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# God is Doing a New Thing

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 2 June 2024

1 Samuel 3:1-10 • 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 • Mark 2:23-3:6

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

In the Book of Isaiah, God says: “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” (43:19) God was speaking at that time about redeeming and rescuing the people of Israel and Judah, his own chosen people who had gone astray and turned to other Gods. The new thing he would be doing was to send his servant, his chosen one in whom he delights, to establish justice on the earth (42:1,4) — Jesus, who came to show us the way to salvation.

And in many ways, God is always doing a new thing. We see it all through the Gospel, as Jesus challenges the religious practices of the Jewish priests, and all their rules and prohibitions. Jesus brings a new way, rooted in the old, but stripped down to its basics: love God and love one another. In today’s Gospel, he challenges the Pharisees in the synagogue regarding their rule of doing no

work on Sundays. “The Sabbath,” he says, “was made for the good of human beings” (Mark 2:27), to allow them to rest after the long week of work. The Sabbath was not made to rule people and make their life harder, and certainly was never intended to forbid healing or helping people. The Sabbath should be viewed in the light of a positive desire to honour God by emulating God’s own rest on the seventh day, after creating the world. As God rested, so we should rest, and remember God’s love and creativity.

And it was not just Sabbath rules that Jesus was challenging. Jesus challenged any rule which stood in the way of serving his people. The example he gives about David eating the bread from the altar, which only priests were allowed to eat, shows that even the sacred laws of the temple did not have more importance than the demands of charity. This was a big change for the Jewish priest and the Pharisees. Jesus was overturning the laws regarding sacrifice and temple worship. He was ushering in a new way of serving God — not through the law, but through faith and servanthood. To serve God means to have faith in him, not to master the intricacies of temple worship, dietary rules and the rest. It is a more mature way of worship, given to us through Jesus when God thought we were ready for it. And it can be practiced by people everywhere, without limitation, not just by those who lived near the temple.

It’s a very small and trivial example, but this reminds me of when I entered first grade in school, which you do when you’re about five years old. (I was only four, but that’s because my birthday’s in December.) I was given a big, fat pencil to write with. We all got them, and that’s what we used in class. At home, however, my parents and my older siblings had already started teaching me how to write, and I just used a regular, skinny, yellow pencil, because that’s what we had around the house. One day I brought one of those pencils into class and was using it at my desk. When the teacher saw me using it, she took it away from me and gave me the big fat pencil again. I asked her why? (I was a bit cheeky I suppose.) She said that my little hands couldn’t hold a skinny pencil very well. “But,” I said, “I am holding it!”

Needless to say, I didn’t win that argument. But I remember the incident today, and it has always been for me an example of following a rule for the sake of following it, rather than understanding the reason for the rule and applying it intelligently. Now I’m sure that there were reasons for that teacher to treat all the students equally, and that does make sense, so I don’t blame her.

In the case of the temple and worship rules, there were also reasons for following them as God set them out for the Israelites, as we see in Deuteronomy. At the time, following the rules *was* the worship. The people were children in understanding, and needed strict rules to bring them to a consciousness of God’s power and authority. By providing a set of very

specific and detailed rules, the ancient Israelites knew just what was expected of them and what place in society they held. God knew they needed this, and provided it for them out of his great love for them. In return, the Israelites showed their allegiance to God by obeying the rules.

Three times God saw that humanity had gone astray, and three times he took action to correct us. The first was when he looked down from heaven and “saw how wicked everyone on earth was and how evil their thoughts were all the time” (Genesis 6:5). That was when he sent the flood. The second time was when he was rescuing the Israelites from their oppression in Egypt, and brought them into the land he promised them. Yet they took every opportunity to rebel and follow other Gods. So he gave them the law: the Ten Commandments and all that went with them.

And the third time was when he sent his Son to lead us into the new commandment of love. This time, the rules were simple: love God and love your neighbour. But the greater responsibility is given to us. We do not have a detailed handbook of how to live. We do not have a new Deuteronomy, with a thousand and one rules to guide us in every aspect of daily living. We have to figure it out ourselves, based only on the two great commandments. But what we do have is the Holy Spirit, which Jesus gave us when his human life was over. So Jesus was able to ignore the temple laws, such as the ones the Pharisees accused him of breaking in our Gospel. He could ignore them because human need and suffering were more important. He could ignore them because the Holy Spirit would very soon come into our lives and our bodies and guide us from day to day. The law was no longer written on stone tablets: it was written on our hearts.

These are all big examples of God doing a new thing. But there are also many smaller examples we see from day to day. God is doing a new thing here in this parish, bringing in more families, and opening up opportunities to reach out to our communities. New churches are starting up in Prebbleton — that is a good new thing. God does new things in my life, and I’m sure in yours as well.

And every new thing is an opportunity for us to give thanks, and to pray for God’s blessing on what we do. Let us not forget to look around us and see the ways God is acting in the world. Thanks be to God for his many blessings. Amen.