
“Do You Not Perceive It?” A Word About Seeing What God is Doing

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Fifth Sunday in Lent – Year C**

In the name of the God who makes a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Amen.

We are nostalgic people.

We tend to yearn for the moments when things felt right.

This is particularly true when change starts to feel like loss.

Many of us are feeling particularly nostalgic right now.

There are so many more voices in the conversation than there used to be. The institutions we trusted feel broken. The ways we used to engage public life—whether by voting, organizing, debating, or serving—seem exhausted.

It's traumatizing.

We want to go back to what we remember from before – something familiar, something more stable, something that we remember as having worked for us.

I. Isaiah's Prophecy

This is where the people of God find themselves in the time of Isaiah.

Jerusalem has fallen (586 BCE) and they have been exiled to Babylon.

They are traumatized.

They are wondering if God has abandoned them, whether they are still God's people, and whether they have any future at all.

Listen again to what the prophet Isaiah tells them that God is saying.

Isaiah quotes God as warning them against nostalgia.

“Do not remember the former things,

or consider the things of old.” (Is. 43:18)

Then, God gives them hope for the future.

I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth —

do you not perceive it?" (Is. 43:19)

It's the question that I find so interesting.

"Do you not perceive it?"

We take it as a matter of faith that God is always doing a new thing.

That's the nature of the creation that he has made.

The question is whether we can perceive it?

We tend to assume that whatever God is doing, it must be a grand strategy or a powerful movement.

God doesn't usually work that way.

God usually prefers a quiet, patient recovery of how we should attend to our neighbor.

The work inevitably starts with our responding to God.

II. Bretherton's Thesis.

In his book, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (2010), British theologian Luke Bretherton offers a vision of political engagement that may help us perceive what God is doing now.

He writes, "We discover what God is doing not by discerning a plan but by discerning the presence of others and learning to respond to them rightly."

In other words, politics — especially Christian politics — is not first about implementing a vision, winning a battle, or enforcing an ideology.

It is about relationships.

It is about attending to the people in front of us and asking:

What is God doing here?

How can I respond in a way that is faithful?

Bretherton invites us to see our public life not as a fight to be won but as a field in which we meet Christ in the presence of others — especially the poor, the stranger, and the wounded.

This is exactly the kind of new thing that Isaiah describes.

The people of Israel expected deliverance to look like it did in the past: mighty acts, dramatic victories, or perhaps a repeat of the Exodus.

But God says: Don't look backward. I'm doing something new — and it's happening in the wilderness.

The wilderness is not a place of control.

It's a place of vulnerability, testing, and dependence.

And yet, it's also where God often does his best work.

Isaiah quotes God as saying,

"I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

So where do we look for this new thing?

Bretherton helps us answer this question.

We look to the presence of others.

We don't start with abstract plans.

We start with concrete neighbors, especially those who have been made invisible by our systems or ignored by our imaginations.

This, of course, is the way of Jesus.

In Matthew 25, Jesus says that the place we will find him is not in the powerful or the pious, but in the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner.

To respond to them rightly is to respond to Christ.

To ignore them is to miss the presence of God.

The question — “Do you not perceive it?” — is a deeply spiritual one.

God is really asking us:

Are your eyes open to what I am doing in those you'd rather not see?

Are you willing to be changed by the presence of another?

III. Avoiding Idols.

Bretherton notes that approaching things this way helps us name the limits of the ways we usually work our problems — not as a constraint, but as a kind of freedom.

Part of how we discern the new thing that God is doing in the world is learning to think rightly about the state, money, and community. Each is important; none is ultimate.

Christians affirm that the state has a God-given role: to pursue justice, protect the vulnerable, and preserve peace.

But the state is not God.

It cannot save us.

It cannot define our deepest identities.

When the state tries to do more than it can — when it seeks total loyalty or attempts to control every sphere of life — it becomes idolatrous.

The new thing God is doing today may be helping us see that politics cannot bear all the weight of our hope.

Instead, we are called to build communities that hold the state accountable, advocate for justice, and practice mercy — especially with those most affected by its failures.

Christians also affirm that money is a necessary part of life.

But when it becomes a measure of worth or a gatekeeper of who belongs, money distorts our relationships.

Jesus warns us repeatedly about the power of wealth to blind and enslave us.

The Gospel of Luke, for example, talks consistently about money, even if it doesn't talk about money consistently.

The new thing God is doing may look like churches and neighborhoods learning to live with less, to share more,

and to practice an economy of enough — not as a lifestyle trend, but as a sign of the kingdom of God.

It may look like Christians investing not just in markets but in mutual aid, local care, and more intentional imagining of what makes for a good life.

Finally, Christians affirm the value of community.

Community is a cherished word in the church.

But even community can become an idol — especially when it is closed off, nostalgic, or fearful of difference.

Christ-entered community is not a bunker.

It's a place where hospitality stretches us, where truth can be told, and where we learn to love people whom we would not normally choose to be around.

The new thing God is doing may be the creation of Christ-centered communities that are more porous, more courageous, and more honest.

The Christ-centered community is not the place to make an escape; it is the place where healing and justice begin.

IV. Living the Vision.

So how do we live into this vision?

How do we perceive and participate in the new thing that God is doing?

Bretherton equates it with the experience of conversion.

It starts with attention:

Who are the people God is placing in our path?

Who is speaking?

Who is suffering?

Who is challenging us?

It deepens with repentance:

What assumptions do we need to surrender?

What plans are we clinging to that are blinding us to the presence of God?

And it takes root in response:

not grand gestures, but small, faithful actions.

A listening ear.

A shared meal.

A reallocation of power.

A willingness to be disrupted by the needs and dignity of others.

God says: "Now it springs forth — do you not perceive it?"

This is not a word of judgment.

It's an invitation.

It's a reminder that even in wilderness — even in confusion — God is at work.

God does not usually work in the ways we expect or through the channels we have traditionally trusted.

God does always work through the Spirit, who leads us into relationships, into community, and into new ways of being.

V. A Closing Word.

How is it then that we can learn to see and participate in what it is that God is doing?

As is often the case, the way is simple, but it isn't easy:

attend to others,

respond rightly, and

be willing to be changed.

This is how God opens our eyes to see the way that he has created in the wilderness and the rivers that he has created in the desert.

Amen.