

"WATCH AND WAIT: JUST DON'T MISS IT WHEN IT COMES" - ISAIAH 43:18-19

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

By: Reverend Racquel Gill

It seems antithetical to the legacy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to heed the words of the prophet in Isaiah 43:18-19, which is a call not to “remember the former things” or as some would say “ponder ancient history.” A church founded in the bowels of slavery that established its own independence and autonomy in a time where black bodies were not even considered fully human is a church with a rich history that leaves much to ponder about. Yet we know that in this text as God instructed his people living in exile to not remember the former things, it is not a call to disavow from their history.

This community had built a culture that honored remembrance as they processed the weight of captivity. All throughout the book of Deuteronomy as Moses is preparing the people for a promise land that he will not see, the children who had escaped the harsh treatment of Pharaoh and been sustained by a mighty God are told repeatedly to “forget not.” It was sacred memory that reminded the people of what the Most High had done for them. For oppressed people, remembering is a call to worship the God who sustains us. We find strength for the journey ahead when we remember whom our Negro National anthem asserts as “the God of our wear years, the God of our silent tears, the God who has brought us thus far along the way.”

But if we are not careful, we can make idols out of history and place periods where God only meant commas. A temptation for many of our institutions, organizations, and associations if we are not careful is that we will remember not as a way to worship God for what God has done but as a way to limit what we believe God can ultimately do. If we are not careful, we will use history as a way to box God into the confines of traditionalism rather than allowing our rich legacies to lead us into a more expansive view of divine possibilities. We will use the great exploits of the past not as a foundation to build into the future but as a script that must rigidly

be lived out in the present. Sacred memory must always be approached with great humility. While we are charged to honor what came before we also have the responsibility to not become stagger in it.

And maybe the call not to remember the former things or consider the things old is not only a charge to the oppressed but also to the oppressor. It can serve as a meaningful indictment on a nation where one can build an entire presidential platform under the regressive desire to “Make America Great Again.” As we heard this rallying cry gaining traction by appealing to the fragility of white supremacy in the 2016 election, one can not help but wonder what period of American history those who supported this adage want to revert back to. Perhaps to them, America was great when it’s founding was rooted in the pillage of land through the killing of our indigenous brothers and sisters. Perhaps to them, America was great when our African ancestors were dehumanized and reduced as property under the weight of chattel slavery. Perhaps to them, America was great during the days of Jim and Jane Crow when white vigilantes lynched more than 4,000 black bodies on American soil. Perhaps to them, America was great when the prophet King was struck down in a Memphis hotel or when 24-year-old Recy Taylor was abducted on her way home from church and sexually assaulted by a group of white men in Alabama.

This invoking of the “good ole days” in American life can only leave many who do not fall under the identity of white and male with the question of good for whom? If our current climate shows us anything, it’s that when people of the dominant culture are hard-pressed to redeem the pleasure of yesterday they will overlook the harm and violence of today. They will turn a blind eye as children are separated from their parents at our nation’s border. They will stand idly by as our government shuts down, preventing thousands of hard-working families from receiving the pay they deserve for the work that they do. Maybe this charge by the prophet to not remember the former things and to not consider the things of old is another way of pushing us to learn from a very complicated and violent history so that we might not be doomed to repeat it. It is a call to look back so that we can listen and learn not so that we can replicate and repeat.

It is after this community comes to terms with God's refusal to let them return that God presses them to conceive of the future. God says, "Behold I am about to do a new thing." There is a deep wrestle here because this would be perfect if not for this small phrase "about to." Usually we use the phrase about to when we are noting what we will do in the near future but what we haven't done quite yet. When we are about to do a thing, we are pretty close to doing it. We are preparing to do it but we have not done it yet. It's close to happening but the time of execution is not quite here yet. This reality is fine when these words come from us but they can be frustrating when these words come from God. Why would God tell us not to look at what God is doing but what God is about to do? God instructs us to keep watching the screen before the movie even starts. We are instructed to watch the stage before the introduction begins. In reality our watching doesn't feel like watching at all. Our watching is simply waiting. This is the beauty of Lent. We watch for the resurrection that we know is coming while we wait for it to come. We watch and wait not with agitation wishing what's coming would hurry up. We watch and wait not with disillusion only half believing that the future will ever come but we watch and wait with anticipation knowing that God is about to do something new. Lent is that season where we can't go back to what was and we can't rush to what's coming so our only faithful response is to watch and wait while we live in the in between.

