Forget the former things

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Isaiah 43:18-19

18 Do not remember the former things,

or consider the things of old.

19 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.

John Powell, our regional pastor, has asked that the pastors under his care preach on this passage on New Year’s Day. What a good idea! I hope many will. We have a short service today, so this will be short.

Am I wrong in thinking that these two verses from Isaiah, on the face of it, seem very American in their optimism and focus on the future? Forget about the past with all its mistakes and failures, it’s the future that matters! Every day, and in every way, I’m getting better and better!

But I think this would fundamentally misinterpret this passage. In fact, if we go back a couple of verses to the beginning of this announcement:

16 Thus says the Lord,

who makes a way in the sea,

a path in the mighty waters,

17 who brings out chariot and horse,

army and warrior;

they lie down, they cannot rise,

they are extinguished, quenched like a wick …

Isaiah reminds Israel that, once upon a time, God brought Israel out of the misery of its exile in Egypt in a miraculous way. God parted the waters, so they could escape the Egyptian army. This made it possible for them to be a people.

And now, Israel faces another exile: they are (or will be) held captive in Babylon. So Isaiah is saying:

* Once upon a time, things were really bad for you
* God miraculously delivered you, destroying your enemy
* Now, things look really bad for you
* God is going to do something even better this time

I think it’s interesting that Isaiah’s announcement describes first the destructive power of “the mighty waters” in what God has done in the past, but then it describes the life-giving power of “streams in the desert” (mentioned twice!) to God’s people.

We can take the big view and ask, what was even better the second time around? Jesus says it wasn’t the rebuilding of the temple, but himself. As we saw in the dream that God gave to Joseph last week, a virgin would conceive and bear a son, to be named Jesus, for he would save his people (and the world) from their sins.

We can also take the particular view and ask what new things will God be doing for us as individuals and as a church as we enter this new year. We can look back and say:

* Once upon a time, or twice, or three times, or many times, things were really bad for us
* God brought us through
* There might be some tough times ahead
* But God is going to keep on bringing us through

What tough times are you facing? What life-giving water do you need?