

The Windshield vs. the Rear-View Mirror
Isaiah 43:14-21, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
September 29, 2019

Dr. Charles B. Hardwick
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Isaiah 43:14-21 (Common English Bible)

The LORD your redeemer,
the holy one of Israel, says,
For your sake, I have sent an army to Babylon,
and brought down all the bars,
turning the Chaldeans' singing into a lament.
I am the LORD, your holy one,
Israel's creator, your king!
The LORD says—who makes a way in the sea
and a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and battalion;
they will lie down together and will not rise;
they will be extinguished, extinguished like a wick.

Don't remember the prior things;
don't ponder ancient history.
Look! I'm doing a new thing;
now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?
I'm making a way in the desert,
paths in the wilderness.
The beasts of the field,
the jackals and ostriches, will honor me,
because I have put water in the desert
and streams in the wilderness
to give water to my people,
my chosen ones,
this people whom I formed for myself,
who will recount my praise.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (Common English Bible)

So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him

now. So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation.

So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God.

Sermon

It makes a big difference how much time we spend looking forward, and how much time we spend looking backward.

At least it does in Driver's Ed. Your rear-view mirror is important, but if you spend all of your time looking in the rear-view mirror, you're bound to run over something in front of you. Maybe a squirrel, maybe a car, maybe a cub scout helping a lady cross the street.

Of course, there are good reasons to look in the rear view mirror, too. You've got to know where you've been. You've got to know what's coming up behind you. After all, the person behind you might be spending too much time looking in their rear view mirror and might be trying to run over you!

But in general, we need to be spending more time looking through the windshield, and less time looking in the rear view mirror. I remember my Driver's Ed teacher saying we should look in the rear view mirror every seven seconds, which seems a little more dangerous advice to give to 16-year-olds ...after all, if you're looking down at your watch to count off four, five, six, seven seconds, now look in the rear view mirror!, you might be in trouble.

Of course the whole reason I'm talking about driver's ed is NOT necessarily because I just got my first ticket in years ...although I might have. The reason I'm talking about driver's ed is because our passages talk about this same

dynamic. How much time should we spend looking in the rear-view mirror? How much time should we be looking through the windshield?

These are the questions that we see in our passage from Isaiah this morning. The book of Isaiah begins in Jerusalem, when the Babylonians are about to invade and take the nation into exile into present-day Iraq—about 900 miles—which is roughly the distance between here and Dallas. Dallas! By the time we get to the part of the book of Isaiah where today's passage is, the Hebrews are already in exile, and are longing for God to do something, to get them back to the kind of life that they used to enjoy back home.

Isaiah wants to give them hope, and he starts by looking in the rear-view mirror—back to Moses. Here's what he says:

*The LORD says—who makes a way in the sea
and a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and battalion;
they will lie down together and will not rise;
they will be extinguished, extinguished like a wick.*

Isaiah looks in the rear view mirror, all the way back to the Exodus, when God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. He reminds them that God has been faithful in the past. He reminds them that God has worked miracles among them.

Of course, this is music to the Israelites' ears. They loved the Exodus. Frogs raining down on the Egyptians. Locusts everywhere. Boils all over the Egyptians' cows. It was something like out of the movies! They look backward, and they get more and more grateful for what God has done. Looking in the rear view mirror gives them consolation—but also maybe that longing feeling that comes when we wish we were younger again, or we were back in a past phase in our life.

They are looking right square in the rear view mirror, and here's what God tells them:

*Don't remember the prior things;
don't ponder ancient history.
Look! I'm doing a new thing;
now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?*

In other words, “If you keep looking in the rear view mirror, you’re going to get into a wreck. Start looking out the windshield! Look at what I’m doing now! You’re looking into the rear view mirror WAY more than once every seven seconds. You’re missing the new thing that I’m doing now. How can you perceive what’s coming if you keep looking backwards? I was on the move in the past. I’m on the move now. I’ll be on the move in the future.”

As the years went by, what was once far into the future in the windshield was right at hand. God was faithful. God promised to let them go home. Before long, the Persians overtook the Babylonians, and the first thing they did was let the Israelites return home. God had been faithful. The new thing that God had promised had come to pass.

God had said,

*Look! I'm doing a new thing;
now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?*

And the Israelites, we know now, were able to say, “YES.” We perceive it. Sorry we kept looking in the rear view mirror, because what we see through the windshield is new and different and a sign of your faithfulness to us.

