

Sermon Ready: Isaiah 43:16-24

This is what the LORD says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, 17 who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: 18 “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. 19 See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. 20 The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, 21 the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise. 22 “Yet you have not called on me, Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, Israel. 23 You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. 24 You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.

Sermon Theme: Living with Past Guilt

You were caught. You had your reasons and excuses—some of them are quite convincing. Other people might assure you, “I understand why you did that.” But the fact still remains: you did it, you did something wrong, you hurt them, you hurt yourself...you sinned. Sure you were stressed out, but you still were short with your spouse. You were tired from a long day’s work, but you still were impatient with the children. You were just frustrated about something, but you still took it out on the cashier who took a little too long. You thought you were doing well; so you decide to let off some steam and go back to that pet sin you said you wouldn’t do again. Whatever the sin was, you then didn’t have to wait too long before the shame came flooding in and we reach for any lifeline we can find to help us feel a little better about what we did. What we are looking for, in some shape or form, is a way to live with past guilt. You did something wrong. You committed a sin. No amount of excuses or reasons can erase the past action. But, then we think, maybe I can make up for it in some way. We expect others to do it when we’ve been sinned against. We try to do it with our loved ones and those closest to us when we’ve wronged them. We sometimes are looking for ways to do it without really even thinking about it. And so, in order to live with past guilt, we try to do the same with God.

Those Israelites—to whom this message in Isaiah is first being spoken—are also dealing with such struggles. These Israelites are the ones who had been taken from their homeland, living in captivity in Babylon, unable and not allowed to go home. They know why this is happening to them. God had given them warnings time and again. He had sent messengers and prophets to turn them away from their sin. But they didn’t listen. Now they are living with the consequences and guilt of their sin.

And so, the Lord, speaking through Isaiah, comforts his people by pointing to something that they would have easily remembered. Any Jewish child would have probably grown up knowing what had happened all those years ago in Egypt. They probably would have heard how this recently freed nation of 2 million people faced—what seemed like—certain doom. With their backs against the Red Sea they watched as Pharaoh and his army come barreling down to take back what they saw belonged to them. And it's there, in an unlikely place and unlikely way, the Israelites are delivered. With these words, the Lord is reminding them, "I did that, for you." **"This is what the LORD says—" in verses 16 and 17, "he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick."** Not only was he the one who opened the waters of the Red Sea for the Israelites to walk through, it was he who brought that army out, and extinguished them like a wick so that it was like they never existed.

And what does God say about all this? **"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past"** (v.18). The Lord isn't telling them to forget their heritage or to ignore what he did for them. But don't dwell on it either; instead, look ahead. What he is going to do for them is going to be even greater. In vv.19-21, the Lord continues, **"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise."**

Imagine hearing these words when it feels like the Lord has abandoned you. As they sat their thinking about how it all went wrong, thinking about how they should have told more people, should have reached out more, could have changed this or that, they hear this promise, **"I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland"** (v.19). The Lord is telling them: in the place that you would least expect it, he is going to bring relief. In a time of their lives when it doesn't look this would be possible, he is going to bring them home. He is going to give them the way and provide for them along the way. They will return to their homeland again. The Lord has neither forgotten them nor abandoned them. They aren't alone. The Lord isn't going to hold their sins against them. Despite their sin, they are still God's chosen people who he formed for himself. With these Words God is also pointing their eyes even further ahead to the one who would come and say of himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Through the wasteland of this world of sin, Jesus gives us the way to eternal life. For people lost in sin without a way, Jesus the Light of the World shines his light to show us the way is forgiveness of sins from him.

And you know this. We know our sins are forgiven. You heard it not too long ago, “As a called of Christ, I forgive you.” That wasn’t just me speaking. That is God speaking through me, to you: “Your sins are forgiven.” But maybe you heard those words and gave little thought to them. It was just that part of the service and now we get onto part 2. But when you do start to think about it, to say that all your sins are forgiven, that seems a little bold. Almost impossible. It’s too easy. How can such a general proclamation be made? I don’t know each and every one of your sins. You haven’t stepped into my office to tell me. So how can I say they are all forgiven?

