

## NEW THINGS

June 14, 2026 -- Isaiah 43: 15-19

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***“Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. 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.”***

***Isaiah 43:19***

In 1847, Dr. Ignatz Semmelweis, an Austrian obstetrician, published a paper showing that when doctors washed their hands before examining or treating patients, the mortality rate for women in his birthing ward at a Vienna hospital was greatly reduced.

In his hospital, doctors had been routinely examining diseased corpses in the mortuary, trying to expand their medical knowledge, and then attending women in childbirth without first washing their hands. In some months, as many as a third of the women in that maternity ward were dying.

Dr. Semmelweis could not explain why hand-washing was effective—he didn't yet know about germs—he just saw that it worked and that patients no longer caught fevers and other diseases.

Sadly, although he cut death rates in his own hospital, his attempts to spread the word failed. People continued to die because hand-washing was not made a routine part of hospital practice.

By 1865, Semmelweis had grown depressed over the rejection of his work and obsessed with the need for doctors to wash their hands. He wrote hundreds of letters—often scathing and insulting—to other doctors and political leaders. He was lured by his wife and another doctor into an insane asylum in Vienna. Realizing it was a trap, Semmelweis tried to get out, but he was restrained, beaten by guards, and placed in a straitjacket. He died two weeks later from the injuries he suffered in that beating.

With Semmelweis gone, his hospital got back to running “properly” again, discarding his “crazy” ideas about hand-washing. Mortality rates increased sixfold, but nobody seemed to notice or care.

A good idea—maybe a great idea—that came just a little too early.

In fact, scientists refer to the “Semmelweis reflex” or “Semmelweis effect” as a metaphor for the reflex-like tendency to reject new evidence or new knowledge because it contradicts established norms. Examples of it are legion.

The fanciful notion that the earth was round was first put forth by Pythagoras in 330 BCE. It took only 1,100 years or so before it was routinely accepted.

The telephone, the radio, aspirin, the automobile, the home computer, the Nautilus weight-training machine, overnight package delivery, and movies with sound were all initially rejected when they were new ideas. This past month, when commencement speakers brought up the subject of artificial intelligence, they were roundly booed by the college graduates to whom they were speaking.

Why do we routinely reject new ideas?

### **WHY WE ESCHEW THE NEW**

Scientists, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other people who study people have a lot of theories about why we resist change—why we run from the new and into the arms of the old and familiar—but I've boiled them down to about six.

#### **1. Insecurity:**

Change scares people. Individuals tend to find security in traditional approaches to life and its situations. One of the major reasons for resistance to change is uncertainty about its impact. The fear of the unknown is a powerful motivator—or, in this case, a demotivator.

#### **2. Lack of proper communication:**

If people don't know why a change is taking place, they may assume the worst. And, as the old saying goes, you have to tell people ten different times in ten different ways, and ten percent still won't get the word.

#### **3. Rapidity and extent of change:**

If the changes are minor and routine, they usually pass by without much impact or resistance. However, if the change is major, look for resistance. A seminary professor of mine warned us in his class that any major change in the church will result in the loss of 5 to 10 percent of the members affected by that change.

#### **4. Group resistance:**

We tend to resist change because our friends resist change. If people we know, like, or admire are refusing to accept something new, it's hard for us to be the outlier. This resistance is commonly seen in union strikes, when some individuals, even if they do not agree with the reasons for the strike, go along with it in order to fully support the group to which they belong.

#### **5. Emotional turmoil:**

One of the major reasons for resistance centers on the emotional turmoil a change may cause, especially if past experiences with change have not been positive. This results in misunderstanding and a lack of trust, so that even when change is well-intended, its significance is misinterpreted, leading to resistance.

#### **6. Loss of power and control:**

If a change is taking place, if something new is happening, and I didn't initiate it, that means someone else has more power and control than I do. And some people simply can't handle it when that knowledge is demonstrated right in front of them.

## HOW TO TELL IF NEWER IS BETTER

No one is saying that new ideas and new experiences should be embraced simply because they are new. But refusing even to explore them or think about them for that same reason is the height of folly—and it is to that height that the Christian church has, unfortunately, often aspired throughout our history.

We burned Giordano Bruno at the stake in 1600 because he supported Copernicus's theory that the earth revolved around the sun. Thirty-three years later, we placed Galileo under house arrest and threatened him with torture until he recanted his support for Copernicus. It was not until 1992 that we finally acknowledged Galileo was right and apologized for overreacting to his teachings.