Fast forward about 2500 years, and it’s not just the Israelites who want to look in the rear view mirror. It happens to us, too. While we’re stuck on the past, we miss out on what we would see God doing if we looked through the windshield. It can happen with our professional lives. It can happen because of grief. It can happen due to broken relationships. And of course, it can happen in our churches.

One of my favorite people in this church has been known to say, “I love change, until it happens.”

Looking in the rear view mirror, and longingly wishing that we could recreate the church's glory days, maybe when we first became members, or maybe when we were growing up here, or maybe when one of our favorite pastors were here.

Of course we're grateful for all those memories of what God was doing. But it's hard to trust God for what we see through the windshield if we are spending all of our time in the rear view mirror.

And believe it or not, psychologists are now saying that it is more natural for us to spend time looking into the future than it is to dwell on the past. Research by psychologist Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania was featured in an article in the *New York Times* a couple of years ago.

Seligman claims that what sets us apart from other animals is not so much language, tools, or cooperation, but our contemplation of the future. He calls this ability to contemplate the future "the power of propection"—figuring out what our prospects are. In fact, he says we should not be called *homo sapiens* (which means "the wise one"), but rather *homo prospectus* ("the one who looks ahead.")

His research quotes an article that asked nearly 500 adults here in Chicago to record their immediate thoughts and moods at random times during the day. The people in the study were thinking about the future three times more often than the past. What's more, when they were making plans, they reported higher levels of happiness and lower levels of stress than at other times.

As we enter into this new season of life with Pastor Clint as the head pastor, it's especially important to live into this impulse to look toward the future, rather than looking back in the rear view mirror. There is so much to be excited about as we move into the future under Clint's leadership. He is kind, and faithful, and inspiring, and full of ideas.

Full of ideas! He is full of ideas! And when you have a pastor who is full of ideas, the future will look different from the past. He is getting to know us and will listen carefully about which ones of all of these ideas make the most

sense for helping us grow as a congregation together here. He'll work with the Session and the staff and with you to lead us.

But as the changes come—and come they will—remember the study tells us that we'll be a lot happier if we focus on the future than on the past. Even more important, remember what God said through Isaiah: “Look, I'm doing a new thing! Now it sprouts up. Don't you recognize it?”

And if neither of those work, maybe you can focus on what Winnie the Pooh once said,

“I always get where I am going by walking away from where I have been.”

This quote makes me think of a story of two churches, where one of them agreed with Isaiah and Winnie the Pooh, and the other one didn't.

They were two small churches yoked together in rural North Dakota. A pastor started serving them, and after he had been at both of them for a couple of years, I had the chance to hear him talking about the differences between the two of them, neither of which had had a pastor for years—maybe decades.

The first church was so glad that Paul had arrived. They had been waiting and waiting and waiting. And when Paul got there, they all took a big breath...and sank back in the pews...and waited for Paul to do everything. After all, they could easily remember a time years ago when the pastor did do everything. Two years after Paul arrived, that church was pretty much the same size as it was when he arrived.

The second church was also so glad that Paul had arrived. In fact, the day he spoke with them about coming they told him, “The very first Sunday you arrive, we're going to have double the attendance we usually have.” He didn't believe it. And he told them he didn't believe it. And they said, “You'll see.” He thought it couldn't possibly be true, because congregations often take a step back in investment and involvement when a new pastor comes. They're so grateful to have a new staff person that they act a lot like the first church.

But on that first Sunday at the second church, instead of about 20 people, there were about 40 people. They were so excited about having a pastor and they couldn't wait to see what God was going to do in the future.

Fast forward two years later, and now there are about 60 people. They have started a Sunday school. The congregation is full of life. The members have stepped up and taken on ministry in all sorts of amazing ways.

So back to that first church. Of course, they're jealous. So they eventually called a meeting with Paul, and they asked him what the difference was between the two congregations.

He told them, "Well, it's not the pastor."

I'm not sure what else he told them, but I know what Isaiah would have told them.

Isaiah would say the first church was spending way too much time looking in the rear view mirror. He'd say the second is trusting God and looking through the windshield.

And I know what God is telling us, today, through Isaiah: "Look, I am doing a new thing. Now it sprouts up. Don't you recognize it?"