

Sermon April 3 2022 5th Lent Nedelka Prescod

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 43:16-21

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: 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. 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, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

SERMON: “A Way Out of No Way” Minister Nedelka Prescod

I think many of you may know Dean Dr. Sarah Drummond and Rev. JaQuan Beachem. I believe they both preached here during Pastor Damrow’s sabbatical. I mention them because this semester one of the classes I am taking at Yale Divinity School is a course co-taught by Dean Drummond and Rev. Beachem. It’s called Colloquium V and we have the best conversations. Conversations that, from what I’ve witnessed and experienced of both of them, are carefully and intentionally crafted to prepare us, the students, for ministry, post graduation.

At this current moment, one of our assignments is to tweak or create our resumes. A resume, as you know, is that document that goes before us, that hopefully prepares the way for a possible interview. As students, we are encouraged to not hold back. This is that place where you show off. It’s not a place to be small, it’s not a place to play humble. It’s a place to let the world know who you are and what you do.

But the humble talk reminds me of Proverbs. I am a fan of Proverbs. My grandmother spoke in the language of Proverbs. She would tell these small stories to make her point, never actually naming the things or the people, but you knew who and what she was talking about. In that way you can get your point across without distracting the listener with all the personal details, so they’ll get right to the heart of the message. Hopefully they’ll better internalize your message, coded in a story. It leaves room for them to translate the story using their own images and experiences as a reference point. But resume writing is not like that. You must name the people and the things, when they happened, how long they occurred, with whom, and possibly how. You are the protagonist, front and center in this story. Some of us are really good at that. Some of us have no problem sharing who we are. And some of us, perhaps, may be a little more shy.

But one of the things Dean Drummond highlighted about resume writing is that it is an opportunity to not just talk about ourselves, but to tell what you can do from what you have done. It’s the sum total of the experiences that should add up to a picture of who we are, and even more, what we can do for the reader. It’s not really a braggadocious act of “ooo look at me” but instead about here’s what I can do for you. How can I be of service to you? How can I help you? A wonderful chance to present how you can bring some of what you do to someone else’s table to make their life (or their company) a little bit better. To show your ability.

I bring this up because in the 43rd chapter of Isaiah, we meet God sharing his resume with Israel. Not God's comprehensive resume... dear Lord, that would take eternity (pun intended)... but specifically what God has done from the beginning, and the beginning of Israel's life. Literally the Lord, in the very first verse, starts with telling his beloved Israel about Israel's self. It says: *"But now, this is what the Lord says -- he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine."*

Pretty much what I gleaned from this was that God was telling Israel... I made you. I formed you and when you were out of line I covered you and saved you from yourself. I wondered why God would even have to talk with Israel in this way?

I'm thinking of when I was a teenager... you know how teenage years can be... my mother definitely told me more than a few times, "I brought you into this world and I'll take you out." Maybe it wasn't your mother! Maybe your parents didn't tell you that! But surely I got that message a couple of times. My peers and I laugh at it now, because we know all too well that famous adage... I say adage because according to the meaning of "adage," it is "a proverb or short statement expressing a general truth." I did believe her. I did believe she was telling the truth! I told you I love a good proverb. I absolutely believed my mother and grandmother when they were telling the truth in these moments of my growth and development and character building. But the truth was that I perhaps had strayed away from the standard set for me by my parents. Again, as teenagers do think, I thought I could explain it away. And my mother would have to remind me that she knew me longer than I knew myself. And with an added reminder of possible consequences.

But bringing it back to Israel... as we read through the Bible we watch Israel grow up. We watch its/his growth and development and we watch its character building process. From reading Biblical scriptures, we know that Israel even had another name and that name was Jacob. So, at a certain point, Jacob had experienced an extensive growth and development so profound that it required a name change. That's significant. (I'm also thinking of Saul becoming Paul.) So significant a transformation that your name gets changed.

To be fair, Jacob didn't always have it easy. For one, he fell in love with a beautiful woman named Rachel, for whom he goes into seven years of servitude to be her husband – I'm fascinated with that one -- only to find out that on his wedding day, when he thought he would be presented with Rachel, he was actually presented with her sister. But Jacob was a persistent one and was willing to return to servitude for another seven years, which he did to finally marry Rachel, which he did. And then he served another six years of servitude to amass the wealth it would take for him to care for not one, but two wives. I won't linger on that point.

But earlier, God promised Jacob that he would be the father of many. And many children Jacob did have. He had thirteen children of which the tribes of Israel were born. But Jacob-Israel also has in his past a history of manipulation and deception, specifically toward his brother Esau. I honestly take pause here and question Jacob's character and God's use of him to be the father of his beloved people. But who am I to judge? The Bible is filled with stories of outliers, rebels and those called sinners, the "wrongdoers" that end up doing right. Thank God.

But on one occasion, Jacob in his humanity and his creaturelyness, stole his brother Esau's birthright. Some writers on Jacob call him manipulative and deceptive, a con artist, a liar and even ruthless. For during those antiquitous days in Canaan, one's birthright was a big deal. To have it stolen would have been a horrendous act. We still carry remnants of belief in the importance of being the firstborn. Ask any firstborn. Is anyone here a firstborn? I'm willing to say that perhaps one out of every firstborn you know will have a story about growing up as the first born child that held expectations and standards, that they are consciously or unconsciously held to. Or perhaps you are a firstborn. There is a weight of respectability that comes with being a firstborn. And Jacob (with assistance – he didn't do it by himself. Maybe you know the story, maybe you do not. Definitely check it out!) stole that right from his brother, Esau. I still don't understand why God would allow his beloved younger Israel (in age and stage of his life) to be the one with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

But that same Jacob became Israel after a fight for his life... with a stranger. Ever up for the challenge, perhaps even stubborn, but let's call it persistence... I mean... seven years plus another seven... is fourteen years... plus another six... twenty years... yes, Jacob was persistent... and now finally free, he set off with his wives and children, returning to Palestine where in Genesis 32 it says that he wrestled with a mysterious stranger... a divine being. Some believe it to be God, Godself until daybreak he wrestled with this divine being... throughout the night. Now God's time is not our time. So when I hear the word "night" I'm thinking it could have been that portion of a 24-hour day when the moon rules the sky.

