

## All Parts Welcome at the River Bank

September 19, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Book of Isaiah Ch 43:16-21*

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

This past Friday I got to officiate my best friend's wedding on a rooftop in Dorchester. It had been a long wait since the pandemic had delayed their celebration not once, but twice. They trimmed down the guest list to a handful of people, moved the location to an outdoor rooftop, and everyone had their masks in tow, so it wasn't exactly how they imagined it would be. But the thing is, sometimes our imaginations are too small for the joys that are being prepared for us and this was certainly the case that night. As we all stood separately but very much together on that roof we were in awe of how the happy couple looked at each other even under their masks with the kind of joy and light that is so needed in this world. All the ways this moment wasn't like it would have been before fell away, and once again we were reminded of the simple truth and abiding hope that despite it all love and joy find a way in our lives, even in a pandemic. At that moment, it was so clear to me that God was doing a new thing that night.

Our text for today comes from the book of Isaiah, a portion written during the Babylonian exile, a time when the people of Israel were without a temple and in a foreign land. The prophet reminds us that God is the one who brought God's people out of the oppressive rule of Egypt, invoking images of the crossing of the Red Sea fleeing from what they called the narrow places into some wilderness land, unknown to them. This was a miraculous thing and was a fulfillment of God's promise to

deliver the Jewish people from their captors and yet, the prophet says this to the hearer of this text:

*“Forget the former things;  
do not dwell on the past.  
See, I am doing a new thing!  
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland  
To give drink to my people.”*

I get weary when I hear someone tell me to forget things that have happened in the past, but I don't think that the prophet Isaiah is saying that what God has done in the past is not important, or that we should just forget the past, our past, and how God has been present through the narrow places in our lives. I think perhaps the prophet is encouraging the hearer of these words to see God being active in the present world, even in the midst of moments of exile. The prophet is calling us to notice that this miraculous event of the past, not only that it is springing up now, but that God is doing the work of liberation and sustaining new life in a way different from what we have experienced before.

One commentary notes that the passage is made to set up a comparison, that during the exodus God made a desert path in the sea and now God is bringing the waters to the desert places, that God is promising to outdo the deliverance that has happened in the past in new unanticipated ways. This clever theological parkour that the commentator points out draws to my mind the lyrics of the first verse of our hymn we heard and hummed together this morning: *Come all you thirsty to the river, here where the word runs cool and deep, come with the outcasts, crushed and broken, come you who rage and you who weep.* Let those words sink into your heart beat and believe that this invitation to the cool and deep river for all is real and it's been made just for you.

These past two years have certainly felt at times as if we were living in a narrow place, a desert place, wondering how things will ever feel “normal” again. After existing in this time of transition for so long and as we continue to navigate what it might mean for us to claim this transitional season as a time of growth, change, and yes even joy, I wonder if God might be calling us not to find a way to what feels normal so that we escape the narrow places all together in this season, but to discover, to uncover the rivers of water God is already bringing to the parts of our lives and parts of ourselves that still feel like they are in the middle of the desert. As we take time to regather in a hybrid way as a worshiping community how might we attend to what we have learned in these narrow places? What we have feared, what moments have brought us joy, what things we have identified as essential in our lives. How do we bring the fullness of who we are now into this new season together? Moreover, how are we leaving space to welcome in the movement of God’s spirit in ways we have yet to imagine?

Sometimes it is just a matter of slowing down and accepting that we are really co-creating something new together, something that will be different than before, letting go of our expectations of what church used to be and embracing the opportunity of getting to experience an adventure with God together. That this is not the end of our journey, but the start, or at least the middle.

We come to this adventure having had different experiences of the past two years. Some of us might be seeking a place that feels familiar and nourishing, where we can leave behind what has happened to us. Some of us might be coming into this season of regathering with a thirst so deep we wonder if the river will be cool and deep enough to quiet our spiritual fatigue, some of us might feel like the events of the past two years have made us feel like we have changed too much and feel all too alone even though we are able to see more people now, some of us might still be weeping from a deep well of grief, the specter of PTSD, of all that we have lost, some of us might be raging at all we cannot control, at our

needs not being met, at the limitations our bodies have put on our feelings of safety for our children and ourselves, some of us might be basking in the embodied experience of doing church as a lifeline for us to thrive and survive, some of us might be feeling all or some of this and at the same time experiencing overwhelming waves of joy and excitement so deep for being able to dip our toes back into those practices and communal witness that make us, us.

Wow, that was a lot of speculating. I guess the point I'm trying to make by naming what feelings might be present today is this: there is room for all of it- at this river of life. All of the joy, the grief, the fear, the excitement, the frustration and the love. However, you are feeling this morning, know that you belong here, and that God is big enough to hold all of it. There is a place for you at the river as we take steps to make meaning of what we have experienced with God's help. I've been doing much thinking about what it means to be a transitional minister in this community centered in the love and justice of Jesus in this time. My hope is that over the next two years we might create space to do some messy imagining, to leave room in our well-intentioned plans to be surprised by what God is doing, and to pay attention to where God is calling us on this way in the wilderness with deep care for one another and for our neighbor.

We come to the river today, trusting in God's presence in navigating uncharted territory in our collective life together. We come holding all that we are and all that has shaped us into who we are now with gentleness and with grace in this place of belonging and becoming. We come too with hearts tender and hopeful, cautious and bold as we imagine what could be in store for us as we create new ways of being in relationship with one another and with God. And through it all, we pause to look and see that God is doing a new thing for us all, beyond what we can ever imagine, even now. Amen.