



Laity Sunday 2021: A New Path | Preaching Resources

Scripture Passage: Isaiah 43:18-19

Focus Statement: God is leading us to let go of the past and to embrace the new things God is doing.

ME:
Tell a story about a time when fear of change or the unknown held you back from doing something new and different. What helped you to eventually move forward, take a risk, and try something new? (You may save the resolution/ending of your story for after the “God” section to create some tension and show how God helped you move beyond your fear.)

WE: We all face uncertainties and fears when we embark on a new path. There are things (people, places, habits, traditions) we are afraid to leave behind. The barriers to a new path might seem overwhelming. Give some examples from different walks of life.

It can be hard to try new things and move forward as a church community too. Give some examples of times that lay people have helped the church to move forward in difficult times – either in your local church, or from church history.

GOD: These verses (Isaiah 43:18-19) belong to part of a long poem the prophet/author wrote to tell the people of Israel about a new phase in their life as God’s people. It was written at a time when the kingdom of Israel had fallen and many people from Judah had been exiled to Babylon, the current ruling empire. The center of Jewish worship, the Jerusalem temple, had been destroyed. But change was coming. This poem tells of how God is going to do a new thing, to make a way for the Israelites to return to their homeland.

Describe some ways individuals or families in your congregation, and your congregation as a whole, might be able to identify with the Israelites. Has God seemed absent during a time of trial or difficulty? Have people become restless, asking questions about why they are experiencing hard times? Does the memory of the (golden) past make it hard to see that the future could be both different *and* good?

Consider closely what the verses say. The Israelites and we are not intended to be stuck in the past or even the present, but rather to look forward to the new thing God is doing. The passage says, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.” This is not because the past is bad or unimportant. In fact, the surrounding verses tell the Israelites to remember the exodus, how God has saved them in the past. The point is that if we cling too closely to the past, we might not be able to see what God is doing here and now. Further, the prophet is saying that what God is doing for our future will be even more amazing than what God has done in our past!



Notice, the prophet does not tell the Israelites to do a new thing or make a new path. It is *God* who is doing the new thing (New International Version) or about to do a new thing (New Revised Standard Version). God has a plan and God is the one in charge, initiating something new and continuing God's mission in the world. It is our choice to get on board with the new thing God is doing, or to be stuck in the past, doing our own thing out of alignment with God's work. Sometimes we are so busy that we "do not perceive it" (v. 19). The passage calls us to stop what we are doing, to listen and look for where and how God is acting *now*, and to respond by participating in it. Discernment is key here. As we listen to the Holy Spirit, we can ask, "Is God still in this old way, or is God nudging us toward a new way?"

The passage does not promise that the future will be easy. It uses the images of the wilderness and wasteland (NIV) or desert (NRSV) to describe the unknown future. This is rough terrain. But God is with us and provides for us as we face it. This is uncharted territory that we can try (and fail) to navigate on our own, or we can travel it with God. God provides a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert! Just as God was promising to bring the Israelites back to their homeland, God's promises are *for us*, for our own wellbeing and life together, and for the world. The future is not happening *to us*, it is happening *for us*, and if we choose to follow in faith, it is happening *with and through us* too.

YOU:

Challenge the people in your congregation to think about some of the possibilities for their lives as individuals and as families, if they were to leave some of the old ways behind. You may want to provide a few concrete examples.

What gifts or talents do they have that may have been underutilized? Perhaps there is something they have always been afraid to try or something they have been curious about, but something has always held them back. Encourage them to listen to God's nudging. What is the new thing God is doing in their own lives? How can they do the new thing now?

WE:

Describe what it might look like if your congregation could let go of the past and look to God's future. What if, "We've always done it that way," was no longer a good enough reason to keep doing something? Instead of focusing on barriers to ministry, how can you congregation start working from its strengths and fully utilizing the gifts of individuals, groups, and the community?