

Angela Pound

Isaiah 43:16–21

Around this time in 2015, I received a phone call that I had no idea would change the course of my life—and, in some ways, the life of Billtown Baptist as well. Mark and I had two young children and were faithfully attending another church. We had finally found a place with other children for our kids, but I still felt something was missing. Then I was asked to come to Billtown for one year to play piano with the choir and congregation. One year turned into eleven, and now, as I will begin my twelfth year here in the fall, I can only thank God for His faithfulness and for the story He has been writing in my life. This week, someone asked me if becoming a pastor had always been part of the plan. I laughed and said, "Absolutely not." For seventeen years I was a teacher, and from the time I was seven years old, that's all I ever wanted to be. I couldn't imagine anything else. I had the career I dreamed of, a permanent position, and a path that seemed set. Yet God had a different story in mind. At One Con this week, the theme was, "God, tell a story we couldn't tell on our own." As I reflected on that, I realized that phrase perfectly describes my life. And as we

celebrate our anniversary today, I think it also describes the story of Billtown Baptist Church. God has been writing a story here that none of us could have imagined on our own.

The Scripture for today comes from Isaiah 43:16-21. Isaiah originally spoke these words to people living in exile, people who felt stuck and far from home. They expected God to rescue them from Babylon, but God had an even bigger rescue in mind. Through Jesus Christ, God would provide salvation not just for Israel but for the world.

This passage is sometimes labelled God's Deliverance Transforms Life. I want you to think about this for a minute. How has God's Deliverance Transformed Your Life? How has God made things happen in your life, worked things together, that you didn't see coming, but God knew! Or maybe you've been coming here to Billtown for awhile. How has God transformed the life of this place?

This passage from Isaiah is called the interpretive key to the chapter; it's theme is integral to the overall message laid out in chapters 40-55 of Isaiah and it is a very interesting passage. As the passage begins, Isaiah speaks to the exodus from Egypt, but interestingly, only zeroing into one aspect of the act. Hear the words at the beginning again: Isaiah 43:16-17 "Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they

cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:” It begins with the Lord saying, remember what I did in Egypt? And when he tells them about Egypt, he doesn’t go into all the details, in fact, he really only references one famous event - the exodus. He doesn’t focus on the fact that he made a path for Israel to escape, in fact, the people are not even mentioned, but he mentions the sea so that they can see how the Lord used the path to bring Pharaoh’s army into the sea and drown them. Isaiah is focusing more on how the Lord eliminated their enemy than just providing them a path to the other side of the sea. The former things are giving way to a new thing.

And we find in the middle of the passage that we read today these words, Isaiah 43:18–19 “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Former things are giving way to a new thing. Isaiah brings the exodus moment to their memory but then right away says, “do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.” That is rather odd....why would it be brought up if you don’t want them to remember it? They are told instead to focus on things yet unseen, the future, on what God will do.

God is going to bring a far greater salvation to them in the future. At first it may seem it’s about what they are

currently going through, about the journey of the Jews from Babylon back to the promised land, but is that really going to be greater than what God did for the Israelites in bringing them through the Red Sea? This is a foreshadow of far greater things to come - salvation among all nations by Christ. As we hear in John 14:6 “Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” What God is going to do through Jesus will be so great, it will make the redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt shrink in comparison. There will now be rivers flowing in the desert, speaking to the Holy Spirit, as we hear a bit later in Isaiah 44:3 “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.” And not just redemption of his children but of nature, with what we hear in Isaiah 43:20 “The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,”

And while Isaiah doesn't mention the people specifically at the beginning of this passage he does in the last two verses. In fact, they are called the Lord's chosen people, a people he formed for himself. What stands out in this passage is that Isaiah says nothing about the enemy behind God's people or the destination ahead of them. Rather, his attention is fixed on the wilderness itself and

the remarkable change God will bring about there. Isaiah wants us to focus on this moment of transformation.

Isaiah begins this passage with an imagery of too much water, to a wilderness that doesn't have enough. From a scene where the Egyptians died to one where God's chosen people could die but will not because of God making streams to flow in the desert. In the past God produced dryness in the midst of water, now he is producing water in the midst of dryness. But it was not a physical river that he would create in the midst of the desert to take the people from Babylon back to Judah. God is saying that despite all the reasons they can find to praise God for his past faithfulness, the future would provide even more reasons. As one person wrote about this passage, God is saying "You ain't seen nothin' yet!"

The Lord is reminding them that their confidence on God's ability to do new things is rooted in the past. God doing what he did at the Red Sea during the Exodus, hope is to rise in their hearts of the future things that will come to pass. No, they are not to dwell on the past, through nostalgia alone, but to know that there is a hope in the future. Being stuck in the past isn't helpful. But moving through the past and using it as a way to bolster one's faith, hope, and confidence into what the future God has for us, then we can appreciate our sacred history correctly.

