***Something New***

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Texts: Isaiah 65:17-25 and Revelation 7:9-12

They say you can’t teach an old dog new tricks, especially a Presbyterian dog! This pandemic has tested that adage; it has forced this Presbyterian mutt to find new ways of doing some old things, to learn new tricks about sharing the Gospel, worshiping God, and staying connected when the virus makes the old ways of doing things too dangerous, impractical, or impossible. Virtual worship via Facebook Live is one example; so is the Zoom Bible study tomorrow morning, and the host of virtual meetings that dot the calendar each week. The once-empty vestibule near the church office has become a depository of food for the food bank, plastic bags for the Boys and Girls Club project, copies of These Days devotionals for pick up, and lately, mounds of candy for our church trick-or-treaters. Online giving, which was available before this pandemic, has skyrocketed while a PPP loan - soon to be forgiven – helped us with payroll, utilities, and COVID expenses through the summer. Back in January, none of these things was on the list of new things we hoped to do in 2020, but then again, neither was: survive a pandemic! The virus has forced us to adapt and try some new things; and some of them have proved to be unexpected blessings. Facebook Live and Zoom enable us now to connect with folks with whom we had become disconnected due to distance (when they moved away) or physical condition that limited mobility beyond home.

Earlier this summer the cover of Presbyterians Today announced, “The digital church arrives”, but then asked, “Is it here to stay?”[[1]](#endnote-1) What do you think? Are these new things we are doing in this pandemic – digital and non-digital alike – here for the long haul, or are they just passing fads, momentary adaptations to get us through these viral days? I suspect that some of the new things will stay. We will continue to broadcast this service into the virtual world even after we can safely return to these pews together, because some of you will not be able to join us here for the same reasons you could not be with us before this pandemic, and we want to stay connected with you. Face coverings which have been such an essential tool in battling the virus may no longer be a staple of daily life, but they may well reappear from dresser drawers in the height of flu season. Online giving and online shopping were already trending up before the pandemic and are likely to continue to rise. There are other things we hope and expect will go away once we are past the pandemic – like social distancing that keeps us apart this morning and a ban on singing in worship together even if it is more of a joyful noise.

These pandemic times are rife with change, and in the midst of all the changes, God is at work. Sometimes it may be hard to see; sometimes it may take longer than we would like; sometimes we don’t like the new thing God is doing. But those are our problems, not God’s! God will do what God will do – inspiring new solutions to old problems and creating new possibilities for the future. Our God is not one to sit back idly and let things stagnate, deteriorate, or stay the same. Our God is a dynamic God who is constantly creating and re-creating, inspiring us to do better and lamenting when we don’t, urging us to see and be part of the new things God is doing. As our ancestors in the Reformed tradition expressed it: we are a church Reformed and always being re-formed by God’s Spirit. Far from being resistant to change, we should be open to the new things God is doing and asking how we can be part of it!

This year there have been a lot of calls for change across our country. Black Lives Matter has led a call for change in the treatment of people of color as the long legacy of racism in our nation continues to raise its ugly head. The increased number and severity of storms, floods, and wildfires has brought about calls for changes to address the growing threat of climate change. As political campaigns mercifully grind to a close this week, there are promises of new things to come from both incumbents and challengers. And while some may foolishly claim that the pandemic is behind us and will just disappear this week, the reality is that we join nations around the world in fighting a surge in the virus and hoping for a new strategy and vaccine that will allow us to begin to envision life in a post-pandemic world. The world is not yet the way we or God want it to be, and so we hope for something new that will bring us greater health, peace, prosperity, and life more the way God wants it to be.

Just over fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial and voiced his dreams for something new - a nation of equality, freedom, and peace for all. It was a dream for change in the lives of people who Dr. King described as “exiles in their own land”, people who were still not free one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, people (in his words) “sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.”

Exiles in their own land is an apt phrase to describe the situation of Black folks in 1963, and perhaps that describes the sentiments of some people of color in our own nation today. But it is also an apt description of the people of Judah to whom Isaiah spoke of new heavens and a new earth 2500 years ago. The people had returned from exile in Babylon courtesy of an Emancipation Proclamation from the hand of King Cyrus of Persia; to their surprise, they found returning home harder than they expected. Life had gone on in their absence, and when they returned, they found their homes and lands occupied by strangers. It was as if Dorothy had returned to Kansas from Oz only to find someone else living in Auntie Em’s house. They experienced anew the pain of exile, this time in their homeland: their crops harvested by others; their homes now home to unknown neighbors. Those who had remained behind during the exile had settled vacant lands and were suddenly confronted with returning refugees who claimed that same land as their own. There was conflict between the settled and the unsettled exiles returning home.

To these conflicted, anxious people came the comforting words of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah:

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating!

The promise is for better days ahead. The Hebrew word there for “create” is bara. Humans can make, build, design, and construct, but only God can bara – create! No political parties, economic experts, military marvels, or ingenious inventors can make that claim. God alone is the creator of the new heavens and new earth, just as God was the creator of all things “in the beginning”. It is in essence a new creation of which the prophet speaks, a new thing God is doing that offers the prospect of great joy, security, prosperity, and peace, not only among the people, but in all of creation. In that new creation, the people themselves will be a joy to God! It is a new thing to be celebrated and appreciated, by glorifying God and enjoying God forever. It is an experience so marvelous that not only the pain of exile but also the memories of former glory days would be forgotten. Like that glorious vision in Revelation that we heard this morning in which a diverse throng of people from every nation and tribe on earth gather around the throne of God in joyful, grateful worship, this new thing God is doing stretches the imagination. For, what God is promising is not just a tweaking of the old; it is something new, something different, something better.

As Christians we believe that the new creation has begun in the coming of Jesus. In Christ the old has passed away; a new day has dawned. We who were without hope have been given new hope by a gracious God who came among us, took human form, showed us how to live, and was crucified by those who rejected the new in favor of the old. In his resurrection we see the dawn of that new day and a new way of living centered in love, centered in grace, centered in hope, centered in God. It is a way that leads to that same idyllic vision of joy and peace of which Isaiah spoke in such glowing terms: the wolf lying down with the lamb and life being gloriously good!

We all know that day may have begun with Jesus coming, but is not yet fully realized. Things are not yet the way Isaiah describes them or the way God wants them to be. Yet we dare to believe that the vision is not a pipedream, that peace and prosperity and joy will yet become real in the new heavens and new earth God is creating. We are not called to stand idly by and wait for that day to arrive; we are called to be instruments by which God brings that future vision into present reality. We don’t wait for the pandemic to pass before we begin that work; we begin now by loving one another enough to protect one another from the virus, by continuing to seek out new ways to minister to one another in this digital age, by daring to try new things that bring life and love, justice and peace to the world and to our neighbors.

Today we dedicate ourselves and our gifts anew to that good work – committing to be part of that new thing God is doing and will yet do in us and through us, without knowing just what God might have in mind. Today we commit, not to reclaiming the old, but to being part of something new for 2021.That is what our pledges are all about – participating in the new things God is doing, and in so doing, hoping to hear God say to us as God said to the people through Isaiah: “I will rejoice in my people! I will delight in you!” Amen

1. Presbyterians Today, May/June 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)