

Looking Forward, Looking Back – Judy Cox

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

“There’s a reason your windshield is bigger than your rearview mirror,” says technology futurist Daniel Burrus. “To drive safely, you need to keep your eyes focused on the big picture in front of you and only occasionally look behind you. Since you’re going to be spending the rest of your life in the future, you might as well focus on it now. In today’s rapid pace of technological change . . . , it’s more important than ever to keep your eyes on the windshield rather than the rearview mirror.”

Isobel Crawley Grey, the Baroness Merton, would agree! The final episode of Masterpiece’s “Downton Abbey” concludes, fittingly, with one final interchange between Isobel and her friend and sometime antagonist, Violet, Dowager Countess of Grantham. To Violet’s wry observation on “...the way every year we drink to the future—whatever it may bring,” Isobel bracingly responds, “Well, what else could we drink to?!? We’re going forward to the future, not back into the past!” And of course, just as she should—who of us would wish it otherwise?!—Violet gets the last, ironic, word: “If only we had the choice...”

We COULD wish that others, in our current political climate, might embrace Violet’s humorously ironic realism. Instead, they hark back nostalgically—even belligerently—to the “good old days,” ignoring those for whom those days were far from “good.”

Is Burrus’ future-oriented focus, Isobel’s “going forward to the future, not back into the past,” the Scriptural witness? Is our future indeed more important than our past? Today’s texts all speak to this tension, in one way or another.

Our Isaiah passage lulls us with its familiar beginning—the Lord is speaking, the Lord Whose identity we remember from the Exodus. There this Lord made a way for God’s people in the sea, a dry path to walk, right through the waters of chaos barring their way. Yes, we remember—this is Who God is, God Who delivers with power! But then the surprise command: don’t remember those former things! UNH??? Isn’t the call to remember key to Israel’s identity? The whole book of Deuteronomy sounds this note again and again: remember!

Apparently Second Isaiah’s audience, those in exile in Babylon, need a heads up. They’re not attending to how God might do something radically new! Perhaps in their desperation they, too, fixate on the past and those “good old days.” But focusing on how God provided for us in the past may keep us from recognizing God’s action for us right now! We see God behind, in the rearview mirror, but God is also up ahead and all around. Our control issues rise up and take over, and we insist that since God has always worked in THIS way, therefore so must God work now. Meanwhile, God is up to something new! God repeatedly turns our expectations inside out and upside down! Can we, with humility, acknowledge that God gets to act freely in whichever ways God wants? From this pulpit Rick has recently reminded us that the very name of God, I-AM-Who-I-AM, I-will-be-who-I-will-be, underscores God’s free working in ways we can’t control.

Notice what Isaiah proclaims, turning the familiar Exodus imagery inside out—not a way in the sea, but a way in the wilderness, not a dry path through the barrier of the water of chaos, but the water of life and provision to convey God’s people through the barrier of the desert. Even the dangerous and outlandish of God’s creation, the jackals and the ostriches, give God honor for this radically new, expectation-reversing, life-giving deliverance. God still delivers, but how God delivers is up to God. To quote Matt Zahniser, we as God’s people need “expectancy, not expectations.”

In our psalm, too, there is both looking to the past and looking to the future. Post-exile, Israel is looking back to when God *restored Zion’s fortunes*, bringing them back from the nightmare of exile. They remember the dream-like laughter and joy of that deliverance. We, today, have already echoed Israel and the surrounding nations in bearing witness, through our opening hymn, “Great things He has done!” Then comes the psalmist’s plea, “Do it again, God!” That was then, this is now; here we are stuck again, back in tears again. We won’t try to specify how—but would you please act again, God, restore our fortunes, turn our weeping to joy? And notice the increasing confidence, the trust that God WILL provide: first, the request—*may those who sow in tears reap with joy*. Then the affirmation, with hope and faith: *those who go out weeping SHALL come home with shouts of joy*.

In Philippians, Paul too looks backward. Here’s an example of how the past could have held the future captive. He names his past achievements, how energetically he leaned into his religious and cultural inheritance. The Strengths-Finder would probably peg him as an Achiever, or maybe strong in Significance and Self-Assurance! The benefits he enjoyed through no merit of his own—his racial and tribal membership, along with circumcision—he maximized with his own zealous study and action. Yet **in comparison with knowing Jesus**, he discounts that all, not only as negligible, but actually *as loss*. In the next sentence he calls all those credentials *rubbish*—to be more literal, “dung.”

