

Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom
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Isaiah 42:1-9

Isaiah 53:1-10

John 9:35-38

“So, God, What’s New?”

It is useless, useless, said the Philosopher. Life is useless, all useless. You spend your life working, laboring, and what do you have to show for it? Generations come and generations go, but the world stays just the same. The sun still rises, and it still goes down, going wearily back to where it must start all over again. The wind blows south, the wind blows north- round and round and back again. Every river flows into the sea, but the sea is not yet full. The water returns to where the rivers began, and starts all over again. Everything leads to weariness- a weariness too great for words. Our eyes can never see enough to be satisfied; our ears can never hear enough. What has happened before will happen again. What has been done before will be done again. There is nothing new in the whole world. “Look,” they say, “here is something new!” But no, it has all happened before, long before we were born. No one remembers what has happened in the past, and no one in days to come will remember what happens between now and then.

What pessimism! What bleak words are these? Are these the words of a character in some avant-garde stage play that presents a despairing commentary on human

existence? Or are these words in some new novel- you know, one of those novels that really bring you down and you end up wondering why you ever wanted to read it, even if it did receive critical acclaim? Well, actually, no, my friends. These are words from the Bible. They are found in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, written by someone known as the “Preacher” or “Philosopher”, who lived and wrote about 200-250 years before Christ. Those of us who are reading through the Bible in a year remember these words from our readings a few weeks back.

I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you.

These words are also from the Bible, from the Old Testament- and are part of the Grand Sweep readings for this past week. They come from what is known as Second Isaiah, and were written about 700 years before Christ.

The Ecclesiastes passage was read in Today’s English Version translation. Ecclesiastes 1:9 may be better

known in older translations- in the Revised Standard Version it says, “There is nothing new under the sun.”

Now, in Isaiah 42:9, we read, “New things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you.”

Both of these statements come from the Bible. They seem contradictory. Which is true? Isn't everything in the Bible supposed to reveal truth? Sometimes we may feel stumped, at a loss for words when we run into this. For indeed, there are many verses in the Bible that seem to say the exact opposite of another. How can we sort this out? What's true? Is there really nothing new under the sun, or is God doing a new thing right this very minute, inviting us to anticipate and watch newness burst forth like blossoms before our eyes?

I don't know about you, but I have moments when I'd side with the old Preacher-Philosopher. There are times when I hear my mother's words emerge from my mouth. There are moments when I page through old prayer journals to find I was writing and praying about issues, needs, hurts and struggles that still plague me today. There are times when I page through Time magazine and see images of war and starvation that look exactly like images I've seen in history books from other times and other places. There are times when I watch the life of a friend or family member unfold in destructive patterns I've seen before- in workaholism, perfectionism, alcoholism, low self-esteem, self-righteousness, and self-

centeredness. These leap out and say, “Here I am again!” One of the most painful times of my life was when I saw depressive illnesses, and suicidal feelings appear in some of my children, after having seen them in my mother growing up. It's a terrible feeling, that feeling of instant replay that the Preacher knew about- of the sun setting and rising and wearily starting all over again.

So, does that mean Ecclesiastes 1:9 is true and Isaiah 42:9 is a mistake? What about it- “new things I now declare; before they spring into being I tell you of them.”

When we read the Bible we need to look at the context, form and style of what is written. This can help us understand more fully. Ecclesiastes presents the musings, questions and struggles of the writer, who is a human person. This book is one person's murmurings. The “Philosopher” reflected deeply on how short and contradictory human life is, with its mysterious injustices and frustrations. He concluded that he couldn't understand the ways of God, but in spite of this advised people to work hard and enjoy the gifts of God as much and as long as they could. Many people throughout the centuries have recognized themselves in his thoughts and feelings. This brings a strange comfort: “I am not the only one to have felt this, to have thought this.” The fact that Ecclesiastes, as well as the Psalms of lament, has been included in the Bible, shows that Biblical faith is broad enough to take in pessimism, doubt, feelings of despair, even anger and rage at God.