Then when God's new thing finally comes, it doesn't come in grand fashion. The prophet says God's new thing is springing forth or as some translations put it's "sprouting up." When something sprouts up from the ground, it is a small growth not an explosive one. When a thing is sprouting up, the early moves of growth are pressing in producing only a bud and not yet a full plant. The sprouting up phase of a plant's life points to the season when evolution is not concrete but the blossoming is still on the way. For the planter knows that as the roots grow deeper into the ground the seed of a new thing slowly breaks through the soil above the ground. After we spent all that time waiting and watching, God points our attention not to the fullness of change in all of it's bloom and flourishing but to the early seeds of change when we have to squint our eyes and we can barely see it. This new thing that God was doing and pointing their attention to was so small, so slight, and I daresay so unclear at times that God had to even ask them don't you recognize it? Can't you perceive it? The very thing we learn about God is that

whenever God does something new, it's not always easy to recognize. Why can't we recognize God's new thing? What blocks our awareness?

Sometimes we can't recognize it because it's mundane. Some days change can feel so incremental and slow that it feels hard to call it such. When black bodies are killed on the street and officer after officer walks away free, it is hard to believe that God is doing a new thing after only one indictment. When churches proceed year after year not allowing women to lead, it can be hard to believe that change is happening when a few women are called to pastor. When change does not rush in like a raging wind, it is hard to celebrate a small break through in the hard soil of inequality. Other times we can't recognize it because it feels too premature. Instead of recognizing the newness sprouting up, we fall prey to the sin of gradualism and only notice God's work when it is almost too late. We love to celebrate movements of change once they have been widely regarded and accepted. We enjoy what's innovative only after it has been tested and vetted. We like to jump on the train towards progression after it has left the station of uncertainty but real faith is being able to trust what God is doing even when it is still in the phase of development. When the idea hasn't gained traction, when the process hasn't been institutionalized, and when we can't see the fullness of transformation it is hard to simply recognize that a thing can still be God's doing even when it hasn't reached it's full potential.

And finally sometimes we can't recognize God's new thing not because we don't see it, but because we don't believe it is God who is producing it. Whenever a thing cannot be tracked with our bylaws, our doctrine, and our dogma we have a tendency to believe that it can't actually be God's doing. God's work must always have a prerequisite in our eyes. When God's new thing pushes up against the hard soil of the status quo, when it runs counter to what we deem as acceptable and respectable, we often can't recognize it because we are looking through the lenses of old paradigms. Sometimes to recognize what God is doing we must first be willing to allow God to renew our minds. We must ask for new insight so that we can discern what God might be doing now even when it looks nothing like what we have seen God do before.

The hardest part about seeing the new thing that God is doing is not waiting for it to happen, but being able to recognize it when it comes. God's new thing is rarely obvious or easily

discernable but it is often that thing that leads God's people on a journey of perception, reflection, and introspection. God's activity in human history is often not as literal or as "cut and dry" as many would have us to believe but it is often a mystery that we trust to be revealed as we reason together. The question to ask is never whether or not God is doing something new in our lives, in our communities, and even in our world but the question we must always ask is am I in a posture to recognize it? Am I despondent because I feel it's not enough, am I hesitant because I fear it's too soon, or am I indignant because I sense it's too unconventional? As God does the work of producing new things, we must ask God to help us envision with new eyes and to listen with willing hearts.

I'm reminded of a story someone once told me about a high school football game. In the middle of the game, their coach decided to switch gears and started calling a completely new set of plays. The fascinating part was that the opponents recognized that the plays had been changed before some members of the team did. Some teammates were still running the old plays on the field and they almost lost the game until they recognized that the coach was doing something new. If we don't put ourselves in a posture to recognize what God is doing, we as the people of God will find ourselves running the same risk. We will be running old plays wondering why they will not produce new victories.

This Lenten season let's allow God to give us perception and awareness so we won't be on our way to victorious living but forfeit our chances simply because we cannot recognize that our divine coach has put some new plays in motion. As we watch and wait, let's be open to the actual newness of God's new thing, lest we miss what we waited for when it actually comes.

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