

## **God Is About to Do a New Thing** **Isaiah 43:1–7, 15–19**

### **Facing Change**

Over the past month, since April, we have been going through a season of significant change—both personally and as a church. Not only have I been appointed to a new church, but beginning this July, Asbury, Zion, and Haven will become one cooperative parish. This is a sudden and unexpected change. And yet, I want to express my deep gratitude to all of you—our church leaders and members—who have remained steady, faithful, and mature as we prepare for this transition. Thank you for caring for the church with such grace.

An ancient Greek philosopher once said, “Everything changes and nothing stands still.” We know this is true. And yet, facing change is never easy. Most of us prefer what is familiar. We like what we know. That is why, every Sunday, many of us sit in the same pews, right? But whether we like it or not, change comes to us. And when change comes, we naturally feel uncomfortable. We may feel anxious. We may feel uncertain because what is ahead is unfamiliar.

What we need in a season like this is not simply to be anxious or afraid. What we need is to honestly face what makes us anxious, and at the same time, listen carefully for what God is saying to us. So let me ask you: What is making your heart anxious in this season of change? What are we most worried about right now?

Maybe some of us are wondering, “What kind of pastor will come next? Will the new pastor be a good fit for our church?” or Maybe ““Now that we are becoming a three-point charge, the pastor will have less time with us. Will our church be okay?” And because we have never experienced a cooperative parish before, we may wonder how this will actually work. And let me say this clearly: it is okay to feel anxious. That is a natural response.

### **“You Are Mine”**

The passage we read today from Isaiah was also given to a community facing a time of enormous historical change. The background of Isaiah 43 is around the year 539 BC, when the Babylonian Empire was falling and the Persian Empire was rising. In 586 BC, the kingdom of Judah had been destroyed by Babylon, and many Jewish people were taken into exile. During that time, the Jewish community wrestled with deep questions: “Why are we, God’s people, suffering like this? Has God forgotten us?”

They struggled not only with their national identity, but also with their faith in the Lord. And then, the Babylonian Empire, which must have seemed like it would last forever, began to collapse. A new empire, Persia, began to rise.

How do you think the Jewish people felt in that moment of rapid change? Were they simply happy because Babylon—the empire that had destroyed them—was now falling? I do not think it was that simple. Fifty years is a long time. It is enough time for one generation to pass and another generation to become the center of society. Unlike the common image we may have of exiles as slaves bound in chains, many Jewish people in the later years of the Babylonian exile had become more like settlers. They had built houses. They had planted gardens. They had married and raised families. Some had become involved in business and finance. Some even served in Babylonian government positions.

And Babylon was one of the most advanced cities in the world at that time—more developed culturally and economically than Israel had been. So for second- and third-generation

Jewish people who had built their lives there, Babylon may have become a livable place. And then suddenly, with the rise of Persia, another wave of uncertainty came upon them. It is into this moment of uncertainty that God speaks through the prophet Isaiah.

The prophet interprets the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus of Persia as an act of God's salvation. And to the people who may now have to leave behind everything they had built in Babylon over the past fifty years, God says: "Don't fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned."

To the people of Israel, who were struggling with identity, anxiety, and change, God gives this clear word: "You are mine." When you lived in Judah, you were mine. When you lived as exiles in Babylon, you were mine. And now, as you return home and face yet another uncertain journey, you are still mine.

When change happens in our lives, we often focus on our circumstances. We become anxious because we cannot control the uncertainty around us. But there is one truth that does not change: We belong to God. And the church belongs to God. The same God who created us, the same God who calls us by name, is with us.

I know many of you worry about the church during this season of change. But friends, even when pastors change, God's heart for us does not change. Even if our bodies grow older and weaker, even if our congregation is smaller than it used to be, God is still the Lord of the church.

Think about it. Our church has not only had easy days. We have had good days, and we have had hard days. We did not come this far simply because we were strong or capable. We have come this far because God has been with us. And that same God will be with us on the journey ahead. So, as Isaiah says, do not be afraid. God has called us by name. God has claimed us as God's own. And God will be with us through every difficult moment. What we need now is to look for the God who is doing a new thing among us.

### **Expecting What God Will Do**

In verses 15 through 17, Isaiah reminds the people of the amazing things God did during the Exodus. God, the Creator and King of Israel, made a way through the sea. God delivered the people. God defeated the chariots and armies of Egypt.

But then, what comes next? "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." Isn't that surprising? God does not say, "Remember my great acts of salvation." Instead, God says, "Do not cling to the former things."

Why? Because God is not trapped in the frozen memories of the past. God is the living God, still making a way in the wilderness, still bringing salvation in the present. The memories of God's grace are important. But we also need to remember that God does not always lead us in the same way.

As many of you know, I enjoy hiking. And one of the dangerous things when hiking is trusting only a memory from ten years ago. A trail that used to be there may no longer exist. A landslide may have changed the landscape. A stream may have shifted and found a new path. The old trail may be gone. But what happens if I insist, "No, I remember this. This is the way"? I will get lost. Even if I have a vivid memory of drinking fresh, cool water on that trail years ago, if the landscape in front of me has changed, I need to open today's map.

Our life of faith is like that. If we keep saying, “Our church has always done it this way,” or “When Pastor Yohan was here, we did it this way,” then the old map may actually keep us from following the footsteps of God, who is making a new way in the wilderness. What we need now is not an old map. What we need is the living compass of God’s guidance.

So what might the new river be that God is opening in the middle of this wilderness of change? I wonder if the cooperative parish itself may be part of that new way and that new river. Becoming one parish does not simply mean that we are sharing one pastor. It means something much deeper. It means Asbury, Zion, and Haven can bring together their different gifts, strengths, and resources to serve the wider community. Together, we may become a deeper and wider river of life for our neighbors.

Think about Vacation Bible School. By ourselves, it would be difficult. But when churches work together, we are able to offer a richer experience of faith formation for the children in our community. Through joint worship, we may experience more dynamic and diverse worship together. These may be small signs of the “new thing” God is preparing for us in this wilderness season. When we stop insisting on remaining as small separate streams and allow ourselves to join the greater river of God’s grace, our churches can become a river of life that nourishes thirsty souls in this community.

So I want to ask something of you. If you have good memories with me, please treasure them as good memories. But please do not allow those memories to become a barrier that keeps you from welcoming the new pastor and the new work God will do. If you experienced grace through our worship services, ministries, and events together, then give thanks for that grace. But do not cling only to the method or the form.

Through Isaiah, God says to us: “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” Sometimes we have to tear open the familiar wrapping paper of “the way things used to be” in order to discover the new gift God is placing inside.

This journey of becoming one parish, and beginning ministry with a new pastor, may feel like a wilderness we have never entered before. But remember this: God makes a way where there is no way. The God who always walks ahead of us, the God who opens the path before us, will begin a new thing among us.

We do not know every detail of the road ahead. But we know who walks with us. We know who has called us by name. We know who says, “You are mine.” And we know that the God who brought us this far is already doing a new thing among us.

So I invite you to walk this journey of change not with fear, but with expectation, hope, and courage. Amen.