

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Sunday, 7 April 2019

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Isaiah 43:16-21

Christian Scripture Reading: Philippians 3:4b-14

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

“Something Old and Something New”



I’m not sure if anyone of you thought it sounded familiar, but Lynn, Anne and Lisa and I drew our stewardship campaign motto from this morning’s Hebrew scripture reading. Remember? “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19). I love this scripture. It explodes optimism and excitement.

In our Christian scripture reading, Paul deeply desires to feel this ‘new thing’ that he knows can spring forth in him.



Paul concludes, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming

like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10).



As we approach the conclusion of Lent and anticipate Easter, I want to feel and sense something new and different, something inspiring and wonderful. I want a closer relationship with God and I want that spirit to be infectious. I want the story of Christ’s resurrection to engender our own resurrections. And I want everyone in the Brattleboro area to encounter our spirits and say, “I want what they have!”

Yet, I also want to be realistic. I don’t want to be ‘Pollyannaish’. I don’t want to be ‘pie in the sky’. I don’t want to exude a disingenuous excitement. I want our renewal on Easter to be realized, not simply hoped for.

Both our scriptures readings give us the key to realizing ‘the new thing’ God will do in our lives.



Both our readings, immediately before speaking about renewal, advise us to ‘let go’ of something. Before the “Behold, I am doing new things” of Isaiah chapter 43, verse 19, verse 18 states, “Forget the former things; *do not dwell on the past*”.



Before Paul expressed his desire to know Christ and the power of the resurrection in Philippians 3, verse 10, Paul said that which he needed to lose he considered rubbish (notice, Paul did not say ‘trash’?). And this only makes sense.



In order to accept something with open arms, we need to let go of that which burdens us.



For those in exile in Babylon, in order to enjoy something new they needed to lose their shame. You see Isaiah spoke to a people who were humiliated, who were enslaved, and who were taken to a foreign land. They understood that God abandoned them because of their sin. But more than that, they understood that God *caused* and *orchestrated* their sufferings. So, God said to them through the prophet Isaiah, “forget the former things, do not dwell in the past (Isaiah 43:18).



For Paul, it was not shame, but the opposite. It was pride that had to be relinquished. Paul was so proud of his race; Paul was so proud of his family; Paul was so proud of his education; Paul was so

proud of his profession; Paul was so proud of his success; Paul was so proud of his status. Paul was so full of pride, that there was no room left for appreciation, or dependence, or even love for God.

Friends in Christ, what must we leave behind this Lent as we approach Easter? We cannot experience the new thing that God will do for us if we as individuals or if we as a church are holding-on to and carrying ‘rubbish’. What is it we need to let go of?



Speaking personally, if I want God to do a new thing in me, I need to rid myself of resentment. I saw a Dilbert cartoon last week that read: “I died on the inside years ago. Now I am just a fleshy container full of coffee and resentment”. Resentment is something that consumes us; it steals new life and possibilities from us by pouring time and energy into a dead past.



Carrie Fisher once said that “resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die”. Some of you, like me, may need to get rid of resentment.



Others here perhaps need to dispose of jealousy. Jealousy achieves nothing. It really doesn't. “Blowing out someone else's candle doesn't make yours shine any brighter”. Jealousy is massively counter-productive, for it robs us of enjoying that which we have. We may have more of it than others, but we are blind to it, for we only seethe about that which we do not have. And we achieve nothing but our own misery. “Jealousy is a form of hatred based on insecurity.”



Some of us need to get rid of negativity. I once read a small plaque on a park bench that read: “In Memory of Roger Bucklesby, who

hated this park and everyone in it.” If we are full of negative, there is no room for positive. Negative people will always find fault with something. And it seems that their identity is dependent upon identifying why things cannot be done. Blessed are those who find reasons to do and to accomplish things. I actually believe one is no more accurate than the other. Negative people often have great points, just as positive people do. But over time, one accomplishes everything and the other accomplishes nothing and even detracts from those doing something. Being positive doesn’t mean ignoring the negative. Being positive means overcoming the negative. There’s a big difference between the two!



For new life to spring forth in us, we often need to get rid of shame as did the Hebrews in exile, or pride as did Paul, or resentment as I need to. Or, perhaps we need to release ourselves from jealousy or negativity. And there is no doubt a laundry list of other life-stifling attitudes that we must forfeit in order to have open hearts, open

minds and open arms to new and beautiful and life-affirming possibilities.



At this table, we symbolically take the bread and the wine and we consume it. It is the broken body; it is the shed blood. By eating this bread and drinking this wine, we are declaring the death of ourselves and our openness to a new life, reunited with God, in-tune with God. At this table we die to self and thus live for God. Is this not the story of Jesus' death and resurrection? Is this not the story of Lent as we lead to Easter? This is the season to discard that which hinders us from living life to the fullest and in accordance with God's will.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded. "Amen".