

**Sunday Sermon**  
**April 2, 2017**  
**“Don’t Put a Period Where God Puts a Comma”**  
**Isaiah 43:16-19**  
**John 11:1-3, 17-27, 38-44**

Introduction

“What if you were out in the middle of a desert and someone came along and said, ‘If you will just wait right here, something new is going to happen. Pretty soon a river is going to come flowing right through this dry land,’ would you believe it?” My husband asked that one Sunday at the start of a children’s time.

“Yes,” said one of the little boys. “I would too,” said another boy.

“Why would you believe that?” Bill asked.

“Because God would do it,” the little boy said.

“So we believe God would do it?” Bill said.

“If you are a child, you would believe,” the little boy said. “But if you are an adult, you might not.” And then he added, “But I wouldn’t be in the middle of a desert anyway.”

“Well, what if you were? What if you had been in a far away wilderness for a long time?” Bill tried.

“I wouldn’t be,” the boy argued.

“But what if you were,” Bill persisted, trying to tell his story. “What if you were there and somebody came along and said, ‘Pretty soon, God’s going to send you home.’ Would you believe that?”

“Yes,” the boy said. “I would believe it,” the other children said.

“The children of Israel had been in Babylon for a long time,” Bill told the children. It was a long way from their home, across a big wilderness. And then a man named Cyrus, who was a Persian ruler, took over Babylon. And a prophet named Isaiah came and said to the people, “God is fixing to do a new thing. God is going to send you home.’ And some people believed Isaiah; but some people did not.”

“I believe,” one boy said. “I believe,” the others chimed in.

Bill continued, “Isaiah told the people, ‘God is going to make a way for you to go, right here through this desert. God is going to make streams break forth where there is no water, and the desert is going to bloom.

“I believe it,” the children said. “Good,” Bill said, “because it really did happen.” “

And they got water?’ “Yes, they got water.”

“And they got to go home?’ “Yes, they got to go home.”

“And the people were happy?’ They were very happy,” Bill said.

And God says to us, “I am fixing to do a new thing with you, “Can you see it?”  
Do you believe it?

“I believe it,” the boy said. “I believe it,” the other children said.

## I

I am starting my twelfth week here as the interim pastor. In the first eleven weeks, we have held funerals for four members. And many of you have experienced the loss of others as well, families and friends. Also we have seen people leave, moving to other places for various reasons.

At the same time, we have had new individuals coming here to worship and get involved, even to join. And yet in the ebb and flow of life, it we tend to focus on the losses rather than the gains and miss seeing the shoots of new life around us. We have a hard time seeing that God is doing new things and giving new life today.

The prophet Isaiah is speaking to people who have faced so many losses. They have lost sight of their calling as God’s people. They seem to have only hindsight, looking backward at what God did in the past. They are not so sure God is still at work among them.

A young pastor arrived at a church call and found no shortage of people ready to talk with her and offer advice. They told her about the great heritage of the congregation’s past and what she needed to do to maintain all that had been good about the church. They told her that if she followed the advice she was being given, everything would go smoothly and she would do fine.

Finally one day, after thanking yet another parishioner for the history lesson and the well-intentioned advice, the pastor said, “I have heard the great things God has done in the past, but what are the new and exciting things you expect God to do now at this church?” And there was silence, for the people could not imagine a future any different than the past.

Can we envision a future here, built upon a great heritage, but discerned and imagined for this time, this day? To what “new things” do you feel God is calling this church for this next chapter?

## II

Isaiah cuts to the heart of the matter. The same God who made a path through the sea for your ancestors leaving slavery in Egypt will make a way in the wilderness for you.

I am hearing the stories about this church, stories about God’s faithfulness and the faithfulness of the people for 220 years. How people dreamed and worked together to build this magnificent place and dedicate it to be a mission outpost in this city.

They gave, they built, they worked, making deposits from which we get to make withdrawals. Now it is time to make some deposits for the next generation.

Because if God can build these buildings through prayer, sweat, and giving, God can certainly build a future for this church.

### III

In our gospel lesson today, John gives the account of Jesus' good friend Lazarus becoming sick unto death. Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, send word to Jesus. But Jesus waits two days before going to Bethany, perhaps because as the disciples point out, the Jews are ready to stone Jesus.

"It's too late," Martha says to Jesus when he arrives. But Jesus goes to the tomb and calls his friend from the dead: "Lazarus, come out!"

On this Sunday, this is the command we need to hear from Jesus in our lives and in this church. We need to hear Jesus say to us: "Come out of your tomb! Be resurrected. Rise again!"

Lazarus does come forth from the tomb. And then Jesus gives a command to the people that is as powerful to them as his resurrecting command to his friend: "Unbind him, and let him go!" The community is commanded to assist in the resurrection process.

There are people around us yearning to live resurrection lives. They have been brought to new life in Christ, yet they are still tangled up in burial clothes. Like Lazarus, they still have the coverings of death over them, still bound in old bondages, old ways, old sin.

And it is the task of Christian community to complete the action of resurrection.\* Like those standing outside Lazarus' tomb, we are given a command: Help the people become unbound. So they may live the life they have been given in Christ Jesus.

### Conclusion

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says to Martha when she is grieving. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." "Do you believe this?" Jesus asks her. "Yes, Lord, I believe," Martha says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Later Jesus will call this community his friends, and he will breathe his very own spirit into them, so that they may live out of the same love that he lived.

And the prophecy of Isaiah is indeed fulfilled. The Messiah comes into our midst with God's gift of resurrection over and over again. Watch and wait. What God is about to do is just as magnificent as anything God has done before.

Can you see it? Can you believe it? Believe it.

Invitation to Discipleship questions for congregational response in bulletins:

*“Where do you see evidence of resurrection in this church?”*

*“What new thing(s) do you feel God is calling this church to after this ‘comma’?”*

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\*Note: Samuel G Candler, “Unbind Him and Let Him Go!” sermon on John 11:1-45, Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, GA, March 9, 2008.