

“New and Renew”

Isaiah 2:1-5; Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126

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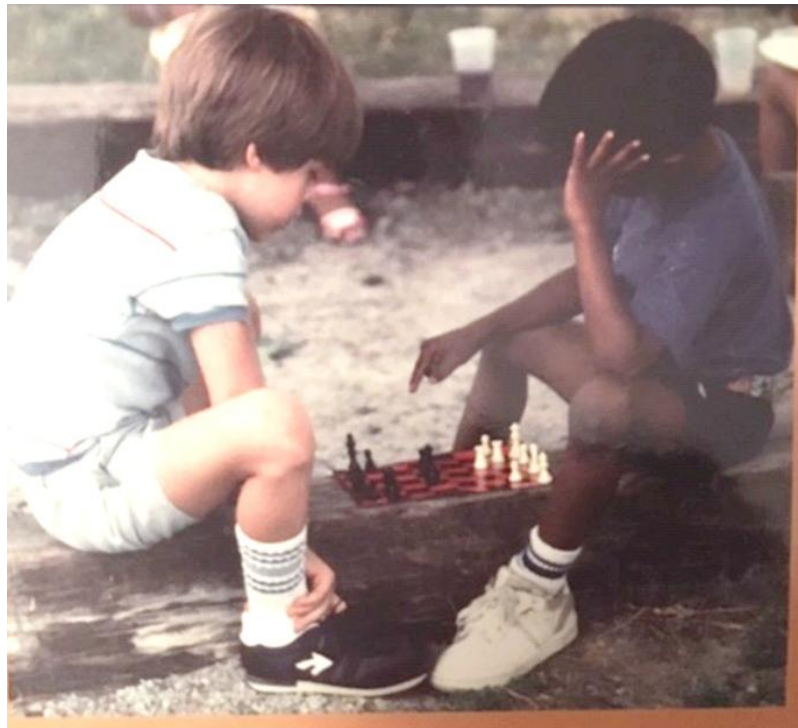
On the front of your Order of Worship is a photograph. You might take a look at it now. Notice the color of the shoes. And the chess pieces. And notice these two boys engaged with one another. It is a remarkable photograph. It may have been staged, I don't know. But think about why it is remarkable. [ pause ]

In this world.

In this culture.

There is a long history that makes this photograph remarkable.

It evokes that history for me when I see it.



The photo is from the front cover of a book about reconciliation by a man named Rob Corcoran. The name of the book is *Trustbuilding*. In the book a man from Richmond, Virginia is quoted as saying this about bridging gaps between people in our culture: “build a bridge of trust strong enough to bear the weight of the truth you are trying to deliver.” (repeat quote)

To bridge a gap from the events of the past...to the future for which we hope...we need a strong bridge. We need a strong bridge because we have a strong truth.

And what IS that TRUTH?

The truth we have is hope!

The truth we have...to carry us across that bridge into the future - - is the reality of hope.

That’s the claim that - - the rest of this sermon will explore: the truth of hope.

But hope is not something you plan for.

Hope is more about how you prepare.

Now don’t get me wrong...I’m not against planning. That’s not my point.

I’m a planner...many of you know that.

Planning is important in many areas of life.

But this is about something else.

This is about hope.

Hope - - - is NOT something you plan for.

Hope is more connected to how you prepare...

How do we prepare - - for a future - - we can’t see?

The prophet Isaiah, in the Old Testament says that God is always doing something new.

With God at work in the future - - the future - - will not be the same as the past.

And - - the new things that God is doing - - are surprising!

Like making a way through the sea - - for escaping slaves.

And making rivers flow - - in the desert.

These are surprising images.

But they are the way - - into God's intended future - - for us.

For Isaiah, the desert is an image of the challenges of life.

And with God - - there are RIVERS in the desert.

Rivers of hope.

Our Monday evening study group has been reading from a book by Michael Lindvall, and he refers to deserts in a similar way. We will be looking at his chapter, "Deserts and Wild Beasts" tomorrow night.

Lindvall says that we often meet God in the desert.

In fact there is a long tradition of going into the desert to meet God.

The desert is usually very still - - and sometimes it is challenging.

But often there are fewer distractions - - than in other places.

In the stark - - challenging - - dry stillness of the desert - - many people have MET God.

These words about rivers in the desert are from LATE in the book of Isaiah.

They are probably from a time AFTER the people were driven into exile.

Forced out of their home land.

Before all of that - - earlier in the book - - there are warnings of things to come.

AND - - earlier in the book of Isaiah, the prophet refers to the future in a hopeful way...

In a much earlier time than the desert imagery - - the book describes peace.

