

Lent 5C'19  
7 April 2019  
Is. 43.16-21; Ps.126; Ph.3.4b-14  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church  
North Little Rock, Arkansas  
The Rev. Carey Stone

*O God of wisdom and truth, gives us the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the grace to perceive, the new thing that you are doing in our midst, through Jesus your Son, our Lord. Amen.*

I trust you enjoyed having the Rev. Canon Jason Alexander with you last week. I really appreciate his filling in for me.

And, speaking of priests filling in, there's a story about one supply priest who decided he would try and assist the Sunday school teacher by attending the children's Sunday School. He was curious as to how much bible knowledge the youngsters were getting so, he asked them a question, "*with what did Samson arm himself to fight against the Philistines?*" None of the children could tell him. "*Oh yes, you know!*" he said, and to help them out a little, he tapped his jaw with one finger. "*What is this?*" This jogged their memories, and the class cried in unison: "The jawbone of an ass!"<sup>1</sup>

Our ability to remember is a funny thing! The vast majority of us get frustrated when can't remember something important. We usually aren't as focused on trying to forget, that seems to happen without any help. This makes something the prophet Isaiah said that much more curious. After reminding the Israelites of their deliverance from Egyptian slavery through the parting of the Red Sea, he said: "*Thus says the Lord, 'Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.'*" And why does he now not want them to remember the past? He goes on to speak

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<sup>1</sup> [http://jokes.ochristian.com/Sunday\\_School/The\\_Jawbone.shtml](http://jokes.ochristian.com/Sunday_School/The_Jawbone.shtml)

the word of God to them, *'I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'*

The prophet understood something that was quite profound for his day, and it's still just as true today as it was then, the fact that past events can cause us to get trapped in a trauma response or a long-held tradition, and that can cause us to miss out on what's actually happening in the present moment. This is true for us as individuals as well as organizations and institutions.

The trauma response is obviously related to some troubling event from the past. One such event happened to me when I was five or six years old. A friend (and I use that term loosely) were out in his backyard playing when we came upon a wasp nest that had somehow gotten pinned on the ground by a tree branch. The friend, a couple of years my senior suggested that I 'remove' the tree branch. I did and about 30 wasps began to pursue me, I didn't have a chance to get the jump on them and about halfway to my back porch they caught up with me stinging me repeatedly in the neck and other places. It didn't affect my breathing but it hurt like nothing had ever hurt before. This trauma from my past continues to affect me to this day! It usually starts when the weather gets up into the low 70's, I begin dreading what I know will bring on the first appearance of wasps. My wife makes fun of me for keeping what must be 20 cans of RAID Hornet and Wasp killer under the kitchen sink. Every year I go to the store and buy a new one. Throughout the Spring and Summer, I remain on high alert especially when cooking outside on the grill. I have unfortunately passed my fear on to my daughter, who recently said, "Daddy why did you make me so afraid of wasps?" This past trauma keeps me from fully enjoying the present.

Churches all have their trauma stories of the past and St. Luke's is no exception. When certain stressors start occurring in the present it reminds folks of these hurts and wounds from years past. Things like indebtedness, malfeasance, and debilitating conflict all form a backstory that pervades our perceptions and colors our analysis of present events. Like an experience of de'ja'vu we may say to ourselves "*this looks awfully familiar*", "*O, I've been here before,*" "*I've heard those words before.*" Like the church staff member who saw three boxes of books stacked up in the pastor's office right before they were leaving for a two-week vacation and the staff member just knew the minister was going to leave the church for good, because they've "seen this before." It can be like me when the wasps return in Spring, it can bring on a visceral response, sweating, insomnia, etc. Our perceptions, like looking through cracked lenses, can distort reality, lead us to faulty interpretations, and can perpetuate cycles of fear.

The prophet Isaiah had been shown that God was up to something new, and it was going to be even better than deliverance from Egyptian slavery, something never before experienced by the people of God. Instead of having one small tribe on one tiny part of the globe as God's chosen, God had a much bigger plan, a plan for the whole world to be chosen! '*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?*' The kind of forgetfulness the prophet is talking about is different than when we forget where we put our car keys, this type of forgetting is intentional, a conscious decision to forget, to put out of mind and no longer consider it as having any bearing in the present situation.

When God is at work what feels like a trauma could really be a tremor from the ground shifting with transformation, when it seems like things are falling apart it just might be that they're falling into place, what feels like a pain from the past might just be a birth pang, signaling the coming of a new life. How do we know? Because that's what God is always doing, bringing transformation and new life into our lives and the life of our church and the life of our community: As the psalmist wrote, "*Weeping may spend the night but joy comes in the morning!*"<sup>2</sup>

A moment ago, I mentioned de'ja' vu that sense that something is familiar, a place we feel that we have been before. But what if St. Luke's isn't experiencing 'de'ja' vu' – what if it's experiencing 'vu ja'de!' It's a new place, a place like we have never been before. This new and different place is about transformation, about breaking hurtful cycles of the past and bringing healing, restoring unity, and bringing us to life like never before!

In his poem entitled "the Guest House", the 13<sup>th</sup> century poet, Rumi has caught on to the idea of God's mysterious and wonderful way of working through the unexpected and the unpleasant to bring us a fresh start on the path to redemption.

#### The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 30.5

empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whatever comes.  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

Amen!