

Isaiah 43:16-23
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“The ‘Do A New Thing God’”

Rev. William Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

This past week saw the coming and going of April Fool’s Day. Raise your hand quickly if anybody got you? Oh I wish we had time to share those stories.

I did not directly encounter or participate in any April Fools shenanigans. I did, however, discover this celebration of jokes and hoaxes is not just a North American tradition, Wikipedia tracks the tradition of April Fools back into the middle ages in parts of Europe. No surprise it has worldwide appeal.

Today, we hear Isaiah addressing his people; he is telling them that after 70 years of Babylonian exile, God is Doing a New Thing! But after 7 decades in exile Isaiah’s announcement sounds mostly like another April Fool’s Day joke.

The promise of God’s new thing can be difficult for us to accept. We move through our relatively routine lives and don’t see much changing. If God is doing a new thing, why does my life stay pretty much the same? Why do I have the same challenges, same problems, same worries? And on a larger scale, why don’t we sense the arc of the moral universe bending toward Justice. All I see these days are hastags. #NotOneMore #LoveWins #WomensMarch #Health4All #Metoo #EqualPay and on and on. How could those change anything?

Isaiah is announcing with full confidence that his people’s long exile is coming to an end and God is paving a pathway back home. Isaiah says, “God is doing a new thing.” But over the years Isaiah’s people have started to sense that life in Babylon isn’t so bad.” Several generations had been raised there and life has fallen into a relatively comfortable routine. Why would we go back now? Sure, there were a few restrictions, but this exile was not about tireless slave labor. Perhaps worse, this exile had been an attack on the identity of Isaiah and his people, and slowly over the years the Israelites had begun to assimilate to Babylonian ways.

Assimilation for Isaiah’s people had included the loss of core values which had given Isaiah’s people their identity since Abraham. Assimilation meant giving up ancient spiritual symbols and rituals which gave meaning to the people’s faith. Over those decades the Israelites began to look and act and talk and worship more like Babylonians than like Israelites. The real casualties of this exile became the people’s identity and spirit.

Over the last few weeks about 15 adults from Emanuel have been involved in discussions about the Doctrine of Discovery. Pope Alexander VI’s Papal decree in 1493 aimed to justify Christian European explorers’ claims on land and waterways they allegedly “discovered.” This Doctrine has been applied in Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and the Americas. It states that if an explorer proclaims to have ‘discovered’ the land in the name of a Christian European monarch, plants a flag in its soil, and reports his “discovery” to the European rulers, and returns to occupy it, the land is now his, even if someone else was there first. Should the original

occupants insist on claiming that the land is theirs, the “discoverer” can label the occupants’ way of being on the land inadequate according to European standards. As you can imagine the Doctrine has supported massive dehumanization of those living on the land and fueled white and Christian domination as the explorers claimed they were instruments of divine design and possessed cultural superiority.

We were inspired as yesterday delegates to the Wisconsin Conference Meeting voted nearly unanimously to affirm the repudiation of this doctrine and consider ways to begin healing the damage done in its name. In other words, this Doctrine during the middle ages, spawned a sort of captivity, with very similar circumstances to the Babylonian captivity. And we can see the disastrous and unjust results today as tribes and nations have lost or nearly lost their native languages, and their culture has become assimilated in abusive ways through the mascots of some sports teams and so on.

Isaiah came to his people to say: God is doing a new thing! And Isaiah comes to us today, in a world of troubles and challenges and inequality and says, “God is doing a new thing.” Diana Butler Bass; author, speaker, and independent scholar who specializes in American religion and culture observes, “At the same moment when massive global institutions seem to rule the world, (*people can find hope*) in an equally strong counter-movement among regular people to claim personal agency in our own lives. We grow food in our backyards. We brew beer. We weave cloth and knit blankets. We shop and dine locally. We create our own playlists. We tailor delivery of news and entertainment.

Around the world God says, “I am doing a new thing.” But we know this new thing isn’t going to be easy. It isn’t going to happen fast. It is going to take work. It will be uncomfortable. But, under these hashtags and other movements toward Justice, people are gathering in groups of hundreds, and thousands, and millions because they want to be a part of the transformation. This gives me a lot of hope for how people might treat each other, and how our institutions might be transformed 70 years from now!

The ancient people had some good reasons to trust Isaiah’s promise, but they had innumerable reasons to trust God’s track record. The do a new thing God had already rescued their ancestors who were slaves in Egypt by dividing the waters. The do a new thing God could raise dry bones to new life. The do a new thing God delivered Noah’s Full ark through the flood. The do a new thing God, time and time again, built pathways to new life.

The Doctrine of Discovery discussions have spawned a lot of inspiration and some good learning by those participating.

I’ll share a short personal Lenten reflection with you. Our group has discussed offensive phrases like, “let’s go ‘pow wow’ for a second.” I’ve said that before, but a few years ago I became aware how diminishing it is to say this when I consider the real meaning of a pow wow. A modern pow wow is an event for Native Tribes and Nations to meet and dance, sing,

socialize, and honor their cultures. So, when my friends and I are trying to choose a movie we all are willing to see, we are NOT having a pow wow.

The Do a New Thing God is at work in numerous ways. God is doing a new thing in people who attend Bible Study, help with our meal program ministries, involve the children in worship, serve monthly dinners, sing in choir, play bells, on and on through the ministries Christ call's us to offer. God is doing a new thing at Emanuel. I might even suggest a good tool for evaluating our ministries is if we sense lives being transformed by the God who is doing a new thing.

What movement do you want to join, or start? What would your Hashtag say? What little part of the world do you want to help make more into the image of God? Mahatma Ghandi once said, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Dear God

We pray for you to help us, strengthen us, and teach us, that our lives are meant to continually and increasingly give praise to you, and that we are meant to experience the transforming love of the new thing you are doing in us, and through us in our world.

Amen