Fortunately, John Wesley, a child of the Enlightenment, gave us a way to evaluate new ideas, experiences, and practices. Scholars call it the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, a framework that offers four lenses through which we can examine life's experiences and discern their value. They are:

**Scripture** — What light does scripture, especially the teachings of Jesus, shine upon this new thing? How are the love, kindness, gentleness, acceptance, and charity we see reflected in Jesus Christ going to guide my reaction to this new experience?

**Tradition** — What does the historic church, and what do people of faith, wisdom, and goodwill have to say about things such as this? What prayer shall I pray that will guide me in my reactions to new things?

**Reason** — What do my own thinking, reasoning, and reflection tell me about this?

And **Experience** — What has my own experience taught me that might be of value in this reflection?

We've already explored what reason has to say about our reaction to the new things in life. Since time is running short, let us pick Scripture for our second consideration. Our primary scripture lesson for this morning has much to offer on this subject.

Isaiah is in Babylon with the exiles who have been forced to live there under Nebuchadnezzar's rule. They long to return home—back to Israel, to Jerusalem, and to the way things used to be—but Isaiah knows that is impossible. Jerusalem is destroyed. The temple is a pile of rubble. The past is little more than a myth, a fantasy, and longing for it will only, in the long run, lead to ruin—not just of the buildings of Israel, but of the heart of Israel, her people, as well.

He knows that they must turn their heads and begin looking forward. They must accept that the old things are no longer where their salvation is to be found. Listen as he gives them the message that God has given him:

**I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. Thus, says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:**

What is he talking about there? Yes—Egypt and the exodus. He’s reminding them of the things God did in the past. *BUT!* And this is very important, so listen carefully. Here comes a theological curveball...

**Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.**

Forget about that. Let it go. It’s old news, and it’s not going to do you any good moping around and hoping that it will all come back again. It won’t. *BUT...* (Here comes another curveball!)

**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.**

I am about to do a NEW thing. It’s happening right now—don’t you feel it? And then God says, here is what’s going to happen: the impossible. I’m going to make the impossible happen. I’m going to make a road through the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Metaphorically, of course.

You know that wilderness of bewilderment and confusion and chaos that you’ve been wandering around in? Forget it. I’m going to build you a road of meaning and purpose that will take you out of it and plop you right down in the place of faith.

You know that desert of depression and despair and sadness and loneliness that you’ve been crawling through, feeling like you’re dying of thirst? Well, get up and walk, son, because there’s a river of hope, a river of life, a river of *living water* right over the next sand dune, and I put it there just for you.

Do you see? Do you hear the promise? Get ready because our God is a God of new things.

### **NEW BECOMES COMMON**

In 1875, two years after the death of Ignatz Semmelweis, Baron Joseph Lister published a paper in *The Lancet*, explaining Louis Pasteur’s theory of bacteria and how he, Lister, had nearly eradicated infection in his surgery patients by using a mild solution of carbolic acid to disinfect the surgical instruments, the patient’s wound, and the dressings applied to it. He called his new approach “antiseptic technique.”

Surgeons mocked the idea that unseen “germs” could kill a patient. One prominent doctor even waved a bottle of carbolic acid in the air and said, “Do you really expect me to believe that this is going to save lives?”

At the time, surgeons operated in street clothes, reused instruments without washing them, and considered bloodstained aprons a badge of honor. The idea that cleanliness mattered seemed absurd.

But Lister persisted. He cleaned his instruments. He washed his hands. He sprayed carbolic acid in the operating room. And the death rate in his surgeries dropped by more than half.

Twenty-five years later, was the work of the Scottish Dr. Lawson Tait, building on the widely rejected work of Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister, that took us from antiseptic to aseptic technique using boiling water and extreme heat. The same doctors who once laughed at him couldn’t laugh at the evidence, and eventually they adopted his methods. Today, the “new” idea that germs cause disease is so universally accepted that even schoolchildren know how important it is to wash their hands.

Our God is a God of new things. Our God makes roads in the wildernesses of our lives and puts rivers in the deserts of our existence. Our God does the impossible, which lies in only one direction, and that is forward.

If it’s been done in the past, it’s possible. It is only the challenge that lies in the future that seems impossible, and that seemingly impossible future is exactly what God is promising for us on this day.

Somebody, say “Amen.”