In chapter 2 of Isaiah - - Isaiah says, the future will be wonderful. Isaiah paints a picture of a time when things are transformed. Swords are beaten into plowshares. Spears into pruning hooks. And nation will not lift up weapon against nation...this was Isaiah's hope...

But if that was the hope...if Isaiah was right about the future...if that is the truth we have to carry across that bridge into the future...then we need a pretty strong bridge I think.

Because - - Isaiah's vision of peace - - is not complete.

There are always threats of war and conflict - - around the world...

But pick up your order of worship again and look at that photo.

And THEN - - hear these words from Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

“I'm not an optimist, I'm a prisoner of hope”

Tutu calls us all to be prisoners of hope with him.

What's the difference between an optimist and a prisoner of hope?

Maybe it is similar to the difference between a planner and someone who is prepared.

So - - how do we prepare for the future?

How do we “get ready” - - for ANYTHING - - you and me?

Maybe one way is to imprison ourselves...to that hope.

The word “imprison” suggests that it is not easy to hope.

But maybe recognizing that is part of the preparation.

And maybe another way to prepare is to begin building that bridge,

whatever that might mean.

Imagine the FUTURE you would like for your life. / Imagine the future YOU hope for.

Imagine the WORLD - - as you HOPE it could be.

Imagine you life - - as you truly HOPE it will end up.

Are you almost there already?

Or do you have a way to go still?

Either way - - there are SOME things - - that will have to change.

For the future to be as God hopes - - some things have to change.

Some things - - have to be made new.

As I was standing in line at the grocery store a book caught my eye. It's called, "New Uses for Old Things". 799 innovative new uses for everyday items. According to the book: an old wine cork is a good pin cushion; an old mitten is good for keeping your sunglasses from getting scratched in your glove compartment; and a paper towel tube is a good way to tame a tangle of computer cables. Something not in the book that I once learned at a church bazaar: old plastic communion cups turned upside down and painted gold look like bells for the Christmas tree. / You get the idea...

The question is, what old things do we want to make new?

Can swords really be hammered into plowshares?

Can spears - - in our world - - be turned into pruning hooks?

How about bump stocks - - for guns?

And if not that - - what?

What does this image mean - - for us today?

Isaiah suggests that at first it might be a little like getting water to flow uphill. Isaiah says that the house of God will be established in the highest mountain, and nations will "flow" to it. People will flow up that mountain.

And it will come to pass...

At an hour that we can't predict...

That nation will NOT lift sword against nation...

And we will awaken...dreary from sleep...like Jacob from a DREAM...

And the earth will be a different place...

And water will flow uphill...

And that photo on the Order of Worship won't be so remarkable...at least not for the reasons it is remarkable now...

But instead something new that we can't possibly prepare for will have taken place.

Look at the photo again:

Hear the words of Tutu:

I am not an optimist... I am a prisoner of hope.

How can we imprison ourselves to hope?

How can we build a bridge strong enough for that hope?

What old things... do we want to make new?

One way into that hopeful future - - is to look for water in the desert.

The image of water in the desert - - was from a much LATER time, as I've said.

Israel had ALREADY experienced exile and invasion.

Isaiah 43 was written after HOPES had been DASHED.

But STILL - - the prophet encourages them - - not to lose hope.

Their hope was - - harder to find - - than when the second chapter was written.

Swords had NOT been all beaten into plowshares!

BUT - - Isaiah STILL held out hope - - with this desert image.

Kathleen Norris describes a desert in her book, "Dakota".

Listen to her description - - as you think about the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“The effect of the dryness on living tissue is in evidence all around us: hollow skulls of mice and gophers - - fossils along the river bank - - a leaf imprint on sandstone.”

“Petrified wood and grass - - speak to us of a deep past - - of forest and swamp.

An inland sea!

Fossils of oysters - - sea turtles and the chambered nautilus.

These ocean fossils are often found near the tops of buttes in South Dakota.

But what makes the plains seem most like the ocean - - she writes - -

- - is the sound!

Many mornings - - when the wind has come up during the night - - the trees around the house thunder like surf - - that swells and ebbs.

In open country far from the trees - - the wind beats against you as insistent as the ocean current. / “For me”, Norris writes - - “for me, walking in a hard Dakota wind - - can be like staring into the ocean. / I live about as far from the sea as possible in North America - - and yet - - I walk a turbulent ocean.”

So what is the turbulence in our lives?

Where do we feel in the desert?

Remember - - God promises - - water in the desert.

The psalm for today - - reminds us of what that can mean.

Psalm 126 refers to events that happened even later.

This describes returning home - - after the exile.

It says that when people returned home they were - - like a people in a dream.

I would suggest - - the DREAM - - is hope.

The dream of faith - - is hope for the future - - no matter what.

Feeling at home in the world - - no matter WHO you are.

May it be so...

For you - - and for me.

Amen