

“A New Thing”

Isaiah 43:16-20; 44:1-4

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July 6, 2008

Second in a Sermon Series, “A Vision for Ministry”

In Stanley Ott’s book I have been reading recently, Paul Munday describes the experiments of Jean-Henri Fabre. Fabre wanted to see what would happen when he put a number of caterpillars end to end around the rim of a large flowerpot. As the caterpillars crawled around the rim, each with his head nudging the caterpillar in front of him, Fabre thought the caterpillars would tire of it, or at least stop to eat, but they didn’t! Munday explains, “Through force of habit, the living, creeping circle kept its accustomed pattern for seven days and seven nights. Only exhaustion and starvation interrupted the caterpillars’ relentless routine. Fabre had placed an ample amount of food just inches away from the rim of the flowerpot, but the caterpillars, stuck by the same old routine, bound by the beaten path, did not reach out for the obvious source of life¹.”

Such is our creaturely nature. We get in a rut and we cling to the old ways. This has been true for centuries. The Israelites, too, clung to their past; the past was important.

The prophet Isaiah (as prophets tend to do) shakes things up by his words of admonition here, as he addresses the post-exilic Israelites, in the verses we will hear from chapter 43. And then in chapter 44, Isaiah reassures them of God’s promises. Let us together listen for God’s word. . .

This is what the Lord says---he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?”

But now listen, O Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen. This is what the Lord says---he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: “Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.

¹ Story re-told in Stanley Ott’s book, “The Twelve Dynamic Shifts for Transforming Your Congregation”

They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.”

I made a quick trip to Atlanta this past week to gather with the 21 ministers with whom I had traveled to Israel back in late April. It was really more wonderful than I imagined, to be back with this group of people with whom I had shared such a special journey. Besides the joy of seeing one another, one of the things we were all struck with, was how much had changed for us in just seven weeks since we went on our trip. Beth had moved to Nashville. She reported she was “living out of her car”. Mary Lou came back from the trip only to find out she’d been re-assigned to be head pastor at a large church. Nancy’s job had ended. Ron (only 52) was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Matt’s church was about to begin the process to call an associate pastor; Harry buried his mother-in-law. Sarah was in the middle of several new hires. I could go on, but you get the picture. There is nothing that characterizes ongoing life so much as does change.

But there was one change that really stuck in my mind. Jess, by far the youngest member of our group at age 32, told us of her decision to resign as associate pastor in order to follow her husband to Wisconsin, where he had secured a promising professional position. She was excited, not apprehensive. She doesn’t know exactly what she’s going to do there, but she’s pretty sure of one thing, she said. “I have decided I will no longer continue to perpetuate the 20th century church”.

Here is a young woman, steeped in the church, ordained in the Presbyterian Church seven years ago, committed to ministry, but clearly seeing a new and different vision of what ministry should look like in the 21st century. And for her, it doesn’t look like the way we do church.

I have to admit it was a little unnerving to hear her say that, but I think it was important---even timely---that I did.

It is almost impossible for us to fathom how much society has changed since the mid-twentieth century, which many think of as the heyday of the mainline church (at least in numbers, it was). Just look around at our Lake Highlands neighborhoods. You can see how many church buildings were built in the 1950’s and 60’s, including our own.

But we are no longer in the 1950’s and 60’s. Patterns of living, working, family structure, communications, travel, technology, mobility, even the definition of what community is---are almost unrecognizable from the years of *Ozzie and Harriet*. From the time of *Leave It to Beaver*. Life has changed drastically; the church has not. Many of the programs

and policies operating in mainline churches today are almost identical to those of 50 years ago.

Those of you, who can remember the church of 50 years ago, stop and think for a minute. Can you think of things we continue to do that were done in the 1950's and 60's? And then, the more important question. Do these things, these programs and policies, continue to spread the gospel, attract new disciples to Christ, and grow members in their own faith and works? That is the key question.

Every other area of life has changed to accommodate to new patterns, except for the traditional church. And we wonder why we have few young people participating in worship and programs. We should stop wondering, because the answer is pretty clear. We have been going around and around in circles, doing the same old thing, nudging the caterpillar right in front of us, sometimes unable to see great opportunities right outside our peripheral vision.

Last Sunday afternoon as I was going through the *Dallas Morning News*, a headline in the Business section caught my eye. Normally the Business section is a bit of a snoozer for me and I don't read it. This particular headline said, "Expand your marketing from boomers to Gen Y". Now I honestly don't like to think about marketing the church, but it is important for us to think together about what is going on with the sharp decline in young people in the mainline church.

Gen Y people are those born after 1985. That's my kids' age and younger. And the predictions are this group of people will grow to 100 million within the next two years. The numbers alone got my attention. So I read on. And as I read on, I began to substitute the word "church" for the word "marketing" and the article really began to speak to me.

Here's what it had to say about this generation:

"They connect with environmentalism, sustainability, the community, social responsibility, (including humanitarian issues), and the Internet. . . Gen Y's concerns are geared toward obtaining tangible results, such as "How do we make the community a better place, the environment safer, what do we do to translate into people getting more food?"

I don't know about you, but to me, except for the part about the Internet, these things sound like things Jesus would have us do! Caring for our world, building community, feeding the hungry.

Here's where I made that word substitution:

For this generation, the rules of **church** will be changing. This generation wants to develop solutions and change (and is) all too often disrespected by **the church** as quirky and atypical, too young to know anything.

So what do we do? Here's what the article recommends:

1. Bring in a Gen Y to mentor you (In other words, ask young people to tell us what they are missing, and to seriously listen to what they have to say.)
2. Tell humanitarian stories that reflect the sum and substance of what (the gospel) is about.
3. Use social media spaces and environments they enjoy, like YouTube, blogs, mobile messaging, e-communications.² (Fortunately, because I have Gen Y people living with me, I at least know what these things are!)

The challenge of a new thing is daunting. It is hard to change. We like the comfortable structures of our past. All of us do. We grow accustomed to the familiar. We find it threatening to think that there might need to be a disconnect from previous ways of doing things.

The gospel of Jesus Christ and the transformation that results in changed lives are what we are to be about. We have a tremendous opportunity to create new ways of being church, if only we can look outside the rim of our usual routines.

Jesus did not give us a guidebook. Nowhere in the Bible does it define or describe church for the 21st century. Jesus did not specify how we are to go and make disciples. We just are. With God's help, it is up to us to figure out what works. What worked in 1950 may not work today, and so we are called to forget the former things and to open our eyes for the new thing God is doing.

Do we expect God to do anything new? Do we believe that the God who acted in Jesus Christ is the same Creator and Holy One who continues to act in our lives here and now? Do we believe? Or have we become purely secular people, like the rest of our society, who say, "sure, I believe in God, but I don't think he does anything new"?

We are standing at a threshold. For the sake of the gospel, for the continuation of God's church, for the love of God, let's do something new.

² Dallas Morning News, Sunday 6/29/08, Mildred L. Culp, Workwise, "Expand your marketing from boomers to Gen Y"