

Sermon *Streams, Sacred Cows, and the Spirit* August 27, 2017

This is what God says,  
“Forget about what’s happened;  
don’t keep going over old history.  
Be alert, be present. I’m about to do something brand-new.  
It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it?  
There it is! I’m making a road through the desert,  
rivers in the badlands.  
Wild animals will say ‘Thank you!’  
- the coyotes and the buzzards -  
Because I provided water in the desert,  
rivers through the sun-baked earth,  
Drinking water for the people I chose,  
the people I made especially for Myself,  
a people custom-made to praise Me.” Isaiah 43:16-21

There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know You’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts You do if God weren’t in on it.” Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from Me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to - to God’s kingdom.” “How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?” Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let Me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation - the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life - it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch - the Spirit -and becomes a living spirit. So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’ - out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.” The Gospel [*Good News*] John 3: 1-8

The Holy Spirit, I believe, gave me these two scriptures for today to respond to (maybe to counteract) the bad news in our country and in the world.... to remind us that God can be found in change. To remind us that the Holy Spirit is an agent of change. Yesterday Ralph and I were at a funeral in Yreka for our friend Pastor Toni Hartman’s husband, Bill. A funeral seemed like an appropriate way to end this month... or maybe I

should say that I've been so grieved over the news in our country, and in the world, that it was a relief to have somewhere to cry, to pray, and to acknowledge that at the end of the day... at the end of a life... God is here. God still is here. There was a Navy color-guard at the funeral and they played "Taps". I always sing the words to myself: "All is well, safely rest. God is nigh." That's the comfort I've been seeking since white-supremacists marched in Charlottesville, Virginia. I don't mean this to sound like escapism or resignation, that God is nigh and whatever happens in the world (as long as it doesn't happen in my town) doesn't trouble me. We are called to work for peace and to speak out against injustice in the world, to help reveal God's Kingdom which, in spite of evidence to the contrary, Jesus said "is at hand." Our baptismal vows promise that we will resist evil and injustice in whatever forms we find them. But we are called to a simple trust in God, to believe that God is present and creating in the world, still redeeming and sustaining us... still working to change us into the likeness of Christ. But still the bad news of racism, hatred, and division, continues to be thrown out of a car window onto our driveway or tweeted onto the ethernet and it's hard to remember that God is nigh.

In these scriptures from Isaiah and John are wonderful images about our God who is always doing a new thing and who is not restricted by what we can and understand. We need to hear the words of Isaiah and John, because these days it's easy to lose to forget that God is. That God is nigh (which means "here.")

In one of the small towns Ralph and I drove through in northernmost California on Friday - a town with a large Hispanic population - there was a Confederate flag flying in a yard. It was like a slap in the face to see, and, I imagined, an insult to the non-white

residents. One of the things I noticed last spring when we were on vacation, driving up the coast, was many small towns with boarded up businesses as logging, railroad, and mining industries shut down... and many of those places are like ghost towns. I've imagined the anger and bitterness people must feel when they no longer had means to support themselves and their families. I imagine they'd want someone to blame for the lack of vitality in their communities. I don't know if it's this sense of helplessness and anger that fuels the white-supremacy movement. I do know that change is hard, and something we humans seem hardwired to resist. And when our old ways and old values and sacred cows are threatened it sometimes causes a protective, knee-jerk reaction against whatever or whomever is causing the change. Our country is changing and some of the old ways we've understood the world to be are changing. Who has power and who doesn't have power is being questioned and challenged. It seems as if we are at war with ourselves... "fightings and fears within, without" to quote the old Billy Graham song.

It's said that the only certainty in this world is death and taxes. The only thing that doesn't change is that there's a price to pay to live in this world, and we can only here for a while. Death and taxes are inevitable parts of life, and so is change. In fact, our God is a God of change. Isaiah and John both tell us this. Their perspective is that it's good news.

