

## **“ADVENT INTENTIONS: LEARN A NEW THING”**

Psalm 25:4-12; Isaiah 43:18-21

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The first Sunday of Advent is the first day of a new church year, and therefore a day when we think about new beginnings. A little bit like the new year that begins on January 1 – except that new beginnings we contemplate in Advent are not initiated by our ambition or unrealistic plans for self-help, but by what *God* aims to do in our lives and in our world. God’s initiative, God’s grace is the starting point. The Christian calendar – in which we hear again, each year, the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection – begins in anticipation of the celebration of Jesus’ birth... God’s most significant initiative toward us.

God has always been about doing new things, unlikely things, never-before-seen things: the creation of the world from chaos. leading slaves to freedom. making a people and nation out of them. The “new thing” Isaiah writes about is a return from a long period of captivity in the hands of the Babylonian conquerors and a restoration of community. Isaiah seems to anticipate that it will be hard for his people to believe that this particular new thing can be possible. Their exile lasted a long time, and the suffering is still fresh in their minds. They understood that it came about because God was unhappy with them... and they don’t quite trust the assurance that they are still beloved of God, and their relationship with God will be restored. In fact, they seem to have all but given up on their part of that relationship. If you read through all of the 43<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah, you see that the message he brings them from God mixes unconditional love and with disappointment in their indifference. To me, it sounds as though Isaiah’s – and God’s – hope is that God’s people will see what God is doing, will see God’s grace, and respond by joining in.

Though the initiative and power to do “a new thing” in our midst is God’s, we are not passive recipients. God’s “new thing” is never dumped on us; it’s an invitation to participate, an open door, a vista of possibility. Not merely a change, but a beginning that leads to a more profound relationship with God and a life richer in faithfulness.

But embracing any “new thing” doesn’t come naturally to us, any more than it did to Isaiah’s people. Every “new thing” demands that we become learners. We have to learn how to discern what newness God has for us, what it means, how to let go of fear and resistance, how to participate, even, eventually to give thanks for the new thing God is doing with us.

One of the first and hardest things we have to learn is that God’s ways and priorities and values – even God’s hope for us – are often different from our own. I am struck as I read various scriptures around this theme by how large a role humility plays. The Psalmist acknowledges the importance of a humble and patient willingness to learn God’s ways; one wonders whether some not-very-wise choices brought him to that realization! “Learn to do good, seek justice,”

we read in an earlier part of the book of Isaiah. Jesus urged his disciples should learn from his example of humility and gentleness. Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians about seeing through a glass dimly; in other words, there is a lot he does not fully understand about God's ways.

Advent is an excellent time for us to remember how much we don't know, to acknowledge that we are all still beginners at this faith business, no matter how long we've been about it. And so Advent is the perfect time to consider what "new thing" God may have for each of us, and ask God to help us learn it.

Where to start? I can't presume to say what that might be for anybody else, but let me suggest some general things to consider, as possible "new things" to learn:

It could be something very simple:

- a skill you need or feel yourself drawn to
- a more in-depth understanding of some issue or topic... something that keeps popping up in conversation, or in your reading or listening, perhaps.
- some different ways of celebrating Christmas, to make the season more joyful or meaningful.

Maybe the new thing God would like you to learn has to do with your relationship with someone else:

- to listen more carefully? or to speak up more forthrightly for yourself?
- more understanding of the challenges someone close to you is experiencing, in order to more helpfully support them
- healthier options for navigating a difficult relationship
- to release others from expectations you've placed on them?

Could it be that the "new thing" God has for you to learn is something within?

- how to practice quietness of mind?
- how to be more courageous?
- to be less hard on yourself... to nurture your spirit... to believe you are loved.
- willingness to admit a need for help
- to discover some comfort or peace or even a little joy in Advent even if this Advent is suffused with sorrow or anxiety.
- one of those "difficult" gifts, like patience, or service?

Something even harder?

- to accept some truth you want to deny
- to let go of the past, or of something you hoped for
- to feel, not deny, pain and grief
- to embrace contradictions, suffering, not-knowing as part of the journey

Maybe it is something to do with your relationship with God:

- how to accept forgiveness, or give it

- more honest prayer
- something you cling to that God would have you let go of
- trust

I don't know what it is for you. I don't even know what it is for *me*.

But I do believe God always has something new for us –

large or small  
easy or hard  
practical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional –

and that the life of faith is about learning how to lean into that, whatever it may be.

New Year's resolutions we make in January often emerge from a strange combination of hubris and self-loathing. The invitation to learn a "new thing" as Advent begins is not like that. This call arises out of God's love for us and God's desire for what is good for us.

It's often fear that makes us resistant to changes, and to changing. Fear of losing what we think we know, fear that we won't be able to cope, fear of losing our selves. Isaiah's message – God's word for us is that we *don't have* to be afraid. We are beloved. And God is with us.

This is from the first part of that 43<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name; you are mine.  
<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
<sup>3</sup>For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1b-3a)

Amen.