

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Isaiah 43:16-21

^{43:16} Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ 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 desert. ²⁰ 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, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Commentary

There is no doubt that the oracle speaks of God's determination to end the exile of the people in Babylon and to liberate them from Captivity to return to Canaan. The means by which God would accomplish this is the growing superpower of Persia, led by Cyrus the Great, who is even called God's "anointed." The "former things" are God's acts in the Exodus. The prophet specifically recalled the actions of these "former things" so as to paint a picture of the "new thing" that God would do. This return is described using the original Exodus from Egypt as a precedent. With these memorable words, the prophet pointed to the certainty of God's imminent action in history. It would be like the Exodus, but with so much grander and more wonderful that the Exodus would be eclipsed in their memory.

Reflection

1. What "new" thing do you expect God to do in your life?
2. Does God use agents outside the faith community (like Cyrus) to accomplish the divine purpose in history, even without their knowledge or assent? Other than Cyrus, what other instances of this can you cite?

Philippians 3:4b-14

^{3:4b} If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Commentary

This letter is first of all a “thank you note” for a gift sent by them to sustain Paul in his imprisonment. Paul’s main concern, however, was to give church guidance in resolving some internal squabbles. Paul offers the example of his life as part of the remedy for the causes of division and disharmony. Paul listed the credentials that gave him status in Jewish circles that he had previously used as a basis for self-confidence and for his claim on God’s favor. These are also the distinguishing marks that created division, separating Torah-observant Jews from Gentiles and others who might be regarded as “sinners.” It was an egotistical confidence, since at its peak it brought Paul into conflict with God’s vision for humanity. Paul realized that what he had been doing in God’s name was actually contrary to God’s purpose revealed on the cross. Paul eventually cast aside those claims and achievements (successes and shortcomings alike) as weights and impediments in this race towards Jesus’ full embrace. This is his growing “maturity” in Christ. Those who adopt this mindset no longer need to build themselves up (too often by tearing others down) and need not use their deeds of service as a claim of recognition and influence in the church. Instead, we take on a shared vision, one that calls each into relationship with the One who gave himself for others and sought only God’s approval.

Reflection

1. On what do you ground your self-esteem?
2. What old attitudes continue to plague your relationships and witness? How can these be changed?

John 12:1-8

^{12:1} Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Commentary

John's story shows Lazarus giving a dinner party for Jesus upon His return to the region of Jerusalem. Lazarus, who is the one who was recently raised from the dead, sits next to the one that is about to lay down His life for the whole world. Mary's act of devotion was indeed extravagant, since the perfumed anointment was valued at a year's salary at something like minimum wage. It was actually Jesus, not Mary, who related the anointing to His forthcoming passion. Mary might also have understood this as she selected this particular venue for displaying her gratitude, all the more as she appears in Luke to have had "ears to hear" what Jesus taught (see Luke 10:39). The fact that the people were aware of the Sanhedrin's determination to remove Jesus makes this a possible motive of Mary and those at the dinner party—to prepare Jesus for his own death and burial.

Reflection

1. When have you been filled with a similar feeling of gratitude? What was your response?
2. When have you tried, like Judas, to restrain another's generosity, possibly from selfish motives?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 126

- ^{126:1} When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
² **Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;**
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
³ **The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.**

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵ **May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.**

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
**shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.**

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**