

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series C)

March 13, 2016

Text: Isaiah 43:16–21; Philippians 3:8–14

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is of such an amazing, divine character, that the Bible often describes it in ways that defy human imagination and understanding. Typically, the Bible uses events and descriptions of past events and then elevates them to new heights of wonder and awe. To illustrate, look at today's OT reading from Isaiah 43. In vs. 16–17, the prophet reminds God's people of what He did in the past, particularly at the crossing of the Red Sea during the Exodus. "Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick."

It's a powerful reminder that God divided the Red Sea miraculously so that the children of Israel were able to cross through it on dry land! As Israel was crossing through the Red Sea, the Lord hindered the Egyptian army with cloud and darkness. And then suddenly, the cloud and darkness were lifted and the Egyptian army entered into the Red Sea on dry land in their haste to destroy Israel. The waters of the Red Sea were divided into two walls on the right and the left. As Isaiah said, this the God who made "a path in the mighty waters..."

But the Lord never allowed Egypt to reach God's people. While in the midst of the Red Sea, the waters began crashing down upon the Egyptians. The chariot, the rider, the army, the horse, were all extinguished like a wick. And Israel would forever be identified by that great event. God destroyed the powers of evil that day. Egypt had enslaved God's people for over 400 years; they had killed their newborn sons. Make no mistake about it...this was a battle between God and Satan. And God won! God's people won!

It was a great moment in redemptive history. The Lord showed Himself strong on behalf of His people. But we cut Isaiah's message off too soon! Look at vs. 18–19, "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old" (i.e., the Red Sea deliverance). Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not

perceive it?” The Lord God of heaven and earth promises to do something greater and more glorious than the Red Sea Exodus. Something greater is coming. Look for that instead of living in the past! My new work is coming; it’s already on its way. Can’t you perceive it?

What is that new thing? Jesus. To be sure, this new thing that transcends the mighty events of the Egyptian Exodus came 700 years after Isaiah’s prophecy. God’s Son was born of the Virgin Mary in the humble town of Bethlehem. Nobody really expected that. Joseph and Mary had to take the infant Jesus to Egypt for safety because of Herod’s murderous rage. That’s rather ironic, isn’t it? God’s people left Egypt under Moses because they had been enslaved for 4 centuries. Now, God’s incarnate Son must fly into Egypt for safety! But then again, there was that obscure prophecy in Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt I called my Son...” No Red Sea parting this time. No plagues to break the stubborn will of Pharaoh. Something new is coming. Don’t you perceive it?

That’s the question we must consider today. Do we perceive the new work of salvation accomplished in Jesus, the Virgin-born Son of God the Father almighty? What God has done and is doing in Christ is similar to His works of old. But His new work is greater, exponentially elevated in its scope and grandeur. For it not only includes the redemption of His people from slavery and evil – as the Lord did for Israel – but the renewal and transformation of the entire created order.

Isaiah prophesied of that too in today’s reading. He described it beautifully and poetically, using the past but elevating it to greater heights. “I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise” (Is. 43:19b–21). After the Lord delivered Israel at the Red Sea, He guided them through the desert and brought them to the Promised Land of Canaan. During that journey, He gave them food and drink miraculously. Water came from a rock to slake their thirst. Manna from heaven fed them every day until they entered Canaan.

The new and greater work that we NT Christians are to perceive and to rejoice in is that the Lord Jesus is our living water (c.p. Jn 4) and our bread of life (c.p. Jn 6). Through saving faith in Jesus, we will never thirst or hunger again. The way to our Promised Land is made clear and plain for all to see, through the love and forgiveness Jesus offers for He is the way, the truth, and the life (c.p. Jn 14:6).

Even the wild creatures, jackals and ostriches, will honor and worship the Lord. Thus Isaiah signifies that the old creation will be made new in this new work of salvation. Genesis 1 and 2 are beautiful in their description of God's creative work. Man's sin and disobedience have corrupted that creation so that death and suffering are all too common. The Bible declares here in Isaiah 43 but also in Isaiah 65 & 66 that the Lord will make a new heavens and a new earth. No longer will death be the norm. The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the bull. No longer shall death and sorrow have dominion. This new work of redemption is elevated in the NT in like Galatians 6:15, II Corinthians 5:17, and Revelation 21. For the new creation, into which we are born again through baptismal faith, is founded upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

This new, exalted work of God finds its heights in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Who expected God's eternally begotten Son to take on human flesh and blood for the express purpose and doing a new work of redemption? Who expected divine love to be demonstrated in the righteous dying for the unrighteous? In the OT, God worked through prophets, priests, and kings to show His wonders. In the NT, God Himself works to save His people, to make them new, to establish a new creation made for them; made for you and me and all believers in Christ.

Do we perceive this new work? It's a greater work than mere survival or even happiness and prosperity. The apostle Paul in today's epistle reading gives voice to this new work God is doing in you and all believers. Philippians 3:8-11 describes how all things are mere rubbish – trash – when compared to the richness of knowing the Lord Jesus in the power of His death and resurrection. A righteousness of faith is obtained through the Lord Jesus. In Jesus, you are able to stand before God the Father with a clean conscience and pure heart for you are covered in the righteous of the crucified and resurrected Jesus. Never before have human beings had such open and clear access to the Father's glorious presence. No more fear. No more diving judgment. The new work of Christ's redemption envelopes us in divine love and righteousness. Through faith, we are perfect in Jesus.

Perfection in Christ is the new work to which strive. Listen to Paul's admonition, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to the make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." (vs. 12). You belong to Jesus. And because Jesus is doing His new, redemptive work, we press forward to obtain the perfection of the Lord Jesus Himself!! That's a new work indeed!

Vs. 13, “Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own.” In other words, there’s more to come. The Lord isn’t finished with us yet. Let us continue (vs. 13b – 14), “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call to God in Christ Jesus.”

It’s all too easy for us to become captive to our past sins and failures, to past sorrows and disappointments. But St. Paul admonishes us to perceive the new work that Christ has done in His death and resurrection. All the yuck and junk and evil of the past and present are left behind. He can do this for one reason only: our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus so that we are now enlivened with His resurrection life. We are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are His new creation! That new and greater work that surpasses all previous works of salvation is our redemption. We are no longer slaves to the evils of this world. Our Red Sea redemption is even greater: the Lord Christ’s Good Friday death and Easter resurrection.

Having been thus loved and redeemed, we press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. That goal is our glorious participation in the resurrection of the just on the Last Day.

The Red Sea deliverance was great! Good Friday and Easter were awesome in the truest sense of those words. But now, we live in and look forward to the greatest prize of all: our final and complete and eternally perfected redemption to be awarded on the Last Day. That’s the new work Christ Jesus does on your behalf. Do you perceive it? Through faith in Jesus and by the power of His Spirit, we press on toward this prize in joy and victory.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.