

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
April 7, 2019
Title: The Free Way - Thoroughfare
Scripture: Isaiah 43:16-21
 Philippians 3:13-14
 John 12:1-8

One day this past week, I found myself walking, or rather trying to make my way, through the woods along a path known to students making a shortcut between their middle school and the neighborhood where they live. My granddaughter is excited about possibly using this path as she becomes more independent and may be walking to and from school next year. As far as I was concerned, it was an overgrown wooded path that contained several obstacles.

One was an steep incline that I managed to navigate going uphill toward the school but that I knew was beyond my abilities going down back to the house. We ended up walking back the much longer way along the main road.

The first obstacle for me, however, was a rock that I couldn't figure out how to get over. It almost stopped our exploring before we really even got started. It was suggested however, that rather than trying to go over or around the rock, I should go on the rock – use it as a stepping stone to the other side. Seeing the rock as a stepping stone rather than an obstacle did help.

I thought about this as I read the passage for today from Isaiah. "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." For my granddaughter this new path is exciting, something to look forward to; for

me it appears dangerous and I would rather stay behind than attempt this path again.

For the prophet Isaiah, these were exciting words. They were a reminder of the Exodus about 800 years earlier, when God had sided with the powerless Hebrew people against the strong powerful Egyptian army; when God had sided not with the masters but with the slaves. It was a reminder that God had led them out of slavery in Egypt and when they were pursued by the Egyptian army, and found themselves face to face with a river they couldn't possibly hope to cross, God had opened a path for them. God made a path through the river where they had crossed on dry ground, while the pursuing army was then swept about by the returning waters.

Most scholars believe that this section of the book of Isaiah, sometimes called Second Isaiah, is associated with the time near the end of the Babylonian exile. Many people who had lived in Jerusalem had been captured when the Babylonians invaded. They had been shipped off to live in Babylon for many years. This is near the end of that time, when it is now becoming possible to return to Jerusalem.

There is great hope that those who had been removed from Jerusalem would return and resettle the area. Hope that Israel could get back to normal. There is hope that the one and only God, who is the creator of heaven and earth is about to do a new thing and make a way for them to return. This is a hopeful vision of restoration for Jerusalem and Jerusalem's people.¹

600 years later, God would again do a new thing with the birth of Jesus. Throughout history, we see God again and again doing a new thing, offering a possibility where none previously seemed to exist. We just

heard an invitation to “listen for God’s word of hope with new ears and fresh faith. The words we read are not a testimony to God’s acts in ancient history, they are an assurance of what God is doing now in our very midst.” We were invited to “Listen for God’s word of promise ... for God is still speaking.”ⁱⁱ

God is always doing a new thing in our lives and in the lives of those around us. God makes a way out of no way. For the people to whom Isaiah was speaking, the path back to Jerusalem would be through the desert, a place with few or no resources to sustain life. But God can and does provide resources even where none seem to be available. The vision here is of a path through the arid places but with rivers flowing through it and animals gathering around the water. It is of the gift of life found in an unexpected place.ⁱⁱⁱ

Years ago, when I traveled to Israel, we went through desert areas and in one place near the Dead Sea, approaching the oasis of Ein Geddi, in the middle of desert, there was a bridge. Why would a bridge be needed in the desert? What’s more, this bridge had collapsed. It had actually been washed out.

Our tour guide explained to us that in the rainy season, when water flows down from the mountains nearby, the rush of water can become a dangerous torrent. It was strong enough that a few years prior to our coming there, it had washed out the bridge. But looking around at nothing but desert, it was nearly impossible to imagine such a thing happening.

The words of Isaiah to those exiled in Babylon would likely have seemed as impossible. For each of us, there may be times in our lives when we cannot imagine a way out, a way through or around whatever is happening. We may not be able to imagine that there will be a time when

we will laugh again, or walk again, or do whatever it is we are not currently able to do. The stone that you picked up this morning symbolizes whatever you think is getting in the way of the kind of relationship you want to have with God.

Is there some memory that keeps getting in the way? Has something happened in your life that causes you to be angry with God or separated from God? Did you somehow come to believe that you are not good enough for God to love? Does the busyness of life simply seem to get in the way of the time you want to spend with God?

Some of us may have been told that all we have to do is pray and give it to God and it will be gone. For some that has been true, for others we are so good at holding onto things that we are never really able to let go. The apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi seems to recognize that even when our lives have been changed suddenly by God, there is still much growth that needs to take place, and this takes time.

He uses the image of a journey, "It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing; I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:12-14 CEB)

Paul recognizes that he is still growing in his faith – as are all of us. No matter how long we have been on the journey, no matter how many dramatic events have happened in our lives to draw us closer to God, no matter how faithful we think we are or have been, the reality is that we are all still growing in our faith. Each day, God has something new to offer to

us, new possibilities, new hope, new insights, new things for us to learn and new things for us to share with others.

In this last week of Lent, before we enter Holy Week, let us think about the rockiness of the way we travel when we follow God' paths. Let us think also of the solid ground that God provides beneath our feet. Let us think about how stones can be stumbling blocks in our journey; but they can also be stepping stones that God has offered to us on our faith journey.^{iv}

Let us pray: Our loving and eternal God, help us to keep our hearts, and minds, eyes and ears open to the new thing that you are doing in our lives and in the lives of those around us. When the stumbling blocks of life seem too big to navigate, help us to place our hand in yours and to discover the stepping stones that you place so that we may believe and find a way through the place where there seems to be no way. Show us the resources you place in the places where we think there are no resources. Guide us through the deserts, the wilderness, and the raging waters. And when our path appears not to have any stumbling blocks along the way, help us to reach out and to be stepping stones for others. Amen.

ⁱ Concepts for this paragraph and the previous one are taken from The CEB Study Bible, Introduction to the book of Isaiah. P. 1092

ⁱⁱ Invitation to the Word" from Abingdon Worship Annual 2019. P. 76 This invitation previously read by lector.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brueggemann, Walter. In "Investing in Life" found in Preaching the word.

^{iv}McFee, Marcia. Worship Design Studio. The Way.