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Isaiah 43:16-21

### SAME THEME, NEW STORY

There are some stories we know by heart. Maybe you have a favorite movie you've watched so many times, you've memorized most of the dialogue. Or a book you've read so many times the cover is cracked and the pages are falling out. Some stories are so appealing to us we can watch or read them again and again. We return to these stories because somehow they speak to us, touch us, inspire us, comfort us, amuse us, lift our spirits, offer us hope.

The prophet Isaiah tells such a story to the Jewish people during a particularly distressing time in their lives. The Babylonian army had conquered the Jewish people and forced most of them to live in exile far from their homeland. And the people were overcome with sorrow and despair. It was a dark and distressing time for the Jewish people.

In the book of Isaiah, God addresses these people with a story—not just any story but the most central story to their faith. God rehearses the story of the Exodus, the time long ago when the Jewish people's ancestors had been enslaved in Egypt, and how, through Moses, God freed them from their captivity. God reminds the people of how back then, God made a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters—you may recall that happened with the parting of the Red Sea, so Moses and the people could safely pass through the sea in their escape from the Egyptian. And when God states how God “brought out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick,” God is recalling how the Egyptian army, with their horses and chariots who were pursuing the Jewish people, got stuck in the mud and how the waters of the Red Sea then came crashing down upon them, and thus the Jewish

people were able to escape to freedom. This story was the defining event in their religious and historical lives. It was how they had come to know God, a God who heard their cries of anguish and who answered them by saving them from slavery. It was a story they never wanted to forget. And so they revisited this story over and over again.

In Isaiah's passage today, God also revisits this story. God speaks to these Jewish people who are now generations later than those in the Exodus story, but who also find themselves in new situation of captivity and hardship—this time in Babylon. And God speaks to these desperately unhappy people and re-tells yet again the ancient story of the Exodus and of God's deliverance.

But after telling them this story, God is saying something really strange. God says, “don't remember the things of the past.” “Do not remember the former things,” God says. Do not remember the former things.

This would have shocked them. How do you forget something so crucial and essential as this story? How do you forget the day your child was born or the time when you sat by your parent's bed as they died? Who could forget where they were when 9/11 took place? Some things we just cannot ever forget for they have shaped us in essential, life-changing ways.

So why would God say this? Why would God want them to forget this important story? God tells them to forget because they were so fixed on this story from the past that they could not see the unfolding story God was writing in their lives right then. “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,” God says, but then God adds, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” God is writing a new story for them and their lives. But they are unable to see it because all they can see is the ancient story.

The thing is, the new story God was writing for them was not a complete departure from the past. The new story contained within it the same theme as the old story. It's the old story with a new twist. Listen to what God says to those folks in exile: "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." Can you hear the plot twist? Whereas in the Exodus story, God parts the waters to make a way for the people to pass into the wilderness, this time, in their time of Exile, God will take the dry wilderness, and make it passable for the people to cross through on their way home by offering them life-saving water. Do you see the inversion of the ancient story? God is doing a new thing. God is telling a new story. But the theme is the same. The theme of deliverance, the theme of liberation, is the same. But if the people can only sit in their present captivity in misery and grief with their hearts fixed on the past, they will miss the new story God is writing in their lives. They will miss how God is trying to deliver them from their current captivity.

Captivity is part of our reality as well, for we are all captives to one thing or another. There are those who rise every day to plow their way through another day of job dissatisfaction. There are those who know the barrenness of marriages devoid of joy or kindness. We are all captives to a way of life that revolves around consuming, and spending our energy taking care of our possessions, and then pursuing yet more possessions.

Sometimes our captivity is acute and frightening: a terminal illness, a grief or loss that comes crushing down upon us. Some of us are captive to addictions we can't control and to habits that are destructive. Maybe we are captive to anger over a wrong done to us that we cannot seem to break free from.

When God tells the Jewish people, “do not remember the former things or consider the things of old,” I don’t think God really intends for the people to forget the Exodus story. Of course the past matters. Of course the past matters. That is why God rehearses the ancient story of the Exodus in the first place. Because God knows the past matters. But God wants them to open themselves to the new thing God is doing in their midst, to see how a new story based on the same theme is now being written in their lives.

That’s what we do when we come to church each week. We come and listen to old stories, ancient stories, of God’s goodness and love, of God’s liberating activity. We read from the Old Testament. We read from the New Testament. The stories vary but the theme is the same: a God who loves us enough to deliver us from all that holds us captive. We tell these stories over and over again not so we can dwell in the past but so we can see how God is now active among us in our lives right now, telling a new story based on the same theme.

God is telling a new story right now. And the characters in that story are you and me. In our situations of captivity to brokenness and pain, to sorrow and anger, to selfishness and indifference, to addictions and divorces and losses and disappointments, the God of liberation is writing a new story. Do you not perceive it? Can we not perceive it?

Lent is the season for reflecting upon this ancient theme of our captivity and God’s deliverance. The season is not just about looking to the past but invites us to also consider how God is writing a new story in your life and mine.

The Resurrection which we will celebrate in a couple weeks was God’s writing an astonishing new story based on this ancient theme of captivity and deliverance. The Resurrection was such radically unexpected new story that it caught everyone by surprise. God’s triumph over sin and death. God’s liberating act of love.

But even this story is not locked in the past. On Easter we will come together to rehearse the story of Jesus' resurrection from the grave, but the Resurrection is an on-going story being written in your life and mine each day. "I am about to do a new thing," says God, "do you not perceive it?" God is writing a new story of liberation and deliverance in your life. Do you not perceive it?

And consider this: what if *you* are the new thing God is doing for someone else? You and your life and your gifts become the new story God is writing. What if *you* are the new story God is writing for our community, for our world? Could we let ourselves become protagonists in God's new story of liberation and deliverance?

God's story of liberating love is never locked in the past. It is always a story that is being told and retold in new and surprising ways in our lives and in our world—a story of God's delivering us from bondage, from heartache, from brokenness, from stagnation, from resignation, from alienation. And it is always a story that bears repeating.