

Doing Something New
Isaiah 43:16-21
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Woodbury UMC
April 3, 2022

I have something to share with you that I think is important. I debated on whether I should tell it to you straight, or if I should maybe soft-pedal it a bit, and the fact that I am telling you any of this is a good sign that in the end my decision was to just give it to you straight, the same way it came to me.

This is an observation by author Theodore Sturgeon, who first made this remark circa 1951 at a talk at New York University. The statement was subsequently refined and included in a talk Sturgeon gave at a 1953 Labor Day weekend session of the World Science Fiction Convention in Philadelphia, because Sturgeon is best remembered as a talented science fiction writer.

What came up at that first talk was a challenge to Sturgeon by an interviewer, who noted that Sturgeons gifts as a writer were beyond question, but couldn't understand why he spent his career writing science fiction. When Sturgeon asked him for clarification, the questioner suggested this wasn't a good use of his time, because "90% of it is crap."

Famously, Sturgeon retorted that this didn't bother him, since 90% of everything is crap. The first written reference to the adage is in the September 1957 issue of *Venture*:

And on that hangs Sturgeon's revelation. It came to him that [science fiction] is indeed ninety-percent crap, but that also – Eureka! – ninety-percent of everything is crap. All things – cars, books, cheeses, hairstyles, people, and pins are, to the expert and discerning eye, crap, except for the acceptable tithe which we each happen to like.

I love that bit at the end because it begs the question of who gets to decide what is the superior ten percent. Plus, what pastor doesn't enjoy the occasional mention of a tithe?

In recent years, Sturgeon's law has received more attention, as in 2013, philosopher Daniel Dennett championed it as one of his seven tools for critical thinking¹:

90% of everything is crap. That is true, whether you are talking about physics, chemistry, evolutionary psychology, sociology, medicine – you name it – rock music, country western. 90% of everything is crap.

What's the point? Well, one obvious point is to suggest we be a little bit more discerning in what you put in your body, heart and your

¹ https://www.openculture.com/2013/05/philosopher_daniel_dennett_presents_seven_tools_for_critical_thinking.html

mind, and your spirit, after all, it was just a few weeks ago that this same prophet Isaiah whom we read earlier today asked us the question “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” That is a good point, but not the one I wanted to highlight today. Today I’d like us to consider the seeming harshness or negativity in the statement. Was it always this way? Whatever happened to the good ol’ days, when things seemed a lot simpler, less crappy?

We humans are a nostalgic species. More than that, we religious types are prone to being nostalgic, always pining away for a golden era when things hadn’t degraded to our current degenerate state. I mean, the Bible starts out with nothing, and then the garden of Eden, so nothing to complain about there—and then it all goes downhill, leaving us wishing for a return to a better time. It is a hard question, in part because it is so ingrained into us. Donald Trump got a lot of people considering this question when he began selling those red hats, saying “Make America Great Again” causing many to ask: just which era is it that you want us to recreate? This is a hard question to answer, of course, because when you begin to dig, you shed the rosy recollections. When you get closer, get more specific, you see the things you had forgotten, and they complicate the image you had. It is much less complicated to just let a gauzy light obscure the ugly bits.

There is another adage from the world of science fiction, I couldn’t find who first observed it: If you have a time machine, and you are anything other than a straight white man, you only ever consider moving forward in time, never backward.

What does this have to do with our scripture, our lesson, Lent, anything? This morning we are back in the Old Testament, in an excited, bubbly selection from the prophet Isaiah. We can't really call most prophets bubbly, after all, maybe that's why we like this one. This is a really great chapter, and you would do well to read the whole thing, especially those who are part of the current Bible study. Lots of effort is put into reminding people of the greatness of God, and you do that by giving examples, and they are all from the past, because of course they are. It is fascinating that the prophet, having gone to so much effort to invoke the past, continues in verse 18 with the injunction: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old!" The command is surprising and serves as an effective rhetorical device to get the people's attention, for the prophet is not content to have the people wax nostalgic about the "good old days."

