's getting in the way of others becoming all that they can be? Are there parts of my life that I'm making inaccessible to God's healing hand? Is there pride...or impatience...or fear in me that I am refusing to allow God to control? How about you?

Let me be clear. This threefold epidemic we are facing is not God's will for us. God's heart is breaking as millions suffer, particularly as this ravages our most vulnerable. It is not God's will that we suffer. It is God's will that we repent – of the divisions among us. Division is a greater plague than any disease. There are deep divisions in our country, festering wounds that cripple the whole body unless we unite, and soon. God's will is that we search our souls, and commit ourselves to discovering our own part in the work of healing.

We are not going back to the way things used to be, and we certainly cannot stay where we are. The road ahead passes through the wilderness and leads to our redemption. Listen to God's prophet:

*I am about to do a new thing [says the Lord] ...
I will make a way in the wilderness...
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.*

ⁱ Center for Disease Control “Cancer Survival Stories” <https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivors/stories/index.htm>

ⁱⁱ Hoda Kotb “Transform and Transcend” Cancer Connect <https://news.cancerconnect.com/survivorship/hoda-kotb-transform-and-transcend-Hpv1vgjtL0qvQ-OkCOW4ig>

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 58:1-14