

Fifth Weekend in Lent (RCL/C): "My Name Is I Am: Seeing What God Is Doing **Today!**"

Isaiah 43:16-21, John 12:1-8

April 5-6, 2025

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"My Name Is I Am"

by Helen Mallicoat

I was regretting the past,
and fearing the future.
Suddenly my Lord was speaking:
"My name is I Am."
He paused.
I waited.
He continued...
"When you live in the past,
with its mistakes and regrets,
it is hard. I am not there.
My name is not I WAS.

When you live in the future,
with its problems and fears,
it is hard. I am not there.
My name is not I WILL BE.

When you live in this moment
it is not hard. I am here.
My name is **I AM.**"

There's an echo of that in this weekend's lesson from Isaiah:

*Do not remember the former things,
or the things of old. (Isaiah 43:18)*

Now **that's** surprising, because Isaiah has just been talking about the Exodus from Egypt, describing God making "a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters," which sounds a lot like the parting of the Red Sea, and mentioning "chariot and horse, army and warrior [which] "...lie down... cannot rise... extinguished... quenched like a wick": the Egyptians dead and drowned on the seashore, the LORD saving the enslaved children of Israel with "a mighty hand and an outstretched arm," the salvation history that the Jewish people embrace as their prized possession. The sacred revisiting of that story is the reason for Passover. Remember the first question asked by the youngest at the seder meal? "How is this night

different than all others?” That’s the springboard for the retelling of the beloved story of the Exodus. How could God possibly say, “Fuggedaboutit!”

Well, God **isn’t**, really. But God **is** saying, “I’m not done yet!” “Don’t be so focused on the past you miss what I’m doing in the present!”

*I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

I **long** to see God at work in this world, busily reshaping human affairs, correcting injustices, bringing on the Kingdom of mercy and justice. I see **little** signs, but I want to see **big** ones! So when the Lord asks, “Don’t you notice what I’m doing?” my honest response is, “Truth be told, not really, so grant me **new** eyes to see more **clearly**, dear Lord.”

Here’s a mini-review of Biblical history: after God liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, they trekked through the desert for 40 years, with a new desert-born generation finally reaching the Promised Land. Things were pretty good for 500 years or so (there’s disagreement about the actual date of the Exodus). Then in 722 BCE the Assyrians invaded Israel (in the north) and hauled off the most educated people, who were never heard from again and have come to be known as the Lost Tribes of Israel. About 125 years later (597-587 BCE) the Babylonians invaded Judah (in the south), and carried many people off as slaves into what is called the Babylonian Captivity. This is where Isaiah kicks into gear!

The first part of the book of the prophet Isaiah is a warning **before** the Babylonian invasion: “Beware! Repent! Or bad things will happen!” The second part is a word of hope for those who are now **in** Babylonia, praying for safe return back to Judah. Well, **some** of them are praying for safe return. Others have an inkling they’ll be returning to a destroyed Temple and a Jerusalem in ruins. They’re not walking around with ball and chains, they’ve pretty much assimilated into life in Babylon, and they’re maybe thinking it wouldn’t be so bad to stick around Babylon. So God sends a wake-up call:

*I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

Eventually we find out God is messing around in politics. God has raised up Cyrus of Persia to conquer the Babylonians and allow the people of Israel to be freed from bondage once again, and to return to the Promised Land of Israel. It's like a second Exodus. This time God isn't just going to make water flow from a rock; God will make rivers of water stream in the wilderness on the chosen people's way home. The animals that once threatened them in the wasteland, the jackals and the ostriches (Isa. 34-35, Isa. 43:20a), will now join them in praising God. There will be harmony in creation, shalom in the land.

The Book of Genesis comes first of all in the Bible, before the Book of Exodus, so we probably think of Israel knowing God first as Creator. In reality the children of Israel first knew God as their **go'el**, their **Redeemer**, the One who with "*mighty hand and outstretched arm*" liberated them from slavery in Egypt. But one of the Bible commentators speaks of both of the people of Israel and us, pointing out:

Our offenses make a dividing wall of separation between us and God – an exile – from which we must not only be **brought** back but also **bought** back, by God, in sacrifice.¹

This buying back is the definition of "redemption," which we believe our God ultimately accomplishes in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, landing us straight in this weekend's Gospel.

Jesus has raised His dear friend Lazarus from the dead and there will be hell to pay for it. St. John tells us that "*... from that day on [the chief priests] planned to put him to death.*" (John 11:53) After the celebration party Lazarus' sisters Martha & Mary throw to welcome Lazarus back from the dead and to thank Jesus for calling him forth from the tomb, the chief priests decide to kill Lazarus, too – he's become too much of a celebrity and is a constant reminder of Jesus' divine power over death.

At this point in the story, and in Lent, the boulder is rolling faster and faster down the hill. The raising of Lazarus, the final sign in the Fourth Gospel, is a foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. And Mary's anointing of our Lord's feet is a foreshadowing of His washing of His disciples' feet the

night before He dies, foreshadowing His death on the cross and burial. One thing leads to another. One thing points to another. The cost of redemption is high, priceless, even. One pound of perfume made from precious nard is the least of it.... The cost is the life of our Savior. His death is life for us.

The 80th anniversary of the martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran pastor of the Confessing Church which defied Nazism, is this coming Wednesday, April 9. He'd been arrested by the Gestapo on April 5, 1943, and after 2 years in various prisons and concentration camps, he was hanged, just a couple weeks before the Allies liberated Flossenburg Concentration Camp. A British soldier was his final cellmate, and reported that as Bonhoeffer left for the gallows his last words were, "This is the end, for me the beginning of life": faith in the face of death.

*Do not remember the former things,
or the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

He saw it. Grant **us** new eyes to see it more clearly, dear Lord, and hearts to appreciate the cost of our redemption, especially as Holy Week approaches. You have **bought** us back. Now **bring** us back to love and worship you, then to go forth to "proclaim the extravagance of your love given to all...."² Amen

¹*New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), p. 381.

²*Celebrate* for Fifth Sunday in Lent (RCL/C) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2024).

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