

“GOD WILL MAKE A WAY!”
Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126
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How desperate folks are for a word of hope! Palestinian refugees in camps, those fleeing warlords in Afghanistan, the earthquake victims in Haiti, now homeless, more than one million of them, we are told --- can you imagine how desperate these people are for a word of hope?! We may not be facing problems of this magnitude, but some days it's difficult for us to see the way ahead as well. Almost every week we learn of someone in the congregation who has received an unexpected and potentially devastating medical diagnosis. We pray fervently and wait patiently for test results. There are difficulties in relationships that strain us, almost to the breaking point. I read recently that one in four marriages will experience infidelity at some point along the way, with potentially devastating consequences, of course. In these uncertain economic times, our jobs cannot be taken for granted. I have heard story after story, as have you, of the unexpected pink slip or a meeting with the boss where a faithful employee of many years is told to clean out the desk and turn in the keys. Almost every week we lift in prayer a family in our congregation who is experiencing the loss of a loved one. For them and for us the pain of bereavement and loss lingers, and never fully goes away.

This morning's Old Testament lesson from Isaiah is written to a people in exile. They have been forced from their land and their homes. They are living in a foreign country under the domination of a government that is not their own. They are resident aliens in a strange land. But, says Isaiah, there is hope. God is about to do a new thing! God is about to work within the heart of the pagan ruler of that land and allow the people to return to their beloved homeland once again. God is about to make a way where there appears to be no way. Even though the displaced Israelites seem to be no match for the mighty ruler of Babylon, this foreign ruler is no match for Almighty God! **God will make a way** where there appears to be no way.

To the skeptical and the cynical, Isaiah appears to be talking nonsense. But Isaiah reminds the people, mired in their own problems, beaten down by the current economic and political situation, that **God has made a way** in the past. Remember Moses? Remember how your ancestors were slaves in Egypt? God made a way for them to go free! And when they got to the Red Sea, God parted the water and made a way through the sea, *“a path in the mighty water.”* Remember when Pharaoh's chariots chased after them, the wheels of the chariots got stuck in the sand, while the people of Israel escaped on dry ground! The God who made a way through the sea will make a way for you as well, proclaims Isaiah.

After the children of Israel made it through the Red Sea, they found themselves in the wilderness. Most of Israel is desert --- dry land. But again, **God made a way**. Did God let the people starve to death? No. God sent manna, bread from heaven, and caused water to flow from a rock, and the people were cared for and nourished.

Sometimes I look at my calendar or my “to do” list and I have a hard time seeing my way forward. How on earth will I ever get done all that I need to do, all that people are counting on me to do? One day I was brooding about my schedule and feeling quite anxious when for some reason I saw

an old calendar on which there were numerous appointments and notes about what I needed to do. Now from this perspective, looking back, I suddenly realized that **God had made a way**, that most of what I was concerned about then I had accomplished and a whole lot more. **God had made a way**, you see. By remembering what God had done in the past, I was better able to face that day and the days to come. **God made a way** when I thought there was no way.

Is there a problem too big for God? The Bible tells us “no.” Isaiah tells us “no.” Our experience tells us “no.” There is no problem too big for God. Charles Tindley was an African-American pastor who served a Methodist church in Philadelphia in the early years of the 20th century. In his immortal hymn, “*Stand By Me*,” which the choir will sing in a few moments, Tindley writes, “*When the storms of life are raging, stand by me. When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea, Thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me. When the hosts of hell assail, and my strength begins to fail, Thou who never lost a battle, stand by me.*” Is there a problem too big for God? The God we worship has **never lost a battle!** God can make a way when we see no way. **God will make a way** for you and for me. Praise God!

“WHAT WILL GOD DO NEXT?”

Philippians 3:4-14; John 12:1-8

Probably most of us, from teenagers to senior adults have had the experience of writing a resume to describe our abilities and work experience for a potential employer. I have written dozens of letters of reference, made phone calls and spoken words of encouragement and support to those in the job market. Our church offers a seminar for those needing work on how to write a resume and present oneself in a positive light to potential employers, with a fair amount of success, I am happy to say.

Imagine for a moment that the Apostle Paul is applying for a staff position at Church of the Saviour. His letter to the church at Philippi sounds like a resume, doesn't it? First, Paul says he is someone who wants to serve God. That's basic, and hopefully, a quality that motivates all of us. Then he lists some very good credentials. He comes from a good family and is of legitimate birth. He was circumcised at the appropriate time, which tells us that his family lived according to Jewish law. Paul is a member of the “elite” tribe of Benjamin. He is a Pharisee (one who studied Jewish teachings in depth and sought to follow the Jewish law in daily life). He is part of the ruling class in the temple. Paul emphasizes that he has always tried to lead a pure and God-pleasing life. Whatever else you can say about Paul, he has no lack of ego! He is extremely proud of who he is, and he should be. I've read hundreds of resumes, and this one is indeed impressive!

Yet when Paul encounters God, he begins to realize that everything he has always counted on: his status, his family connections, his heritage --- is of little or no value. The things that he thought were impressive don't really matter that much. Paul discovers that he is ill-prepared for the challenges before him. Paul feels like the person who shows up at a pool party without a bathing suit. He is not prepared, and he realizes it. Paul wants to dedicate his life to serving God, and he discovers he is going about it all wrong!

There is a scene in the movie, *Titanic*, when the ship is sinking and panic has set in. The wealthy villain makes a desperate attempt to secure a place on one of the few lifeboats by shoving a wad of cash in the face of the sailor to buy a seat. The sailor views him with disgust as he pushes the money aside. Money that had opened doors and got people's attention on the mainland has no value whatsoever on a ship sinking into the icy waters of the North Atlantic. The money that had given him power and influence is suddenly worthless.