Paul looks back, not to Who God was for him, but to who he, Paul, tried to become by his own efforts. He paid his dues, achieved tenure, earned his union card, gained his diploma—sweated his way up the hierarchy to a stable position of status and security. He looks back to acknowledge, and then **to let go, to set it aside**. In light of the new thing God is doing in Jesus, he abandons those observances and efforts as past. He doesn’t set aside what doesn’t matter, what was easy. No, he sets aside what he, and we, have counted as gain, what we have valued highly and claimed as our own achievement, what has given us our status, how we have measured our spiritual, or professional, or relational progress. It’s a complete giving up of our measuring.

This painful self-emptying mirrors that of the previous chapter’s “kenosis hymn,” which we’ll hear in next week’s epistle reading—the hymn to Jesus, *who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself*. Paul not only preaches but also seeks to live Christ. And so we hear him explain that from that past *righteousness of his own*, from keeping the law, he looks forward to *gaining Christ, being found in Christ*, with a *righteousness from God based on the faith-and-faithfulness of Christ*. His goal: *to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the **sharing of his sufferings** by becoming like him in his death*, with the outcome of sharing resurrection! And again comes the challenging

yet heartening emphasis: *forgetting what lies behind*, in the relative futility of his past, and *straining forward to what lies ahead*, to indeed have *the same mind in [him] that was in Christ Jesus*.

Mary, in our gospel text, also remembers her past. A chapter earlier, she and her sister Martha had desperately sent word to Jesus of the serious illness of their beloved brother and breadwinner—the man on whom, in that culture, they would have been financially dependent. When a “tardy” Jesus had finally arrived, after Lazarus’s death, she had knelt in worship, but in bewilderment and grief also reproached him, *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*. Entering fully into her grief, Jesus had also wept—and **raised her brother from the dead!** How gratitude and awe must overwhelm Mary, looking back!

This has changed everything. Their breadwinner restored, the sisters too have been given life again! Mary can do nothing for Jesus—with that kind of power, Jesus “needs” nothing. And in his company, Mary realizes that she too “needs” nothing. Her security so clearly safe in Jesus’ hands, nothing is held back. She brings out the uber-expensive nard—can you imagine a bottle of perfume that costs \$50,000? Might this have been their Judean savings bond, or Roth IRA equivalent, saved up against the proverbial rainy day? Humbly kneeling, just as she had a chapter earlier, she pours out that nard on Jesus’ feet, and then wipes them with her hair.

(And might Mary, in this extravagant, offensive foot-wiping, this holding nothing back, become the model for the ideal disciple? It is foot-washing that Jesus will commend to his disciples just a few days later, on the night that Judas will betray him. She **wipes** his feet with her hair just as he will, outrageously, **wipe** their feet.)

Jesus, more than Mary, seems here to look ahead. He defends her against Judas’ self-serving accusations. He commends her action as prophetic preparation for his burial. As the following three verses foreshadow, that burial will come very soon.

But Mary, too, looks ahead. She recognizes the new, life-giving thing God is doing in Jesus, with expectancy, while Judas sputters in his greedy expectations. In the extravagant generosity of pouring out this accumulated wealth, Mary entrusts her future to the God Who has acted so powerfully for her in Jesus her Messiah. She lives boldly into the Kingdom Jesus brings, the Kingdom of abundant provision rather than fear and scarcity. Because of what and Who she sees in her “rearview mirror,” she, as well, can fearlessly look ahead.

So our Scriptures today seem to agree, if you will, that our rearview mirror needs to stay smaller than our windshield. Isobel wins this one, Violet! God’s dream for us, being brought to fruition in Jesus Christ, eclipses all that our anxious achieving has ever made us. Let’s keep an eye on the mirror of our past, though—not to put God in a box with expectations of how God can and can’t act, but to remember that God DOES deliver, and name with praise all the ways God HAS delivered. Let’s keep our eyes open with expectancy to radical new ways God might be delivering us even now. Sometimes, HANGING between our known past and our unknown future, we find the tension unbearably painful; can we, in that pain, help each other affirm with hope that in God’s great providence, *shouts of joy* WILL come? And can we together join Mary, kneeling before the Lord of life Who is also Lord of our lives, in rethinking our security, in the

light of Who Jesus is?—in holding our security, whatever and wherever it is, loosely? May we with open hands turn it back to God, and with trust live into the Kingdom of God's own extravagant, abundant generosity.

The God Whom we see when we look back, and look forward, gives good gifts to all God's children. The most extravagant, costliest gift of God's is Jesus, poured out on us in the ultimate generosity. Here, at this Table, he is poured out for us. Thanks be to God!