In 1821, this lot was purchased from John Mayhew Bill,

with the first church building being erected in 1822, although not dedicated until 1823. It was believed to be a one-room structure, almost barn-like, in appearance with few windows. As time moved on, the small meeting place wasn't big enough and so in 1872 another larger, two-story structure, with the sanctuary on the second floor, was built. However, from the winds, difficulties with heating, it was decided that a different type of building was required and so in 1902 that building was demolished and a third building erected in 1903, which is what we have today, more or less, with some renos, the cornerstone being laid on May 25th, the church being completed in early autumn and dedicated on October 25th, with a message that day called "Salvation Is For All." A lot has happened since then. Constitutions, a church bell, electricity, indoor plumbing and toilet, a telephone, a kitchen, then a newly renovated kitchen, stained glass windows, firsts of female deacons and pastors, first Black pastor, other pastors that have come and gone. There have been times of great celebrations, and times of sorrow. Times of prosperity and times of financial struggles. Times of stability, and times of tensions. But throughout it all, one thing that has remained is God's faithfulness. We could look at the long history of the Billtown United Baptist Church and say, it's a God story that we couldn't write on our own.

The Lord through Isaiah is promising more than just to

provide physical water on Israel's journey back from exile in Babylon. He is going to inject life into a people whose spiritual existence has dried up. Their relationship with the Lord had shriveled away to nothing, but the Lord was on the verge of making it sprout back to life. He was going to provide living water that would flow in their lives when he sent the Messiah to rescue his people—not from a physical captivity, but from a captivity that was life without the Lord. When Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well that he can provide living water that wells up to eternal life (John 4:14 “but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”), Jesus is indicating that he is the fulfillment of these promises made through Isaiah.

The final chapter of the larger section of Isaiah 40-55 begins with this invitation from the Lord: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters.” Jesus acknowledged that his task was to issue this invitation. In John 7:37 he says, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” Of course, we now celebrate the reality of the chosen Servant, that Isaiah speaks to, in Jesus Christ. We know His reality. For us, celebrating the Savior and Lord, requires that we not forget the things of the past, but celebrate them, and we can look

to the future with hope and renewal of things we can scarcely imagine. Our Christian hope of today and in the future is found in the past. It's not just about what the disciples experienced back then, it's about now and the future. We know what Jesus did on the cross. We know that he died and resurrected for us, so that we could live with God forever. He is making all things new. Because of all of that, we don't make the past into only a personal reference point. What God is doing and will do in the future is much more than we could ever imagine, and it is for all of creation. It is not focused on an individual person, or group, but God's plan encompasses everything, including the animals and the land.

In the words of Harry Bill, in his written work, "The Enduring Past: A History of the Billtown Baptist Church" he writes in his introduction:

"The enduring past of the Billtown Baptist Church has been a wonderful testimony to God's great works in this little rural community. Our church has not only served as a spiritual entity, but has been the community's main social organization as well. Many people in Billtown and area have come to the Lord, have been dedicated and baptized, have been married, and at life's end, have been buried from God's house in Billtown. Our church has been a blessing to all of us both in happy and not so happy times."

And then he continues in the epilogue, "God has been good

to all of us in the Billtown area. He has caused us to form a special Christian bond that is commonly referred to as the 'church family.' He has blessed this little rural community for many generations...We remember our forbearers and thank them through the Holy Spirit for passing on their Christian morals and values to us. Their efforts have left a great legacy...It is my fervent hope that you enjoy reading this book as much as I have in writing in. After all, it is about our enduring past as a church and as a family of God.”

The past of Billtown Baptist, the past of Christians in this place—we look back and see God's fingerprints everywhere. We see His faithfulness in the lives of those who built this church, worshipped in this church, prayed in this church, and passed their faith on to the next generation. We see His faithfulness in our own stories. I see it in mine. Eleven years ago, I came here planning to stay for one year. God had another story in mind.

But Isaiah reminds us that while we celebrate the past, we are not meant to live there. God says, "Do not remember the former things... I am about to do a new thing." The question for us on this Sunday is: What is the new thing God is doing now? Because God's story at Billtown Baptist is not finished.

It continues every time someone walks through these doors searching for hope. It continues every time a child

learns that Jesus loves them. It continues every time someone chooses to follow Christ. It continues every time a person is baptized and publicly declares, "I am the Lord's." It continues every time someone joins this church family and commits themselves to God's mission in this place. It continues every time one of us says "yes" to where God is leading, even when we never imagined that path for ourselves.

Some of us are here today because we are part of the history of this church. Some of us are here because we are part of its present. But all of us are invited to be part of its future.

Ask yourself, what story is God writing in your life? What part of the story is God asking you to be in this place? Perhaps for some, the invitation today is to receive the living water that Jesus offers for the very first time. Perhaps it is to stop living on the memory of yesterday's faith and allow God to renew your spirit today. Perhaps it is to take the next step of baptism, membership, service, or discipleship. Perhaps it is simply to trust that God is still at work in the wilderness places of your life. The God who made a way through the sea is still making a way. The God who brought water from the desert is still bringing life where things seem dry. The God who has been faithful to Billtown Baptist for more than two centuries is still writing His story among us. And if the last 203 years have taught us

anything, it is this: God is not done yet.

So let us give thanks for the story He has written. Let us celebrate the story He is writing. And let us step forward in faith, ready for the story that only He can tell. Because God will tell a story we couldn't tell on our own.

To God be all the glory.

Amen.