

## **A Real Page Turner Isaiah 43:9-19**

My favorite part of this entire reading is the first portion of the last verse as it asks this question, "Behold, I do a new thing; now it is springing forth; do you not recognize it?" It is a question that God continually asks through the people who serve Him. Without saying it directly Jesus was always challenging those around him. The religious leaders hated him for it, his disciples didn't get it, and those who followed him knew something was different but didn't know exactly what it was. Jesus was constantly doing a new thing. Whether preaching to the lepers, dining with society's indented outcasts, or testing the religious establishment and their well worn legalistic standards: Jesus was always doing a new thing.

At the end of his earthly ministry he was questioned, judged, beaten, and killed because he dared to do a new thing. And of course his resurrection was the ultimate new thing that left his enemies bewildered and confused.

Christians are constantly being challenged to do a new thing, or at least take an old message and tell it in a new way to a new world. The question of relevancy is a huge issue for the church today. We still speak the language of those who have lived and loved it. Most churches have perfected worship styles that affirm generations of believers who have lived long and faithful lives in the institutions they helped build. We like things to be consistent, unchanging, predictable, and controllable. But if we seriously take the ministry of Christ to the world it was anything but unchanging, predictable, and certainly not controllable. Jesus was constantly breaking down old barriers so that people once shut out now had access.

Think about it. Jesus opened the doors to the non-Jews and Jews alike. He included women in his inner circle. He befriended prostitutes and tax collectors. And those he claimed as his inner circle were not power people but common folk. All of this was radical and all of this was threatening. Jesus was always doing a new thing...turning a page on a new chapter.

Every generation of the church has its own struggles with how to write a new chapter, how to do a new thing, without completely throwing away the comfortable blanket of doing it the way we always have. There are those here who can tell the traumatic stories of once unacceptable people now becoming leaders in the church. In the 50's and 60's the stigma was divorce. Following on its heels were the role of women in the church. Issues of sexuality became the next hot topic and who knows what the next divisive issue will be.

In our own tradition's history there have been incredibly difficult splits around the issue of Biblical interpretation and even the use of instruments in worship. Divisions and the struggle to do things in a new way have haunted the church its entire life. Where can we bend and what should never be compromised define lines that are sometimes in the sand and other times in stone. And as much as much of this is institutional, even more of it feels like a personal attack on our faith and our God.

So here is the rub. Most of us would admit that the world is changing around us and doing so at a pace that has never been matched in human history. The entire mass of information available to us, which in previous generations took 10's or 100's or even 1000's of years to double, not happens every couple of months. We are being bombarded by a world we cannot come close to keeping up with and so we too often bunker ourselves away in what we can control and let the rest of the world roll on by. If we can't manage it all, why even try?

And yet, for the church that has transformed lives throughout history, and therefore the world, to be a viable voice we have to do more than try, we have to succeed. This is where our human weakness is fully exposed and our dependence on God becomes apparent. Without God's help we cannot do this. The new thing required of us is far too great!

For several years we have been dangling our toes in doing a new thing. We have set up committees and talked about what that might look like. And in the time the world has dramatically changed again and again. The knowledge available to us, and to the world, has doubled, quadrupled, and on and on and on. New and challenging issues, faith issues arise every day. What once may have appeared to be black and white is now a rainbow of choices and changing societal norms.

The temptation will always be to protect those things we know to be tried and true, to hold onto traditions and memories as if they are the bedrocks of life itself. But when we do that we also are forced to shut the doors and bolt them from the inside, for when the world comes in all of those things will be at risk. Is this uncomfortable for those of us raised and well acquainted with the church where we feel safe and warm? You bet it is! Is all of this frightening because the horizon always seems to be unclear at best, and constantly changing at worst? Absolutely! So if this fear and discomfort is real, why should we even consider taking the risk? Well, the answer is one most of us will not like, but if we are honest we will know that it is true. We risk because Christ demands it of us. How can God do a new thing in the world if we who are charged to do it, refuse to? And what will happen to the church that shuts in doors and its heart on Christ? It will die...if not a physical death at least a spiritual one.

Now, let me be clear. None of what I am talking about this morning has anything to do with relocating or not relocating. What I am talking about is finding new ways for Southport to be relevant to the needs of the world around us. This generation needs the good news as much as any generation ever has, but unless we find a way to share it that makes sense, we are but a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. Moving to a new location won't make a bit of difference if we don't find new ways to invite, grow, and challenge people into a new way of living and being. We need to write a new chapter of how we do God's work together.

To that end many of you are stepping up and saying this is how I am gifted to help. Some will be teaching new classes, others will be leading Bible studies, many will help grow new small groups, others will give of their time to in-reach and outreach projects. The list of opportunities is endless but can only be

accomplished when gifted people act. For years this church was staffed in a way that depended on staff to initiate new programs and ministries. You called good people to work side by side with you to set a vision and then to reach it. We now face a staffing structure that is not able to do what once was required of it. We are small and hardworking, but we have less than half of the staffing that has been here in the recent past. In some ways this is by choice and in other ways it just is how it is. In many ways we are going back to the way it used to be when this church was first starting up. If people didn't commit, if they didn't fill the gaps, then it didn't happen. Our current reality is that reality. If you have a vision or a passion for a particular ministry, do not wait for someone else to organize it or do it...claim it yourself. There are several people who have begun to understand this and they are stepping up. We are only limited, in this model for ministry, by the willingness or unwillingness for people to serve.

I believe that to do this well we need to do several things. First, we need to pray for God's will to be done in this church and through the people that are here and through the people that God will bring to us. Prayer must undergird this entire ministry for us to succeed. If you feel unable to carry the load of new programming or leadership, then be a prayer foundation for us.

I also believe that for the church to grow and succeed we need to be Biblically literate. The Disciple Bible Study has been a source for preparing people for ministry in this church for years. A small group of committed people just completed level one a few weeks ago. I think it is time for us to get serious about Bible study again and I challenge those of you who believe this as well to step up and help us create opportunities that can involve many more of us in engaging the scriptural story that is the heart of the church. If 30% of this church would commit to a Bible study class in 2012 we would be amazed at what God could do through you and through this place.

Finally, I believe that in 2012 we need to undergird this ministry with the resources it needs to do what God is calling us to do. No more "poor" talk. No more worrying about whether we can afford it or not. It is time for us to put our financial gifts where we say our heart is. This is the time for the rubber to hit the road. If it is important to the people of God, then the people of God will find a way.

Today we dare to start writing a new chapter at Southport. Four things are required of you to help us do this. Pray for God's will to be done. Step up and use your gifts to the honor of God and Christ's ministry of compassion here and around the world. Engage the scripture...get reacquainted or acquainted with the Bible, if it is your first time. And finally, provide the necessary resources to do the work God is inviting, no demanding, that we do. When we say we can't then we are saying God can't. Do you really believe that? I say we can, because God can do anything through people who are willing to try.

"Behold, I do a new thing; now it is springing forth; do you not recognize it?" As a member of the family at Southport I hope we can say that in this New Year we not only recognize it, but embrace it as our own.