Ah, but that starts to shed a little bit of light on the issue that we are dealing with here. It’s the belief that in order to feel like I can have God’s love, his forgiveness, I need to either make up for my sin first before I can be forgiven, or even after being forgiven I still need to do something about that sin.

And so we do this sort of bargaining thing where we are quick to bring up how at least I’ve done *this* and not done *that*. For instance, “At least I made sure to give them a hug and didn’t yell too loudly at my children when I lost my patience.” Or, “Yeah, I was selfish and didn’t listen, but at least I was willing to do the chores around the house later on in the day.” “Yeah I was late to work or messed up, but at least I’ll stay longer and work harder.” But no amount of good deeds done will delete the fact that sin was committed. No amount of nice gifts is going to take away the pain when you raised your voice to your spouse. No amount of extra time spent one day with the children will make up for those other times you promised you would be there and weren’t. Being nice to a stranger later today, doesn’t make up for those cruel and unloving thoughts you had of someone else.

And you know this too. But still we even try to make it up to the Lord with promises that we are going to do better next time, I’m going to be a better Christian, or I’m going to be nicer to that person. Or it’s almost like we think we are giving God this gift to make up for a sin with volunteering to serve or with the offering we put in the plate. One might think that by coming to church and sitting in the pew it will make God happier with me: “At least then he will ignore what I did on Saturday night or my grumbling and complaining before church.” It’s even the idea that, “I just need to learn to forgive myself.” But until that day comes I have to carry this secret pain and drag around this guilt as extra penance thinking, “I need to really feel sorry for what I’ve done before I can be forgiven.” As humble as that sounds, it’s still trying to make up for a sin.

Maybe that works for a while. Maybe it helps a little for you to live with the guilt. But the reality is that it’s not relieving you of the burden. It’s adding more because deep down you know you could have or should have done more. You could have done better and you didn’t. No amount in the offering plate, nice and kind actions done, times you have come to church, how horrible you make yourself feel is going to make up for sin.

The truth is that Jesus doesn't want you to try and make up for that guilt of sin. He doesn't want you to try and live with it. He wants it all—your sin and the guilt. God knows your sin and hates it when you sin. He hates the sinner who goes back again and again despite his warnings and in spite of him. He didn't wait for you try and make it up to him; he knew you couldn't. He didn't wait until you decided that you wanted to; he knew you wouldn't.

And so, the Lord does a new thing! Now it springs up, do you not see it? It's right here in his Word that tells you that God didn't wait, no, while you were still a sinner, Jesus died for you. In the most unlikely of places on Golgotha on a cross for a people who would not call out to him, for a people who reject him, the Lord sends his Son—the New Thing—to save you. For us sheep who love to wander, God laid on his own Son the sin of us all. Yes, he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds you are healed (Isaiah 53:5). He doesn't just want the action done, Jesus claims the guilt of your sin too. And so he suffers God's just judgment because Jesus became sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). This means when God looks at you, he doesn't see the sinner. He sees someone who has been made holy, right with him.

Our hope is found in no one else and still comes in the least likely of places. The Lord still saves his people with water, that is, the water of Baptism. It looks so simple. There is no pomp and circumstance. It's seems like a few shorts words, a couple splashes of water; it doesn't look like anything should be happening. But in those waters a miracle happens. God formed you for himself. Baptism now saves you (1 Peter 3:21). And Jesus continues to give you nourishment. Again it's in a place where it doesn't make sense, reason balks against it, and logic says nothing should be happening. But here in the Lord's Supper Jesus' body and blood is poured out for you. And it's not just you in general, it's Jesus' body given for **you** personally. No one else can eat the bread for you. It's Jesus' blood shed for **you** personally. No one else can drink the wine for you.

This forgiveness is yours not because you chose him or could make yourself worthy by making up for your sins in some way. Don't be arrogant. Stop kidding yourself. Realize your sin, confess it, and trust in the forgiveness that is yours. Throw your sins on Jesus, he wants them all. Let go of your past guilt, Jesus already claimed it to be his own. You don't have to try and live with past guilt, Jesus already lived, died, and rose again for you. In God's courtroom no accusation can be brought against you—baptism promises it, the Lord's Supper gives and reassures you of it, and by faith this is your hope and guarantee: As a called servant of Christ, I forgive your sin and the guilt of your sin. Amen.