

## Braving the Wilderness *A River in the Desert*

Isaiah 43:14-21

March 17, 2024

It was William Faulkner, in his novel *Requiem for a Nun*, who wrote these provocative words: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

We know this by experience, each of us impacted by what has happened to us. Words that have been spoken. Actions that were taken. And it is as true of communities and nations as it is of individuals that the past is never dead. It lives on within us, among us, particularly evident for people who claim faith or, perhaps better, are claimed by faith. We belong to a tradition that is rooted in what came before us. We stand on the shoulders of ancestors—sinners and saints. We bear the burdens and enjoy the blessings of a past we did not control. We gather every week, and we read these texts that were written centuries, millennia, ago. This is not a place for breaking news or tracking what's trending. No, our stories travel a great distance to get here. We are a people with a long history, a deep memory. And there can be great comfort in that reality, to be sure.

This Lent, we've been exploring ancient texts that recall experiences in the wilderness. There was Jesus tempted in the desert for 40 days. God's people wandering through barren wastelands for 40 years between promise and fulfillment. There were those disciples stranded in a storm on the sea. Jacob on the run far from home. Scripture is filled with wilderness moments. And while these stories may recount past events, they speak in the present tense. So it is this morning with the words of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah addresses God's people living in exile in Babylon. They are far from home. They are captives in a hostile land again. And in that context, Isaiah lifts up these treasured memories.

*Hey, do you remember when God freed our ancestors from slavery in Egypt? Do you remember how God parted the waters of the Red Sea and made a pathway in the middle of those rushing currents?*

I can imagine the response of the congregation as Isaiah recounts these events. *Of course we remember, Isaiah. We've heard these stories all of our lives. But if only we lived in those days and not in these days, these terrible times. If only we could go back.*

And that's what makes Isaiah's next move so interesting to me. It's a daring approach to the prophetic task of truth telling, that having rooted his proclamation in the past, Isaiah urges us to forget it.

I've been puzzling on that admonition. *Do not remember the former things.* Why not? Why not turn our eyes backward?

Well the past is complicated. Most of us deal with it in two distinct but related ways. Two temptations. Neither one particularly helpful.

The first one is what I'll call selective amnesia. We make a conscious decision to forget some element of the past we may find disturbing or shameful. In fact, often in the Hebrew Scriptures the people of God are commanded *to remember* as a way of overcoming precisely that temptation, an instruction tied to ethical practices toward the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. *Remember, remember, God says, that you were once in their shoes. Remember that you too suffered oppression. Remember God's mercy poured out on you in the most difficult of circumstances. And then, when you remember, let that memory guide you toward justice and compassion. Remember.*

You see, selective amnesia is dangerous because it absolves us of the responsibilities rooted in our stories. We can become bound only by our own self-interest in the present. It was for those with amnesia that American philosopher George Santayana wrote the oft-quoted wisdom: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." We should be mindful of the risk of amnesia.

But it is not the only risk, not the only temptation, facing God's people in this morning's story. This selective amnesia is the gateway to a more pernicious trap. *Nostalgia*.

Now this one is easy to understand. They're exiled. They're in a strange land. Unfamiliar and inhospitable at best. Dangerous and deadly at worst. And so, God's people begin to paint pictures of life the way they imagine it perhaps used to be. The glory days. *You remember when our God was on the throne. You remember when we had prestige and power.*

Before you judge these ancient people too harshly, remember the past is never dead. Their story is our story. We, too, are tempted by selective amnesia and nostalgia. I know I am. I find myself yearning for the good old days, and I think you can relate because I hear it often. For the last couple of weeks, I've been keeping track, and here are just a few sentences I have heard in the last, say, six weeks:

*When I was young, people had respect for their leaders, their elders, their country, their neighbors, their God.*

*People used to volunteer without even being asked.*

*Pastor, if only we could return to simpler times.*

*We didn't have all these problems when I was a kid.*

*I just wish we could take this church, this city, this country back again.*

*I remember when that sanctuary was filled twice every Sunday.*

Now, did I mention that I, too, am a regular practitioner of such nostalgia? So much so that our two sons have a little game they play at my expense. It involves a comical, mocking voice and the phrase, "Back in my day..." followed by some pseudo-memory.