That is Paul's discovery. His good name might have earned him respect on the street, but it won't get him a place in heaven. His family background or extensive education might have provided him with opportunities, but God is not impressed by heritage and by the number of degrees he has earned. Paul's many accomplishments cannot earn God's regard. Paul must acknowledge that he is dependent on God's grace alone.

Contrast the self-assured, (some would say arrogant) Paul, with Mary, who could not be more humble. Quietly coming to Jesus to wash his feet, in the role of a lowly servant, she uses not water, but costly perfume to wash the feet of her Lord. Now because the people lived in a dry area, as I have already indicated, and they wore sandals, it was customary to wash people's feet as a sign of hospitality. I love to kick off my shoes after a long day! It must have felt good to have someone pour water over your tired feet and then dry them with a towel.

I had read this foot washing story for years before its full impact hit me. One Christmas, my wife asked for some perfume. She made it easy for me. She told me what brand she wanted, but she didn't tell me the price. When the store attendant told me how much I owed, I thought she was kidding! For that little bottle?

Perfume is expensive! Then we read that Mary took a whole pound of perfume to wash Jesus' feet! The commentators tell us that the cost of the perfume would be the equivalent of a year's wages for a worker at Ford or GM! Holy cow! The Bible says that "*the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*" I'll bet it was! One of the commentators says that the smell of a pound of perfume in a little near eastern home would have been so strong people wouldn't have been able to stand it. It reminds me of the time a few years ago, when in order to illustrate this story, before worship I poured some strong perfume into a bowl in the pulpit. Even though it was twenty degrees outside, the ushers began opening the church doors. "What are you folks doing?" I asked. "Just trying to air the place out, pastor," they explained. "There's really a strong perfume smell in here!"

Then, instead of using a towel, Mary did something that women never did in public in the near east. She took down her hair, unbraided it, and used her hair to dry the feet of Jesus. Now to dry his feet with her hair, Mary has to be on her hands and knees. This is not accidental. Mary is worshipping her Lord.

Of course, Mary is criticized for her actions. Judas, who will later betray Jesus, is outraged. (It's always easier to find fault with someone else's behavior than to examine our own.) This perfume could have been sold, and the money given to the poor. After all, how many Haitian homeless could be fed with a year's wages of an American auto worker?

Judas has missed the point of Mary's action. Here is Jesus, just days before his arrest and trial and crucifixion. This is not a time for economic calculations. It's a time for radical devotion. Mary seizes the moment. In her humility, in her outpouring of love, she acknowledges who Jesus is and what he is all about. There have been times in my life and ministry when I have said, "I wish I had a camera." What someone said, what someone did was so meaningful, so moving, I wish I could have captured it and replayed it for others to see.

That's what Jesus does for Mary! Judas is quick to condemn her actions, which on the surface seem wasteful and foolish. But Jesus sees her radical and flamboyant act as a demonstration of love. Some will say that the Mary who washed Jesus' feet was Mary Magdalene, a woman from the town of Magdala, known for its prostitution. Luke's Gospel points to this Mary. Others will say it was Mary, the sister of Lazarus, which is what John's Gospel indicates. Whoever this Mary was, she was an extremely humble person whose only intent was to show her love for Jesus. She would have receded into the background, humiliated by Judas. **But Jesus made a way for Mary**, and his actions change her life. Mary's story was told far and wide as an example of generosity and devotion and faith. Coming to Jesus in humility, Jesus spoke a word to her that changed her life. **God made a way for Mary.**

When Paul realized that his resume didn't count for much in God's eyes, he, too, could have turned, rejected, and gone away. **But God made a way** for Paul to go forward as well. Slowly, the Apostle realized that it was not his strength and his credentials, but God's love that would carry him through. Not his way, but God's way, you see. Like an Olympic athlete, Paul was eventually able to say, "*Not that I have already obtained this, or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own....I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*"

And so **God makes a way**. God makes a way for Mary, and God makes a way for Paul. **What will God do next?** I believe that God is ready to make a way for you, and a way for me! The question is, are we ready for the new thing that God is about to do?

Be careful what you pray for! I love the story in our Lenten devotional books about the family that went to a sandwich shop for supper. As was their custom at home, before the meal, seven-year-old Susie asked that they say grace. “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest,” they prayed. “And let these gifts to us be blessed.” As they started to eat, a bearded man came over to their table. His clothes were disheveled; he needed a shave, and he smelled. “Excuse me,” he said. “I’m hungry and I don’t have any money.” The little girl’s dad got up and took the man to the sandwich counter. Susie, with eyes wide open, went with them. She kept staring at the man as her father ordered food for him. When Susie and her dad got back to the table, she, exclaimed, “Just think, Daddy. We asked Jesus to be our guest, and he came!” **What will God do next?**

I can’t fully answer that question, but I know one thing: whatever God asks you to do, **God will make a way** for you to do it. When we say “yes” to the new thing that God is doing, God always makes a way. When we pray for courage, for God’s presence, for strength --- the answer is always “yes.” **God always makes a way.** Yes, I will help you, says the Almighty. Yes, I will be with you.

What is God calling us to do as individual and as a community of faith? God has been at work in many wonderful and marvelous ways in the life of this congregation. We were the first congregation in the Cleveland area to host Interfaith Hospitality Network guests. For twelve years God has enabled us to do that new thing. God made a way for us to build this facility in which we are able to house everything from child care to seeker services to Upward Basketball to open gym night for adults. We have sponsored missionaries, nearly completed a Habitat House, and sent numerous work teams to places around Ohio and around the world.

Does God have something new in store for us? I am totally convinced that the answer is “yes!” And, to whatever God is calling us, God will make a way for us to accomplish that task. **What will God do next?** Open your heart and let God make a way for you!