Some commentaries say, though, that the "night" was a "never-ending struggle." Jacob-Israel wrestled with that divine being all night. I'm also thinking of Psalm 30: 5... "weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." Weeping like from the sorrow felt in "a dark night of the soul"... which if you are familiar with depression or know of someone that is experiencing it... that kind of deep dark night is a strong one to deal with.

At this point in my life, I don't interrogate that story in the same way, that story of Jacob wrestling with, I'll commit and say, "GOD," I don't look at it the same way. When I first read the story I thought here goes that rascal Jacob at it again, wanting his own way to the point of actually fighting God. Rude. Unruly. Disrespectful. Undisciplined. But I know what it is to wrestle spiritually. To be so angry that I had the audacity to confront God and wrestle in the spirit, throughout the night, for so many nights that it became a season.

But Israel had some history with God. Israel actually knows God intimately, having wrestled with God for a night and all... or perhaps it was a season. They say you really get to know your beloved when you have that first disagreement. So Israel and God were not casual. God shouldn't have to recount his resume to Israel. That's what you do for a stranger. They're not strangers anymore, not since the night that they first wrestled. Israel should know God by now. I mean Israel in Israel's stubbornness ended up on an unnecessary 40 year trip because of Israel's diminished belief and a loss of faith. They had forgotten again what God had done for them and stopped believing, and trusting, and aligning their actions accordingly to the point of becoming so unfocused that they wandered for 40 years.

So by the 16th verse of that 43rd chapter of Isaiah, God has already established that he's known Israel for all of Israel's life and that Israel is a witness for God, a chosen servant, and that before God there was no other and there shall never be another. Sheesh. Why would God have to say that?

If it is a thing that God can become angry... in our human minds we want to put our human emotions on God. The Bible does say that God and Jesus have become angry. After the way God has shown up for Israel, even to the point of still providing for them in their disbelief, and they couldn't see that they were being blessed in the midst... I think there can be a point where someone can get frustrated to find themselves in the same place of disbelief. It's just hard to have a healthy relationship with someone if there are trust issues. The relationship can't go to that next level. It won't go but so deep. It will be shallow. With trust issues, it's hot and warm sometimes, it's in and out. After a while the make up to break up can get tiring. There's so much more, an abundant amount of life to be lived on the other side of it.

So the passage continues from verse 16 saying that God recounts to Israel the creation God has created... the sea, the waters, the chariots and horses. But then God says, after reading Israel the riot act from Israel's birth back to God's eternal nature, God says... forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!

I think it's important that we unpack that part a little bit. Forget the former things as a memory? It's that we actually forget all of it comprehensively, not just the memory of it. It's that we forget the ways of it. The behaviors, the practices, the attitudes, the things of it, the former things. Making the former things eventually forgotten... because God is doing a new thing. Providing a way in the wilderness. When I looked up possibilities for what a wilderness means in the Bible, I read "a locale for intense experiences," a liminal space... A liminal space like a pandemic can do for some. And for others it could be the loss of a loved one. It could be in the grief of a dream deferred. In general a time when you feel spiritually tired. When life feels turned upside down. In that space, God makes a way out of no way. Turning wastelands into nourishing streams. Imagine that. The places we've given up on, in God's hands, can become a place of provision in a time of need. And God just asks us to remember. Remember what we've been brought out of. The unplanned blessings, the second chances for the fourth time.

That even in the midst of a wilderness, Israel was still provided for, if only they would offer a testimony and a praise on how good God has been, instead of forgetting and losing faith. It's not that God needs our praise. Not in the human ways we may think of offering praise to one another. It is our witness that God requires and can use. A witness that offers praise for what God has done in a way that translates as hope to the listener, perhaps in a moment when they really need it, at a time when you yourself don't even recognize it. Because God can do that through us when we allow ourselves to be true servants of God. God can do it anytime and in any way. But we are talking about an individual relationship. An invitation to at times wrestle with the divine, beloved to beloved, to an intimate knowing that inspires hope.

Stockbridge, if you've heard anything today from me, let it be a reminder to remember. To count your blessings and even name them one by one. And may your memories encourage your present, and inspire your future, and that you may be a blessing to others. Amen.

Our guest preacher, Nedelka F. Prescod, is a singer-songwriter, educator and organizational consultant focused on Black culture, spirituality and social justice. A daughter of proud Panamanians, Nedelka was inspired from an early age by her family's commitment to the practice of social activism and community building through music in the U.S., Caribbean and Central America. A sought after teacher and coach, Nedelka has over 25 years of experience working in a range of educational settings. Nedelka's belief in the power of art to illuminate social issues and galvanize action has led her to found multiple community initiatives. She has served as a DEI consultant at New England Conservatory and Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School, spearheading "The Sound of Andover Newton" project. In 2019, she created the Unsilenced Voice Project to shed light on the trauma experienced by women and create pathways for healing through music and community dialogue. Nedelka holds a BS and MA in Music Education from New York University and CUNY Brooklyn College's Conservatory of Music respectively, an MM in Contemporary Improvisation from New England Conservatory, and is currently pursuing an MDiv from the Yale Divinity School.