

April 6, 2025 – Isaiah 43:16-21

Going home after you've been away for a long, long time is always an interesting experience. I feel that often when I go back to Ohio. There are certain parts of being back home that are very familiar. The Cuyahoga River Valley as it cuts through the city. The Goodyear blimp rising out of the air-dock. The old Quaker Oats grain silos at Quaker Square. You see these things and you know you're in Akron, OH.

But there are other parts that are very unfamiliar to me. Because the city is always changing. Every visit, there's always something different. Some old building that got torn down. Some new building filling a lot that used to stand vacant.

Such that navigating the city can really be quite difficult. I think I know where I'm going, but all the landmarks have changed. My memories don't match what the city looks like anymore. Often I have to pull out a map like a common tourist, just to make sure I know where I'm going.

Throughout Scripture, God regularly calls His people to remember. To remember His mighty works. To remember His mercy. To remember how He saved, how He delivered, how He provided. The memories of what God has done become landmarks. A way to navigate their relationship with. So that they know what to expect from him. So that they know where they are going.

And we see examples of this over and over again. In Deuteronomy 5, He says, *“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”* In Psalm 105, David exhorts us, *“Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered.”*

God doesn't call His people to look back out of nostalgia. He calls them to remember so their faith in the present will be anchored in His faithfulness in the past. If He saved us before, He will save us again. If He provided for us before, He will not fail us now.

And we hear that call to remember again at the beginning of today's reading from Isaiah. *“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.”*

This is the Exodus he's describing. The great rescue from Egypt. The Red Sea split in two, the dry path through the waters, the crashing of the waves over Pharaoh's army. The chariots—gone. The horses—swept away. The soldiers—quenched like a candle.

This moment defined Israel. They were slaves, but now they were free. They were pursued, but now their enemies were gone. And it was all the work of God. This was a key landmark in the history of Israel. One that the Israelites remembered well and expected to see every time the Lord spoke.

But then comes something entirely unexpected. *“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.”* Wait... What? Forget the Exodus? Forget the greatest moment in Israel's history? After centuries of remembering, after generations of celebrating festival after festival of remembrance, now God says, “Don't remember it?”

This would have startled Isaiah's hearers. It was like tearing down a key landmark in their relationship with God. Forget the very thing that shaped their identity as God's people? Forget the Red Sea? Forget His deliverance?

But then God explains: *“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”* God is doing something new. Something greater. There's going to be a new landmark in place of the old one. Something that makes the parting of the Red Sea look small. Something that makes the old rescue seem like a shadow. Something that bursts forth like a shoot from dry ground, like a spring in the desert.

*“I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”* Not just a path through the sea, but a road through the wasteland. Not just water held back, but water gushing forth. Not just escape from Pharaoh, but rescue from sin and death itself.

What is this new thing? It's Jesus Christ. Because He is the new Exodus. He is the way in the wilderness. He is the river in the dry land. He is the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. He is the deliverer who sets us free not from Pharaoh, but from Satan. Not from slavery in Egypt, but from bondage to sin. Not from mortal danger, but from eternal death.

Christ walked the road to Calvary. Christ passed through the waters of suffering and wrath. Christ was drowned in our judgment and raised to give us life. This is not just another chapter in Israel's story. Another landmark to add to all the others.

This is the climax. This is the fulfillment. This is the new covenant, the new creation, the new thing that makes all things new. Because, in reality, all those landmarks of the past that they were supposed to remember, were all pointing to Jesus. Every miracle pointed to Him. Every promise led to Him. Every sacrifice foreshadowed Him.

And so now, God says, "Forget the former things"—not because they were unimportant, but because they were preparation. Because what has come now in Christ is better by far. As Paul writes in our Epistle: *"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."* Everything – even the Old Testament that Paul spent so many years studying – is worthless compared to knowing Christ. Our focus must be Christ. His death. His resurrection. His grace. His promise.

But this is a hard thing for us to grasp. Because we're sinners. And we are so very easily distracted. We're pulled away by the world. Pulled away by its worries, by its temptations, by its false hopes and fading pleasures. We are weighed down by anxiety. Overwhelmed by schedules. Consumed by comparison. Exhausted by fear.

We're so sinful that even the good gifts of God can become distractions if we lose sight of the Giver. Family, work, health, community... these are wonderful blessings from God. First article gifts from the giver of every good thing. But when they take Christ's place in our hearts – when they eat away at our time and our attention – they become burdens, rather than blessings.

And so we end up like Israel in the wilderness. Grumbling because things are harder than we thought they'd be. We end up like the Pharisees in our Gospel lesson. Clinging to the creation and rejecting the creator, even as he stands directly before them. We end up like the disciples in Gethsemane. Falling asleep when we should watch and pray.

And yet, thanks be to God, He does not withdraw His mercy. He does not take away the new thing. He does not say, "You failed to notice it, so it's gone." No. He gives. And He gives. And He gives again.

*"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."*

He gives drink to the thirsty. He gives grace to the ungrateful. He gives mercy to the undeserving. He gives Christ to you. Because He is gracious. Because He chose you. Because He formed you for Himself.

And today, that giving continues. Right here, in this place. Today, we gather to receive what God has given. To receive Christ in the Word. To receive Christ in the Sacrament. To receive the forgiveness of sins, the strengthening of faith, the peace that passes all understanding.

Here, in this place, rivers run in the desert. Here, the new thing springs forth. Here, we perceive what God has done. And here, we declare His praise. Not because we're good, but because He is. Not because we're faithful, but because He is. Not because we've earned it, but because He has given it.

So forget the former things. Let the past rest. Fix your eyes on Christ. He is the new thing God has done. He is the living water in the desert. He is the Lamb who was slain and now lives forever. And He is here. For you. Amen.