God Is making All Things New! (Isaiah 43:16-20)

Special New Year’s greetings to all of you and I wish each and everyone of you, a blessed and healthy new year. God has again given us a new year and it is a sign of God’s love and blessing for all of us.

As we are gathering for the first time in 2022, each one of us comes to the Lord with our own hopes and dreams for the new year. Just because we have been given a new year, it does not mean that all our past has been magically erased and that we begin life from ground zero. Those issues in our lives – problems, struggles, challenges that were with us all through the last year are still with us, and we will have to continue the new year with every single one of them.

What can be different, however, is our attitude toward those life issues, and how we perceive them. I do not know if anyone remembers Bishop Roy Nickels. He was the bishop of New York Annual Conference who ordained me. What I still remember is what he said to those of us who were ordained. He said, there are two kinds of pastors: One who acts like a thermometer and the other who act like a thermostat. And, he said, “What kind of pastor you would like to be is your choice.”

These words of Bishop Nickels had a great impact on me as a young person going into ministry. Obviously, by saying these words, Bishop Nickels was encouraging those of us as newly ordained to become more pro-active and effective ministers for churches we were about to serve.

As we know, a thermometer which measures the temperature is easily changed by the environment which it is in. So, depending on the situation, a thermometer goes up or down on the scale. On the other hand, a thermostat changes the environment it is in. It can raise or lower the temperature of the room.

**P. 2**

What Bishop Nickels said is not only applicable to pastors but also to all Christians. We are people of God, and we are called to be the people who can change things not only for ourselves but also for others around us. Even if things are not going well as we intended, and roadblocks are thrown at us time to time, we should not be moved or swayed. We should stay on our course and should move forward with a conviction that “In all things, God works for the good of those who love him” as Romans 8:28 says.

Talking about Romans 8:28, I ran across the following, beautiful, commentary and I would like to share it with you as an introduction to the meditation this morning. “Too often when life isn’t going our way, we let Satan get in our head and we start acting like we are defeated before the battle even starts. It seems we forget what scripture tells us in Romans 8:28, and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. And those whom God called, God also justified. Those God justified,

God also glorified. What then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”

We know so well that there are the inevitables in life which we cannot change. However, we can change our attitude towards these inevitables. And, with our faith in God who will make all things fine for us, we can have confidence and bring our hopes and dreams for the new year. We can lift them up to the Lord and ask for his blessings on them.

Our Old Testament reading, from Isiah 43, has the same message for us this morning. In the verse 19, Yahweh declares that he is God who will make all things new! He says to the people of Israel, “Do not dwell in the past – do not let your past, your past failures, mistakes, overwhelm you and take away your faith. Because of your past, do not lose your hope in me – God says.

**P.3**

Our Bible passage this morning was written during the time of Babylonian exile. People of Israel were in Babylon in exile. When God said these words through the prophet Isaiah, they were displaced by force and lived in Babylon against their will, serving Babylonians. According to Biblical scholars, people of Israel were in captivity in Babylon for about 70 years.

It is not difficult for us to imagine the lives of Israelites in captivity. They were taken there against their will and the life situation for them must have been so difficult and hopeless. In the midst of the harsh life conditions, it must have been so hard for the Israelites to have dreams and hopes for the future. When the goal in life is just to survive each day, a voice to urge them to have hopes and dreams for the future may seem a distant unimaginable reality for them.

We can see a glimpse of their life in Babylonian captivity. In Psalm 137, the scripture describes the Babylonian captivity this way. “By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.” While in captivity, people of Israel often gathered by the river of Babylon and wept as they thought about Zion, their homeland. This was how their lives were in Babylon. In captivity, they had no power to change their life situations and were unable to shape their own future. In their despair, they cried out, “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”

In this context, God was speaking to the people of Israel, “Do not dwell in the past. Be the people of forward looking and see how I can make things new for all of you.” - I will make a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.” No doubt that the Israelites in Babylon understood the life in the wilderness and wasteland. But, you see, when they heard these words of God, I am sure that there were some who were skeptical about what was God telling them. For those many others who believed in God’s mercy and deliverance, however, it must have been so comforting to hear these words. For those who have faith in God and those who were waiting for God’s intervention to end the exile, these words of God, telling them that He would make all

**P. 4**

things new, gave them hope. Among those who heard this message of hope included - along with Isaiah - Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Haggai, and Daniel, to name a few.

Israelites were once again able to pick up pieces of their lives and begin to dream about their future. And they were able to return home from the exile in 70 years. God freed them from the captivity and made them a free people.

God who makes everything possible for us is telling us this morning, again, to all of us, the same message. “I will make a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland for you.” Perhaps, the skeptical side in us may doubt this message of God. But whether to believe this or not - the choice is ours. And, when we open our hearts to the Lord and humbly embrace the promise God is offering to us, we know that possibilities are limitless. We should not let what we think we know keep us from experiencing what God can do in our lives today and beyond.

A Bible scholar, William Barkley interprets today’s passage, “I am doing a new thing,” in this way. “When God says I am doing a new thing, it includes God’s ongoing work of re-creating and re-newing the lives of his followers.” I particularly like Barkley’s interpretation because it brings the relevance of our scripture text to our present. God’s promise of making things new was not only for those people of Israel who were in exile but for us also in the 21st century. It is as relevant to us as it was to the people in the Babylonian exile.

St. Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 16, says these words. “Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Life troubles, difficult situations that we see around us may discourage us but we do not lose heart. Here, St. Paul is speaking about our attitude again. We do not lose heart even in the face of our trouble because God is continuously renewing our lives through the Holy Spirit. He also urges us in the verse 18, “to fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.” And he offers the reason why. “For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

**P. 5**

There is a story about a shoemaker. Perhaps, some of you know this story. A shoe maker who decided to open the African Congo shoe market sent two sales persons to evaluate the undeveloped territory. One salesperson cabled back: “Prospect here nil – zero. No one wears shoes.” The other salesperson reported enthusiastically. “Market potential terrific! Everyone is barefooted.” One saw no market for shoes because no one was wearing them. The other saw the potential because no one had shoes.

God wants to realign our hearts, just like he did to the people of Israel through the prophet Isaiah’s words. If God’s people had stayed focused on their captivity, they would have never experienced their release. As God calls us up and out into a new year and new territory, we may find ourselves looking more to our limitations than to God and his great power. We see all the way we have fallen short in the past and wonder if we can be effective in business, ministry, motherhood, fatherhood, marriage, and so on. But, God says, “Forget about all that. I am doing something new now.” – “I will make all things new for you!”

This morning, it is time for us to purposefully embrace God’s promise to do a new thing through our lives this year and to confidently continue our journey of faith, fixing our eyes on Jesus Christ.