

A NEW THING
5 Lent, Year C, March 25, 2007
The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ

Here we are at the last Sunday of Lent. Next week we move to Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. We will soon be in the story of the Passion, Jesus' last few days ... his arrest, trial, crucifixion, death ... and then ... two weeks from now ... EASTER! What are we to expect? What challenge is being laid down before us? What meaning can we take away from today?

We hear from the prophet Isaiah. He says that we are not to remember former things or consider old things. Isaiah says that God is about to do a new thing, can we see it? A new thing? What's that all about? What did it mean for Isaiah, for the first Christians and for us?

This past week a good friend of mine, Joan Kirby, died. You would have liked her ... she is one of those people we call a "character." Joan was one of those people I talked with a great many times about spiritual, religious and theological topics. Joan suffered a great deal in her life. Cancer left her with radiation burns. Lupus sapped her strength and energy. She was a little too heavy and had thinning hair. But she also had a great spirit.

One time we were talking about what heaven would be like. Joan talked excitedly about the new body she would have upon her resurrection. She would be a lot slimmer, her long full hair would be back and she would have a gorgeous body! Boy, that's what I'm counting on in the after life! A new body ... one where all the parts work, where hair grows where it's suppose to and I look great? Does anyone here wish they had a new body? Maybe this is what God means by a new thing!

Isaiah does reveal an interesting thing this morning for us. There is a pattern in the life of the people of God. There is suffering, the desire for something new, God acting and a new life. Isaiah was speaking to a people who understood this. The Israelites were in Babylon in exile. Their Temple had been destroyed and the people carried off to a strange land. Now circumstances had changed ... a new king told them they could go home. Isaiah issues a note of praise and caution to the Israelites. God has acted in their lives to save them ... but they were not going back to the way things were as before. Experiences had changed them. There's no going back to the good old days. But there is new life, a new thing.

The Israelites knew what this was all about. The first Exodus is the story of their being in captivity in Egypt as slaves. They cried to God and God hear them. God sends Moses and after a series of plagues they are freed! But where do they go next? They are delivered from Egypt and plopped down in the wilderness! Whoops! Now they are going to experience 40 years of wandering before they finally come into the Promised Land! But his difficult time is one where they will be shaped into the people of God! There will be Mt. Sinai, the manna, and more! There suffering does have meaning! So too does ours. Often God will begin a new thing in us by taking us from one difficult place and moving us into another before the new life emerges.

Isaiah encourages the people not to live in the past. Things will not be the way they were ... but rather than lament, he encourages them to look for what God is doing! Isaiah asks the

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people if they can see the new thing that God is doing in this new exodus! Can we see God at work in our lives? Why is it harder for us to see, especially when we get older? Too often we complain about how better the past was ...when life was simpler, when people were trustworthy, when children behaved and crime didn't exist, when you could leave your doors unlocked ... and all these wonderful things occurred. Except the past was never that good. We suffer from nostalgia, the selective remembering of the past. Things were never that good!

The reality is that suffering has always been around. Life is about growth, change and becoming what God wants. There is new life all around us ... in the babies we see, the teens growing into adults, the new jobs, the new schools and relationships. Suffering is part of all of this. We can't avoid it, but there is a greater truth here ... in the present of it all God is there working something new in us!

For us as Christians, there is something new being worked in the life of Jesus. Yes, we are moving towards the Passion. Yes, Jesus will suffer and die. But God will do something new on Easter and that is Resurrection! Just like for Isaiah and the Israelites, just like for the people around Jesus, we too are coming into something new. Can we see it?

Some of you may have noticed my reddened face. A couple of you wondered if I was vacationing in Florida. Another person asked if I was feeling well and another if I was having a reaction to a medicine. What is happening is something new is taking place. Several years ago I had melanoma, skin cancer. I go to the dermatologist and have molds removed every six months. I'm losing ground there as pieces of me are cut off! But the doctor has me on this treatment. I use this cream every day on my face. It destroys the upper layer of the epidermis. This is where the damaged skin cells lie and could turn into cancer if not dealt with. The process is painful and unattractive ... but the promise is new skin ... as soft as a baby's bottom! The other promise is no cancer. This is something new. It reminds me of what the Israelites went through in Babylon, and what Jesus will go through next week.

We have a loving, forgiving God who makes things new. We have a God who loves to create new things in our lives ... and does so every day. What we need to do is to start looking for what God is doing in our lives. It's time for us to stop our complaining and open our eyes to the wonder of what is taking place all around us. Isaiah says to us, "Behold, God is doing a new thing, can you see it?" There is a wonder of life out there for us. My friend Joan knew what this was all about. She's a modern day Isaiah inviting us out of the suffering to look for the wonder and joy that God has intended for each of us.

I want to challenge us to finish our Lenten journey by looking for the way God is creating something new in our lives. It's the way God works with us ... and there is more going on than we could ever imagine! We are a work in progress; something new ... let's recognize what God is doing and celebrate the good news! May we open our eyes and see what God has in store for us!