Isaiah told the Israelites that the exile from their homeland had been God's punishment for their unfaithfulness. The book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Scriptures is actually three books, written by three different authors, at three significant times in Israel's history. The first book of Isaiah is Isaiah's condemnation of the Israelites for

their infidelity and careless disregard of who they were as the Chosen People of God. Israel was invaded by the Babylonians, and the Israelites were forced into captivity and slavery. The first book of Isaiah is all doom and gloom - my words, not Isaiah's - about God's wrath and punishment. The second book of Isaiah is known as "The Book of Comfort" when God gives Isaiah words of hope and comfort to say to the people... assurances that God will do something new on Israel's behalf. Isaiah says, "This is what God says, 'Forget about what's happened; don't keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new. It's bursting out! Don't you see it?'" Isaiah tells the people about God's love and mercy, which is stronger than God's anger and disappointment... and of God's desire to do something new to awaken and enliven and bless God's people. This unexpected thing - like a road in the wilderness and a stream of water in the desert - will bring joy and delight to the people. Even though they had deliberately disobeyed God's commands to love God and love others... even though they had turned their backs to God... God reassured them that God would lead them home, and would continue to love them, and claim them as God's own. There's a promise here for when our old ways of doing things no longer work, and no longer satisfy... that God is always doing something new. If we are awake and aware, God is always doing a new thing in us, and for us.

Karl Barth was a 20<sup>th</sup> century Swiss theologian I studied in seminary. He said that a preacher should stand in the pulpit with a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. I can't always make myself read or hear the news. Sometimes it's more than I can take in, especially when it's about horrific, inhumane events, and questionable political decisions. It's easy to be filled with fear and hopelessness about the state of the

world. But I invite you to remember with me what Isaiah helped the Israelites remember: that God is always doing something new... and that nothing we hold as a part of our history, or that we consider the sacred past, is immune to God's Spirit breathing change and new life upon it... and upon us. God wants to be more relevant to us, more important to us, than any of our sacred cows, our cherished traditions, our prejudices and preferences. This can be bad news because in the midst of change we hold tight to our old ways, our old beliefs.

I'd like to judge (and part of me would like to hate) the people who spew racist doctrine and attend Neo-Nazi rallies. And part of me sees that some of the things they value are slipping away. Some of the old ways of being are being replaced. Change is happening, and it's painful. Here's some good news: God is found in change. Jesus told Nicodemus that the Holy Spirit (in Hebrew and Greek the words "wind" and "Spirit" are interchangeable) blows wherever it wills. He said, "You know well enough how the wind (or the Spirit) blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next." This is an invitation to us, as God's people, to be light on our feet... to be ready, to expect change... and to be confident that in the change "God is nigh". God is present. In her letter responding to the Neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Bishop Carcaño wrote, "God's love is unmerited, unconditional and faithful, flowing for each one of us without exception. I believe that God loves even our enemies and calls us to love them as well, because God knows something about our human condition: we are all broken and in need of not only God's love, but each other's love as well." You can read the Bishop's letter in its entirety at [calnevumc.org](http://calnevumc.org). It's good news: a reminder that God's will is that we love those we

disagree with... that we are not afraid to let go of hate and anger and disgust and do a new thing... love others the way God loves us.

I see a change in the values that my parents and teachers and my church taught me - values of kindness and tolerance and respect - that are no longer cultural values. And I've realized that if I want to see those values evidenced in the world I need to practice them, and I need to name them as Christian values. I need to be - we need to be - as Mahatma Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, without the love of Jesus, and without the mercy of our Father-God, these are pretty much pretty words. But God is still working in us, and using us to bring about change... not for the sake of change but for the sake of building and revealing God's Kingdom, here on earth as it is in heaven. I think the most radical thing we can do is loosen our grasp on how we think the world out to be ~ and take the hand of Jesus, and see the world, and see our brothers and sisters, through His eyes, and with His love. Amen.