

**A NEW THING**  
**September 13, 2020**  
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*Isaiah 43:1-2, 18-21*

*But now thus says the LORD, God who created you, O Jacob, the God who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.*

*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals 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 so that they might declare my praise.*

Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah are known as Second Isaiah. They were written by an anonymous prophet who preached to Jewish exiles in Babylon just before the capture of the city by the Persians. There was no planned date for their return to their homeland. All they had was the promise that God would intervene and create “a new thing” if they only could perceive it.

This “new thing” turned out to be a central event in the life of God’s people. Noted biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann calls it an “active intervention,” which transformed God’s people from those living under the judgment of their pre-exilic life to those living under the promise of the future. Exile turned into homecoming and death into life. God’s promise included a homecoming journey when the “dry parched land” would become “well-watered, life-giving territory.”

Even without a return date set in stone, the promise of God’s intervention gave hope for the future. God’s people remembered those times when flood waters receded, seas were parted, and the waters of Jordan were crossed.

One word of warning: we may return to this text when our newly-established Anti-racism Task Force begins its work. One of our “new things” will include a new look at familiar biblical stories. We will discover that our history suggests more similarities to the Babylonians who captured people and took them from their native lands. That doesn’t mean we can’t identify with people in exile, just that we have to be careful as we perceive the new thing God is doing in this time of pandemic and social injustice.

As a staff member of the Illinois Conference I’ve been on many Zoom sessions with Conference clergy, lay persons, and Members in Discernment. At a weekly Conference Zoom sessions, I heard Rev. Nate Brantingham, the new Chaplain at University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana who arrived as the campus shut down.

Rev. Brantingham received an MBA with an emphasis on entrepreneurship and had experience in that field. I asked him what the church could learn from the field in this time period. He gave two answers:

1. We are involved in the Ministry of Winging It. We need to learn to move quickly in a new direction, turning on the proverbial dime.
2. We have to be OK with the inevitable concept of failure.

Moving quickly in a new direction and being comfortable with the concept of failure were not gifts I brought to ministry. Being familiar with more than a few congregations, I know many congregations don’t necessarily have these skills in abundance. But I have been amazed how quickly many churches have embraced the challenges of this time and how many congregations have actually perceived God doing a new thing.

Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ, located in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago, has a long history with social activism, going back to the 60’s with anti-war and racism work. Their ministry and mission have been closely intertwined. Like many congregations, they love their building. Their Arts and Crafts styled sanctuary was on the same architecture tour program that our church participated in.

In the wake of current realities, the congregation’s “new thing” was to sell their building. They could no longer in good conscience pour money into

their admittedly beautiful building. They put it on the market and found a buyer – a Jewish congregation – almost immediately.

Future plans include establishing a foundation to support individuals and groups whose ministries align with theirs and establishing themselves as a congregation of elders able to mentor a new generation of justice seekers. They'll find another place to worship but, for now, this is their new thing!

Another gift for ministry in this time has been resources provided by church-related organizations. This week I read the latest installment of “The Journey Blog” of the United Church of Christ Mental Health Network, Rev. Dr. Rachael Keefe’s article “Recognizing Reality: The Stress of Pandemic.” Rev. Keefe noted most people are operating at 80% stress capacity even as we try to admit that we are coping with the new realities.

Rev. Keefe reminded her readers being people of faith can be helpful. Our traditions and practices can reduce stress. She writes, “Practicing love of self, neighbor, creation, and God in this time of pandemic can help mitigate the stress we are all living under.” She provided an extensive list of practices and actions that could relieve stress. Most of them are not “new” in the sense of never having been done before but in the sense that different times call us to practice them in new ways.

The practice of compassion is a great spiritual practice. Instead of rushing to judgment (as many faith communities have done in the past), we can practice compassion toward ourselves, toward our neighbors, toward creation, and – in so doing, toward God. The practice of compassion toward our neighbor recognizes - to use a frequent metaphor - that, while we may be traveling on the same troubled seas, not everyone is in the same boat.

Rev. Keefe listed those people who might need experiences of compassion: “people living alone, single parents, healthcare workers, retail workers, delivery people, people with physical disabilities, people with mental health challenges, People of Color and many others” who have increased stress.

Perhaps the spiritual practice of compassion is “the new thing” we can embrace even as we struggle to move quickly in a new direction and we struggle to become comfortable with the concept of failure. We don’t have to sell our building to show increased compassion. Let’s just listen for God’s voice calling us to live in new ways.