The same Bible that reflects human thoughts and feelings also offers hope in God. The passage from Isaiah presents this side of the coin: words of a prophet sharing what God has said to his heart. Isaiah 42:9 presents GOD speaking. Ecclesiastes presents a human being speaking. GOD speaks in words of promise, making a bold declaration: I am doing something new. Watch for it, even now it's taking shape around you!

So, which is true- Ecclesiastes or Isaiah? **THEY BOTH ARE TRUE.** Even though initially there seems to be an unresolvable contradiction here- both passages speak truth to us. It is **TRUE** that human beings face times of struggling with futility, with the unfairness and injustice of life, with despair at anything ever really changing. **THIS IS TRUE.** It is an authentic human struggle, and I am thankful that our Scripture gives it a voice. For me, this is part of the grace and love of God- the recognition of what is **TRUE** and **REAL** in human feelings and experience.

IT IS ALSO TRUE that God makes promises to us, and that God is a certain **KIND** of God. God is a God of creation—always creating something new. God is a God of surprises—always acting in unexpected ways that we can't anticipate, and often through people we see as insignificant or disreputable.

It was certainly unexpected that God would come in the flesh to live among us. It was unexpected that God-in-the-flesh would die on the cross for us. Yet, another passage from Second Isaiah, written long before the birth of Jesus, appears to anticipate this incredible event.

Have you noticed how often, in communion services, Holy Week reflections we read the words of this ancient voice? It speaks of a “man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity.” The man was “despised and rejected by others”. Something about him caused people to “hide their faces”. Yet, the writer proclaims, his suffering was on our account: It is “our infirmities” that he bore, “our diseases” that he carried. “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.”

The coming of God into our world, the gift of his life offered on the cross, this was **NEW!** And it appears that long before it happened, it was glimpsed and celebrated.

God can be relied upon to always be who God is. **BUT GOD LIVES OUT HIS NATURE IN A MULTITUDE OF WAYS.** GOD'S nature is to be up to something **NEW!**

God is a God of mercy and hope—never giving up on his children, but always calling to us, drawing us forward and out into **NEW PLACES WE HAVEN'T BEEN**

BEFORE. God is a God of POWER--- and this is perhaps the greatest surprise: God loves to SHARE his power and pour it out upon us in amazing and miraculous ways. The POWER of our God has a name—its name is LOVE. And that love became flesh and dwelt among us- his name is JESUS. And that love still lives here—in our hearts and in our relationships- through what we name the HOLY SPIRIT.

What kind of news is that? Alfred, Lord Tennyson, England's poet laureate in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was welcomed to a friend's home where he stayed for a night on a journey. When he entered the house, he asked his hostess if anything of note was happening. She answered, "There is only one piece of news I know: Christ died for all." "Well," answered Tennyson, "That is old news, good news, and new news."

In our times of discouragement and despair we WILL think and may say, "There is nothing new under the sun." Yet in the midst of our roller coaster lives, in our lows, our highs, our in betweens, God will always be whispering, or thundering, "NEW THINGS I DECLARE! Watch them. Can you see them? They are emerging even now."

"What's new, God?" we will ask. And God will stretch out a hand and say, "What's new? What's new? Come on, take my hand. Come with me and find out. Let's make things new together!" We may want to shrink back,

saying, "Oh, I don't think there could be really anything new, really." Or, "I don't have the power to affect anything- things are too complicated, too stuck, too messed up for ME to change them." Or, we don't say anything to God, but deep inside we don't trust him. We're afraid God will lead us out into deep water way over our heads and we'll end up sinking to a watery end.

But God won't be silent: "I WILL, I AM doing a new thing. Receive my power and come with me. You won't sink in deep water. You'll swim. You'll soar like a gull above the waves!"

What a wild God. Always up to something new. Always wanting to share his Spirit's Power with us. Always bringing new and more love and grace to an old and weary world. Always wanting us to be a part of it.

This God speaks to us as Christ spoke to the man healed of his blindness, asking us, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Do we? Have we truly answered, "Lord, I believe"?? Will we be a part of the new things God is doing in this world? Will we? He calls to us even now, asking for a NEW commitment, a NEW and FRESH openness to his leading. What will we say this Lenten season, as we follow Christ's road to the cross?