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May 16, 2021

Isaiah 43:1-21

John 17:6-19

A New Thing

Here we are on the seventh Sunday of Easter and we find ourselves back at the Last Supper and we hear the earnest prayer of Jesus, a prayer of intercession really, asking for peace and sanctification and unity and protection of his disciples, his friends. Jesus knows that he will soon no longer be with the disciples in the way that they are used to him being present with them. He is praying for them and also preparing them for the new way they will experience the loving presence of God. Jesus, incarnate God, the Messiah, will soon be turned over for crucifixion and through that painful experience of loss and then the promised hope of resurrection, the disciples will come to discover anew God’s steadfast love.

In the reading from Isaiah, we hear the word of God spoken through the prophets - a reminder to the exiled Israelites of God’s uncompromising love for them and an envisioning of a future steeped in newness. We, too, it seems, are embarking on a future steeped in newness, as we begin to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic. In ever-new ways throughout myriad circumstances, God acts to redeem creation, not because of anything that we do, but because God is characteristically and essentially loving, gracious and merciful. The Israelites who were exiled to Babylon more than 2500 years ago and then delivered back home by the grace of God, sang a new song recounting and bearing witness to the freedom given to them by God. The disciples who sat with Jesus at the Last Supper, experienced the fullness of God’s love in a new way through Jesus’ death and resurrection. God’s unchanging steadfast love continues to show up in new ways that bring us a promised hope for the future – a future in which justice and righteousness and peace are fully experienced. God, who made a way through the wilderness, can make a way through our wilderness too, but it takes some courage for us to enter into this relationship of knowing and trusting God, holding onto an expectation that God’s love will show up in ever-new ways.

I came to you amidst a pandemic, and we were introduced to one another through our computer screens. I took notes at first, trying to put names with faces, trying to figure out who did what in the congregation. My notes say things like “Sam, council president, part of multi-generational family at SOTH”, “Jim, married to Lois, choir director for 50+ years”, “Margaret, white fluffy dog, prayer chain and card ministry” “George, pun-maker, cookie-baker”. You seemed to be a pretty well-oiled machine who knew who you were and what you did. You are a tight-knit congregation who pays attention to each other and knows how to care for one another. I wondered at first where I would fit in. You were not used to having a seminarian in your midst. How would you react if I did something different from the way you were used to? How would I even know if I was doing something differently? Would I be able to read your reactions through Zoom?

Perhaps the pandemic meant that you were already doing everything in a new way (and not necessarily by choice), or perhaps you are just a congregation who is comfortable with God who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow also being God who shows up in new ways.

During Advent, together we did a “new thing” when I led Wednesday evening Lectio Divina reflections through Zoom meetings. And you showed up, lit your advent wreaths, and tolerated my solo singing live from my living room. You participated in reading the scriptures out loud (some of you for the first time) and you shared your personal reflections and vulnerabilities.

This winter, when my aunt passed away, you ministered to me, your student minister. You called me, and sent me notes, and shared scripture with me, and held me in prayer. You taught me a “new thing” about how to be present in someone’s grief by modeling that ministry of presence.

During February and March, I offered to lead a small group Dialogue on Racism – and you showed up, did your homework, had some earnest and difficult conversations, and at the end of the book with your eyes set on justice, you said, “and now that we know more, what do we do next?”

During Holy Week, some of you participated in creating the Stations of the Cross guided reflections video. There were a lot of moving parts – a video, a script, background music, timing, and all of this online. And you volunteered, and showed up yet again, and didn’t get frustrated when the technology made things tricky. And at the end of one recording, one of you said to me “I don’t know where you come up with this stuff, but it sure is fun.” I cannot take credit for coming up with it, just with participating in it right alongside you. But that comment, “it sure is fun” spoke volumes to me.

We are sometimes reluctant to change things up but doing a “new thing” can be fun. Doing a “new thing” can also be challenging. Doing a “new thing” almost always makes us grow as a community and into a deeper relationship with God. Doing a “new thing” reminds us that God does “new things” right along with us. Thank you for welcoming me into your midst during this year of finding and experiencing God in “new places.” My hope is that we will continue to sing a “new song” to the Lord recalling our past, giving witness to our present, and sharing hope for the future.