*Back in my day only grownups ate dessert. Back in my day, they actually played defense in the NBA. Back in my day, Duke won back-to-back national championships.* It goes on like this for a while, and it usually ends in some utter absurdity, like: *Back in my day we had to watch out for dinosaurs when we played outside.*

Nostalgia. It's a powerful, gripping force among us, especially when we are anxious for the future. And, my friends, we are a profoundly anxious people. This week, I read an alarming essay titled *Why We Gave Up on the Future*. The author describes ours as an age that "has discarded visions of pathbreaking novelty and increasingly focuses on intramural arguments about which elements of a nostalgic past to emulate." Sounds like our faith ancestors. In times of despair, we construct a past. We remember through rose-colored glasses, and so did our ancestors. *Back in my day...*

*Back in my day, God parted the Red Sea, and we walked through on dry land. Back in my day, God was powerful, and everyone knew it. Back in my day...*

But the prophet Isaiah will simply not allow it. *Stop!* he says. Stop worshiping the past. Stop being held captive by memories that tell only a partial truth. Quit the nostalgia because it is preventing you from seeing what God is doing right now. No matter how hard we may try, it is not possible to live in the past. And so, nostalgia does not create a different world, it denies the beauty of the one we're living in and the responsibilities that are ours.

Having instructed God's people to forget what was, Isaiah speaks of what God is about to do. And what he unwraps here is the antidote to selective amnesia and stifling nostalgia. It is *imagination*. His words overflow with imaginative power.

Friends, we cannot begin to live transformed lives, or think of building a new world, unless we first imagine another way is possible. The words of the prophet are designed to shake us up. The past might inform, but it must never dictate, our future. We worship and serve a living God.

Long ago, God parted the waters and gave dry land for safe passage. That was then. It will be different this time. There will be a river in the desert. But you must know where—or how—to look. Imagination conquers nostalgia with renewed vision. When we are captive to wistful remembering, we find ourselves immobilized, our faith drained. We give up on the future. But when we trust a living God, all things are possible.

I thought of this a few weeks ago when I attended an event celebrating the work of the Congregational Care Network at IU Health. It's an extraordinary program that partners isolated patients with volunteers who offer encouragement and receive friendship in return. At the event, a speaker referred to a phrase used to describe factors that have a negative influence on wellbeing. That phrase is: *social determinants of health*. Things like lack of access to nutritious food, systems of discrimination, educational inequity, and generational poverty. The speaker told us that he had stopped using that phrase, replacing it with this one: *social impediments to health*. It's a subtle change, but it describes a significant difference. When we speak of determinants, we speak of what is fixed, set in stone, outside of our control. There is this implicit fatalism that can deplete our energy. But the truth is we can do something about these systems and challenges. But first, we must imagine a different way: a community mobilized to support the most vulnerable.

Nearly one-third of Marion County residents needed food assistance in 2023. One-third. 90% of renters spend more than 30% of their income on housing. These are profound challenges, impediments to wellbeing. But they don't tell the whole story. There is incredible abundance among us. Abundance of material resources, yes. *And* abundance of generous

hearts and compassionate spirits. What we lack, it seems to me, is prophetic imagination. A vision for a brighter future of shared wellbeing. A vision that can take shape right here.

*So do not remember the former things.* Yes, they were miraculous in their time, inspiring for sure. But God is about to do a new thing. In the desert, John the Baptist found a river. He spoke of new beginnings as he baptized those who came seeking transformation.

The gift we have to offer the world is our imagination. The green shoot sprouts the instant we acknowledge its potential. We look across the arid wasteland and, *could it be?* A river flowing through the desert. Yes, there is hope in the wilderness. You just have to know where to look. Amen.