

Sermon for May 19, 2019, Easter 5
Acts 9: 36-42; Rev. 21:1-6

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Making Everything New!

If you've been following the daily prayers that Bonita and I have been sending out during these 40 Days of Prayers here at St. Andrew, then you might remember this passage on May 13 from Isaiah 43: 19: *"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"* The Rev. Joan Gray uses this verse as a message from God, which she relates this way: "Never think you have me figured out. I am always doing something new. If you are too comfortable, you are probably not living close enough to me. Do not resist when life takes you out of your comfort zone. Do not struggle to hold on to the way things are or have been. I am a God of the future, and I am always walking with you into the unfolding surprises of my will. Relax and enjoy the journey!"

Oh, if only it were that easy, right? As I worked on this sermon, I was sitting in the airport in Albuquerque yesterday, waiting on a flight that had been delayed two hours and knowing that delay would keep us from catching our connecting flight to Huntsville. All flights were full and we weren't sure we'd get home last night. I didn't quite know which one of you would want to deliver my sermon so I was a bit on the anxious side. But here was this verse, right in front of me: *"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"* The new thing God was doing was giving me the uncomfortable opportunity to realize there are many things that I cannot control and that the best action was to hand over the timing of airplanes to God and to realize that whether or not I was present today was not as important as your presence and God's, which would go on.

When I read the scripture selections for today, that one line kept catching my attention: *"See, I am making all things new."* That verse is from the Book of Revelation, a very esoteric, complex, and often misunderstood text which requires much study. So, can we understand something about this verse without knowing everything about Revelation? Yes.

The chapters in our Bible that we call Revelation were parts of a letter written in code and sent to various early Christian communities that were facing ostracism and persecution for being a community on the outside of the norm. The author, named John, traditionally believed to be the same John as the gospel-writer, but more likely a Christian prophet and disciple of John exiled for preaching the good news, wrote to these communities to encourage them to stay strong in the face of opposition. According to him, they had a choice to make: to orient their lives to their culture (Babylon being the

code name for Rome), and so avoid persecution, or to orient their lives to God, who, through their suffering, was making all things new.

So, what's that have to do with us? We don't have to suffer for our faith, yet. We're not outsiders yet. But the fact is that our faith will suffer if we, too, don't make a choice between our culture and our God. Our culture offers us all new things. God wants to make all things new. There is a world of difference in between, so listen again. Our culture offers us all new things. God wants to make all things new.

We like new things, don't we? Fact: On the highway in Albuquerque, we saw a car called a Porsche Spyder, a bright red compact sports car. Dennis wanted to take a picture of it but we couldn't get a good shot. I asked him what made it so special. He said only 900 models were made to sell in the United States, and that the sticker price was \$845,000. Not \$84,000. \$845,000. Oh yes, we like new things. And so does our culture, considering all the necks, including mine, straining to catch a glimpse of this car.

We assume that new is always better than old. Think of new cars, new houses, new neighborhoods, new jobs, new clothes, and new hairstyles. Even the phrase "a new you" implies that "the old you" wasn't worth much. I sure wouldn't mind being traded in for a new me. Yes, I'd love to snap my fingers and trade in the old for the new.

But that isn't how our God works, and that's the GOOD NEWS we hear today. God doesn't toss the old away and start over, like Coca Cola did in 1986 with "New" Coke. Remember how well that worked? No, God doesn't discard what is old; he redeems it. And he doesn't make all things new at the snap of his fingers. No, God takes time; God IS MAKING all things new and he hasn't yet finished. And that includes us. We, his children, imperfect, warped, yet valued, are in the process of being made new through love, the love of a God who chose to come down to mere mortals and pitch his tent here.

This image of God working patiently with us and on us in each of our own situations is an awesome, intimate, and personal one, one that was familiar to the early Christians reared on the Jewish Scripture. God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah and said to his rebellious children, "Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand" (18:6). Think of yourself being held in the attentive hands of a deliberate potter. God desires to shape us, to smooth us, to strengthen us, even though it's a messy job for the potter.

Another passage of God as redeemer is found in Malachi 3:3, where the prophet describes God as a silversmith: "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." We are the silver being transformed and made new, but we fail to remember what it takes of the silversmith. The silversmith has to stay close to that refining fire and keep his eyes on the glaring flame. He cannot afford to leave the fire or the silver will be destroyed. Sometimes it's in the very heat of the fire that God most changes us, where God also is.

The challenge with being made new, which the author John understood, is that it is not a painless process, so we often avoid it. Think about the birth of an infant. We all know how much the mother suffers in making something new. But the infant also suffers as it leaves its place of security, warmth, and enclosure to face bright lights, loud voices, stethoscopes, needles, and separation. Have you ever thought how frightening that must be? But the birth passage is necessary for making things new.

We can look around this church and see trials and persecutions going on right now. Some of us are tackling physical ailments and health issues, while others are facing the changes that aging brings. Some of us are struggling with difficult family challenges or concerns about our children or spouses. All of us are wondering what God's plans are for St. Andrew's future. We each have a trial, tribulation, persecution, or woe going on somewhere in our lives, and the question becomes, "Are we allowing God to make us new? Or are we avoiding it?" While we might wish that God would toss aside our problems, God doesn't work that way. Instead, he works through our problems and redeems them. Can the lures of our culture do that? Even a Porsche Spyder? No, so we must choose to whom we will give our trust, time, and attention.

As Christians then, who know to expect suffering, are we to believe we are all alone in these life-passages? Our God is not an uncaring, distant Being, but a personal, involved God present with us in our pain, willing to feel our pain, and able to redeem our pain, making it something new, if we allow him.

Former things are being made new. That is our hopeful message today. In Revelation, we get a glimpse of what awaits us, and those we love, as we are in the process of being made new. Processes require our participation and our patience. That redemption is happening now, every time we remember that God is with us in the good times and in the bad, in the laughter and in the tears, in the easy moments and in the challenging. Nothing in our lives is wasted for God is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, encompassing all of our lives. Each time we turn our thoughts and hearts to God, we give him the opportunity, like the potter and the silversmith, to patiently work on us with loving hands that will not let us break or perish. If we let him.

In these next few weeks before Pentecost, our sermon focus will be on prayer as a tool God uses to fashion us into new creations, and as a way for us to make ourselves accessible to God. Prayer comes down to a choice: culture or God. Culture won't encourage us in a life of prayer; instead, it will distract us from it. We cannot be changed if we don't make the time and space, through prayer, for God to be with us. We cannot endure our challenges and trials without prayer for ourselves and prayer for each other. We cannot transform our church into a place where disciples make disciples if we do not pray for the Holy Spirit to lead us. Prayer may not change our situation, but prayer will change us. That is the promise of the Creator who even now is making all things new.