

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Cycle C
March 13, 2016 (Year C)

Anne Goodrich Heck

Reflections on **Is. 43:16-21; Phil. 3:4-14; Jn. 8: 1-11**

We are living in a difficult time and a challenging world. We are in the midst of a season of ugly politics, with a lot of self-righteousness, scapegoating, and hot-button issues. It is easy to get discouraged, isn't it? But is it possible that God is doing something new?

Fifty years ago, in December of 1965, the second Vatican Council issued its Pastoral Constitution on the Church, which spoke of Christians sharing the joy and the hope (*gaudium et spes*), the grief and anguish of the world. And it spoke of the need to read the signs of the times if we are to press forward toward the reign of God. That is to say, we need to discern how God is working in new ways in our world.

This fits very well with the theme running through all our readings today: God is active in our world, as God always has been. But God is not tethered the past, to the old ways and the old laws. So we must always have new eyes to see what God is doing, and open hearts to share in the joy and hope, the grief and the anguish of all, especially the poor and afflicted.

Our first reading, from Isaiah displays a remarkable shift from the old to the new. The reading starts out sounding very traditional:

Thus says YHWH, who made a road through the sea—A path in the mighty waters, Who led chariots and warriors to their doom . . .

It's the familiar story of the Exodus, the act of God that led the people out of Egypt and shaped them into a nation in the Promised

Land. But then Isaiah springs a surprise:

Forget the events of the past; ignore the things of long ago.

Look, I am doing something new!

Don't get hung up on the past! Something new is needed now!

Isaiah's audience is no longer living in the Promised Land. They are in Babylon. God's "something new" is the vision of a direct road leading due west, stretching across the desolate Arabian and Syrian deserts, back home to Jerusalem. Along with the road God promises water to drink, and a friendly relationship with the jackals and ostriches that live in that wild, arid land. It is the promise of a return, and a reminder that even the desert belongs to God, and rejoices in God's presence.

In the second reading, Paul draws a vivid contrast between his zealous Jewish past and his new life in Christ. Looking at the two halves of his life, he makes it sound like a balance sheet. All the credit he built up with his youthful religious zeal (gain) is now seen as a debit, or loss. Paul even goes so far as to call it "rubbish" (etymologically, "dog droppings"!) in order to make his point!

Paul is happy to be living in the middle of "something new" and he is convinced that God is there "in the mix." Like us, he does not know exactly what lies ahead, but he trusts in its unfolding, and in the value of what he calls "the prize"

Not that I . . . have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. [I] forget what lies behind and strain

forward to what lies ahead.

This hope of Paul's is especially poignant, because he wrote this letter to the Philippians from prison. He knows that he might be facing execution, which is why he talks about perhaps *becoming like [Christ] in his death*.

We are not facing martyrdom, but the rest is our reality, too, isn't it? What God is doing will continue to unfold after we are gone. But we can trust the process, because Christ Jesus has made us his own.

Isaiah and Paul give us two fine examples of living faith, of trust in a God who was active in their present day. Our gospel gives the opposite. It shows Jesus dealing with the dead faith of religious leaders who are blind to God's work in their present time. Instead, they use their expertise in the tradition to advance their own purposes, not God's.

The accusers are not being sincere when they pose their question to Jesus. As the gospel clearly states, they are setting a trap. Jesus already has an audience of listeners who are interested in what he has to say when the accusers arrive. The accusers are trying to create a debate that will serve their own interests. And they have all the best debate ingredients.

- They have a hot-button issue: adultery. It is an issue that arouses a lot of raw human emotion and carries heavy symbolism.
- They come from a position of strength: they are standing on "principle." Too often it happens that "principle" is wielded like a hammer; it is "the Law" that human beings are made to serve, instead of vice versa; it is a form of "justice" that obliterates mercy.
- The accusers also have a convenient scapegoat, a woman. Her male partner-in-crime evidently got away scot-free.

As we know all too well, women have often been made the scapegoats. For one thing, they are easily stereotyped as madonnas or whores, rather than seen as individuals. Look at what happened to Mary Magdalene, whose true story was lost in Western Christianity for more than a thousand years!

When confronted by the accusers, Jesus shows his impatience with their barrage of accusations by doodling in the dust. He has no intention of meeting them on the debate stage they have set up.

What was going through his mind as he doodled? Perhaps he was remembering that the stories in scripture are a lot more nuanced than the prescriptions of Leviticus. Think of his royal ancestors, David and Bathsheba. It wasn't Bathsheba's fault that King David sent for her, but she shared the punishment for his sin, when they lost the child of their adultery. And it was her reputation that really suffered.

Perhaps Jesus had heard rumors that his own birth was suspiciously early, and that his mother's chastity had been questioned. Yet Joseph, his father, would not expose her to the law by casting the first stone.

Or maybe Jesus had just sat down with too many "sinners" and listened to their stories. He realized how "rigged" the system was.

Fortunately, Jesus' challenge to the accusers worked. By law, one witness to the adultery had to accept the responsibility of setting the execution in motion, by casting the first stone. Here's where the insincerity of the accusers really shows.

They didn't care about the woman, or even about the offended husband; she was only a pretext. So, faced with actually throwing a real stone at a real person, while at the same time implicitly claiming to be without sin themselves, they chose to slink away one by one.

Jesus then addresses the woman as a real human being, and sends her away unpunished. We never get to hear her story, or what happened to her afterwards, when she had to face her husband, her family, and her neighbors. Nor do we know what the people who had been listening to Jesus before the accusers arrived made of the whole encounter—except that somebody remembered it and passed the story on. Finally, it made it into one of the gospels, not in the earliest copies that have come down to us, but in many of the later

ones, usually in John, but sometimes in Luke!

In Jesus, God was doing something new, in this particular moment, publicly displaying mercy where the letter of the law said otherwise. It was new and bold corrective to the tradition, made in the face of the religious authorities, and within the precincts of the temple itself.

Mercy is central to Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God. Mercy has a wider meaning than leniency in the case of sin, since it sometimes comes in the form of healing, or liberation. In today's gospel, clearly, it comes in the form of forgiveness.

So where do we see God doing something new in our world? We probably won't see it in the headlines of our newspapers. Don't look for it in the videos and transcripts of campaign rallies!

We are fortunate to be living something new in our Beatitudes community. We see God calling women to new roles and new dignity

in the church. We do not know how this will all work out in the end, but we know that Christ has made us his own and we intend to persevere in reaching for the prize.

We see something new in a lot of the work Pope Francis is doing. I am struck by how his recent encyclical, *Laudato Si*, resonates with today's readings. His plea for the earth and all its creatures recalls Isaiah's vision of the desert brought to life with an honored place for even the wild animals. His plea for all the world's peoples in the midst of poverty and violence reminds us of the example of Jesus' healing and forgiving presence. And he exhorts all of us to a deep-rooted change of life like that of Paul, with his whole-hearted dedication to furthering the work of God.

The Pope's powerful message in *Laudato Si* is that God remains active in our world, that God hears the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. We who seek to serve God must hear those cries as well.