This passage might be summarized as observed by James Newsome: "The Lord is on the verge of doing such a startlingly new thing that models for this impending act of grace are to be found almost nowhere." That puts us in an odd position, of course, reading words thousands of years old imploring us to stop being so focused on the past that we are blind to the present. And yet I am pretty sure that is what we have here.

To be clear, this is supposed to be shocking. For the original Hebrew readers, remembering what God has done is critical, remembering the Exodus is a critical part of their identity — and now

they are told to forego this critical thing?? Not only that, but the language used by the prophet suggests that what is coming is a new Exodus — language of “making a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert,” all Exodus imagery, and yet what is coming will mean a new pivot point in their history, a new central event by which all others are measured. Wow! We are to recall God's greatness, but to focus squarely and fully on the present and the things that are needed NOW, and the God that is living and creating and redeeming and sustaining God's people NOW.

From just last Sunday, in 2 Corinthians, we are told: If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” We are to remember what God has done, remember the Christ that incarnated and lived and died and resurrected — but also that everything old has passed away, that everything is new. We look at the past to gain strength and confidence for the present, but do not make an idol of past glories! Do not make an idol of past glories! Be grateful, be proud, and then get on with it. If you can't manage this, then I urge you to go all in with your nostalgia, up close and personal enough to see the crap that you may have forgotten, because that is motivation for what we have to do now.

For many, our churches glory days have surely past. But when you squint in and see who was included and who was not, you see who had access and authority, and for me that takes a lot of the shine away.

In 1939, a big merger created The Methodist Church from the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church South and Methodist Protestant Church. The Southern church only agreed to union after a compromise created a jurisdiction based exclusively on race — not geography.² Nineteen Black annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church were placed in the Central Jurisdiction and the white conferences were placed in five regional jurisdictions.

Seventeen of the 19 black conferences voted against the 1939 Plan of Union. The Central Jurisdiction persisted until the April 1968 merger that created the current day United Methodist Church.

Methodists also stopped ordaining women in 1939 as part of the political bargain that paved the way for that merger, and didn't start recognizing God-given gifts of women again until 1956. Not for any fault with them, but for political expediency. Point being if you are a woman or a Black person, you'd be hard pressed to consider any of those the good old days.

I agree that this is an interesting bit of church history trivia. I also recognize that this is a white congregation in a white community, and I assure you that in majority Black congregations, this is **far** from trivial. For all of us who were alive in 1968, this means that **church enforced racial segregation is in our own lifetimes**. Rev. Gil Caldwell was a leader in the work for racial equality in the United Methodist Church from its inception, and expressed frustration that the church frequently lags behind society in terms of social progress. “The Supreme Court

² <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/50-years-on-central-jurisdictions-shadow-looms>

ruled in 1954 (Brown v. Board of Education) that ‘separate but equal’ is invalid but our Central Jurisdiction was not officially dissolved until 1968,” he said. “Martin Luther King Jr. raised the question, ‘Why is the church always the tail light rather than the headlight?’”

Ouch. That hurt to type out, and it hurts to say those words out loud.

And throughout all of it, Jesus waits for us to follow him. Not where he WAS, but where he IS, and where he is going. After all, “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?”

My point is simple. Let’s not spend a moment trying to recreate the good old days. After all, lots of it was crud anyway, even if we didn’t think so at the time. Let’s build what the world needs now, right now, without concern to what it needed in decades past. Does that sound absurd? To me, that is a Lenten message for sure — to recognize that all things have their day and then pass into dust, and that in Christ, new life is possible if you want it.

We serve a living God. We serve a savior that came to change the world, was executed by the state, and changed the world anyway. A savior that lives right now, with a message of love and justice and renewal that remains not only vital, but essential. Jesus is still reaching out to his people, extending grace and love that reorients entire lives towards God and guides them into a new life.

The church of Jesus must do no less in his name. May it be so. Amen.