

Scripture Readings and Sermon

January 12, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on 42:9-16 ([Youtube Lectionary Study Video](#))

This "new" thing mentioned in verse 9 is repeated in 43:19 and 48:6. The word new is not mentioned that frequently in the Old Testament unless in the context of ceremonies like new moons, new grain, or new wine. Singing a "new" song only appears in the Psalms (33, 40, 96, 98, 144, and 149) or in Isaiah 42:10. This new song is often in response to God's gracious acts of salvation. In this passage, God's gracious act is the done through the "Servant of the Lord" which begins chapter 42. God has put "My spirit" upon him to "bring forth justice". The introduction of this "Servant" of the Lord rather than a king or a patriarch is a "new" thing. The servant will be fill with the Lord's spirit and have a heart for God. The term "new" is used in association with a change of heart and spirit in Psalm 51, in Jeremiah 31, and in Ezekiel 11, 18, and 36. This shift in the Psalms and Prophets to something new seems to mark a shift from ritual obedience based on a legal covenant to a heartfelt and spiritual obedience based on a relational covenant (Jeremiah 31).

Commentary on Acts 10:34-43

([Youtube Lectionary Study Video](#))

After Peter receives his lesson from God about the nature of "uncleanliness" on a rooftop, he is called to go to Caesarea to baptize Cornelius. Cornelius tells Peter of his vision from God and Peter responds by proclaiming the story of Jesus from his baptism to his resurrection. It is by the Holy Spirit that Jesus is anointed and empowered to do good and heal "all who were oppressed by the devil". This power did not end with Jesus' death but continues through the resurrection. The resurrection is at the center of every sermon preached in the Book of Acts. This is the last of five speeches given by Peter in which he proclaims that God raised Jesus. Unlike the one given after Pentecost, this sermon by Peter is directed to a non-Jewish audience. Jesus is no longer simply considered a "Jewish Messiah" but the Savior of all humanity. Faith and not tradition now becomes the standard for salvation and faith shows no partiality. At this point in the Book of Acts, the congregation of believers or "church" in Greek grows beyond a Jewish sect and becomes a global religion or "catholic" which in Latin means universal.

Commentary on Matthew 3:13-17 ([Youtube Lectionary Study Video](#))

While the story of Jesus' baptism is well known, there are a few differences between the Gospels. Matthew is the only Gospel to contain a dialog between Jesus and John. In the Gospel of John, John proclaims that Jesus is the "Lamb of God" only after he witnessed the Spirit at the baptism. Before the baptism, John "did not know Him" (John 1:33). In Luke and Mark, Jesus simply gets in line with the others to be baptized and it is only afterwards that his divinity is revealed. In Matthew, however, John recognizes Jesus and tries to prevent Jesus' baptism, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus' response appears confusing in light of the claim that Jesus is and always has been sinless. Why then is it "proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness"? The law in Leviticus 16 and Numbers 8 may provide some insight. In Leviticus, the high priest who will be offering the atonement sacrifice for the nation " shall bathe his body in water". (Leviticus 16:4) In Numbers, all of the Levites who will be serving in the Tabernacle must "sprinkle the water of purification on them" before they can minister to the people. (Numbers 8:7) In this context, the baptism in Matthew can be viewed not a purification from sin but a purification for ministry. For Matthew, even Jesus must obey the will of the Father.

Sermon "Something New" ([Sermon Video](#))

One of the great advances in modern medicine was the reintroduction of basic hygiene in

surgeries and hospitals. Even today, the number one preventative measure against illness is hand washing. Is it any wonder then that there are so many references in Leviticus and Numbers concerning cleanliness and washing. It is interesting to note that most illnesses that seem to appear in modern day refugee centers like dissenter appear to be absent from the accounts of the Israelites who wandered in the desert for forty years. Many attribute this to the numerous dietary and hygiene laws in Leviticus and Numbers.

Over time, these hygiene laws began to be interpreted as not just representing physical cleanliness but also spiritual cleanliness. The Essenes, during the time of John and Jesus, were known to place a great deal of significance on ritual bathing known as a mikveh in Hebrew or “baptizien” in Greek. The mikveh was most often associated with Temple worship which is why there are so many “pools” surrounding the Temple Mount. John, however, choose a spot on the river Jordan associated with the crossing of Joshua and the Israelites into the promised land. Just as Joshua called the people to repent of their disobedience in the desert and renew their covenant in his well known “as for me and my household” speech. John wanted the Jewish people to repent and recommit their lives to holiness. As a sign of this repentance, John used the mikveh in the river as an outward sign of a spiritual cleansing and renewal.

When Jesus appeared at the river, John was confused because Jesus had no reason for spiritual cleansing and renewal. While a mikveh is used for cleansing in Leviticus and Numbers, it is also used to prepare Levitical priests and the High Priest for service in the Temple. Jesus came not to be cleansed of sin but in preparation for his role as the one who would cleanse all the people of their sin. Jesus was both the High Priest and the sacrifice as the Lamb of God. God was doing a new thing. The heart and not the Temple would now become the center of worship and Jesus would be its High Priest.

The reading from Isaiah mentions that God will do a new thing and there will be a new song. The use of new, apart from a new moon or a new king, rarely appears in the Old Testament. The word new is only used in conjunction with a new heart and a new relationship with God. When Jesus arose from the water, God was doing a new thing. The Law of the Word was being replaced with the Living Word and the sacrificial system of animals was being replaced with the sacrifice of the Love.

This “new” way of relating to God was difficult for those who encountered Jesus to understand. Tradition meant more than love and ritual meant more than intentions. Peter encountered this head on in Acts when God sent him to baptize a Roman family. Peter was in hiding from Roman soldiers and in trouble with Jewish officials. In this simple act, God was asking Peter to reject Jewish notions of cleanliness and become vulnerable to his mortal enemy. This was a sacrifice of love and when Peter witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit in that moment, he proclaims that surely God shows no partiality. The old traditions and rituals which proclaimed righteousness and holiness were replaced by the Living Word who acted through the Holy Spirit.

In His baptism, Jesus transformed the meaning of the mikveh and the definition of cleanliness. With God proclamation that “This is my Son”, the mikveh became a symbol of a new life in Christ as part of the family of God. It was God who cleansed with the Holy Spirit and Grace and not some ritual and tradition. It was God who declared who was acceptable and not some priest or religious official. And it was God who gave power and not an institution or titled individual. With Jesus’ baptism, God was doing something new.