

“Are we Gaining or Are we Losing?”

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

Fifth Sunday in Lent: March 28, 2010

A sermon preached by Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

MUMC, Thomasville, NC

Old Testament reading for the Fifth Sunday in Lent: Isaiah 43:16-21:

Thus says the Lord,
 who makes a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
 army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things,
 or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
 and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honor me,
 the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
 rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
 the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

Are you gaining or losing? It could be a question about your weight. It could be about your investments on the stock market. But this morning the question, “Are you gaining, or are you losing?” is not about your weight, nor about your investments. As if those questions are not personal enough, I am asking an even more personal question: “As a Christian, are you gaining or losing?” Because I don’t want it to look as if I am pointing fingers at anyone, I have changed the pronoun in the title of the sermon from “you” to “we.” So, as a company of Christian believers ...as a congregation of God’s people ...let us ask ourselves, “Are we gaining, or are we losing?”

The scripture lessons for this Fifth Sunday in Lent, not only suggest, but will also help us to explore appropriate responses to this question, “Are we gaining, or are we losing?” The

readings today help us to understand that – generations before us – there have been people of faith who have asked this question and searched for answers.

In the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday, Isaiah 43:16-21, the prophet Isaiah is in a reflective mood. He recalls the past. He alludes to the stories of the Hebrew exodus. He remembers a time when the ancient Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt ...when they had no power ...when they had no hope ...when it seemed as if they were losing rather than gaining. Isaiah is drawing a parallel between time past and time present. He remembers a time when his forbearers seemed to have lost all hope and expectation that God would deliver them. The story had been preserved. Isaiah knew it well. It was recalled in great detail each year as Isaiah and his family observed the Passover feast. With remarkable prophetic insight Isaiah draws a parallel between what happened to the Hebrew people in the past and what is happening to his people as he writes. He feels that he is writing during a time of similar trouble.

Isaiah's forty-third chapter was written during the time of the Babylonian exile, when the people of Israel had again been taken away from their homeland. Reflecting on his nation's present condition in exile, and the apparent loss of their homeland, Isaiah looked back to the exodus and looked forward with anticipation to what the prophet believed would be something as grand as another exodus. If the Hebrew people were once delivered from Egyptian slavery, he said, "One day we will be delivered from Babylonian captivity." The yesterdays he talked about were not simply object lessons to get us less obsessed with the good old days of the past. Isaiah gets us to look forward eagerly to what God is going to do tomorrow. Clearly, Isaiah is concerned to communicate anticipated gain through liberation, not loss through oppression.

Our Epistle lesson might seem at first, to the casual reader, to be about loss rather than gain. The apostle talks about all the things that he counts as loss: his Hebrew heritage, his study of the Law, his zeal for Judaism. On and on he goes, and he says that he counts everything as loss because of the surpassing knowledge of knowing Jesus Christ. The apostle is writing this Letter to the Philippians from jail – at a time when it appears as if everything is going wrong in his life. Nonetheless, his Letter is full of hope and expectation as he leans

into the future and talks about a day when his life will be made whole and complete and united with Jesus Christ – sharing a death like Christ’s and then sharing a resurrection like Christ’s. Here we see the apostle: a follower of Jesus Christ, one who is facing many troubles, yet one who believes and expects he has much to gain.

We are invited this morning, *via* Holy Scripture, to join prophet and apostle in having this mark of the Christian life as a part of our lives: this mark of expecting to *gain* rather than to *lose*. We are invited to *expect great things for ourselves*. One of the worst things that can ever befall us is to think that our life is over . . . to begin to believe that what we have, and what we are, and what we know, is the whole story. Christian people, we need to *believe* that there is more. Yes, there is *more!* There *is* more! The Christian life is about gaining, not losing. Listen: we’re gaining . . . we’re expecting the rewards that come from investing our lives in Jesus Christ.

If we believed that the knowledge we have of God today is all we would ever know about God, we would be losing. If we believed that our experience of Jesus Christ up to this point in our lives is complete and there is no room for further Christian growth, we would be losers. But there is good news: the reliable biblical record, combined with the evidence of many before us, is that we have much to gain . . . that we will know God better and we will experience Jesus Christ even more powerfully in our lives. If our prayer life is non-existent or flat, let us expect it to get better. If our witness and service and hope are stumbling, let us expect to stand tall again. In your life and in mine God is not done. Let us lean into the future. Let us live life on tiptoe, anticipating tomorrow.

We are invited also – especially by Isaiah – not only to have individualistic expectations, not only to have the promise of gain for our own lives, but also to have expectations for our community of faith . . . for Memorial United Methodist Church. I hope and pray and trust that in the days ahead God will work through our congregation in God’s mission in the world, transforming our community, strengthening our lives, and expanding our fellowship.

But let us take care as we think corporately this morning. Let us take care that when – like Israel – we hearken back to days of old and tell the old religious stories, we don’t get the

idea that all God's glory days are behind. Let us take care that in our worship – in our prayers and liturgies, in our songs and anthems – we do not merely rehearse old history, recalling a mighty past, assuming that – as far as Memorial Church is concerned – God has passed the divine “prime” and is ambling toward old age. Yes, God is the “Ancient of Days” ...yes, God is the One who in days past has delivered us . . . yes, the works of the Lord are mighty ...but this same God of history is still with us ...the great “I AM” ...the first and the last ...the *Alpha* and the *Omega* ...is the God of the *present* and *future* as much as the God of the *past*.

I am convinced that one of the greatest barriers to growth in any church is the subtle belief that a church's history is more glorious than its future. I would invite you to examine your own thoughts on this matter. Do you think that the very best days at Memorial Church are behind in our history or ahead in our future? Think carefully, because we are likely to gain what we expect. If we think the best days of our church are in the past, we are not likely to invite our neighbors to be a part of Memorial. Then we will lose, not gain. If we think the best days of this church are in the past, we are not likely to take risks in mission in the world. Then we will lose, not gain. If we think the best Sunday School classes this church ever had were in bygone days, we are not likely to do well in the future. Then we will lose, not gain. But if we have the expectation that God's future is even greater than the past, if we, like Isaiah, can look back on the exodus and say that even in our circumstances today there is something better ahead, then we are likely to experience it. In a non-materialistic sense – and I stress that I am *not* speaking of *material things* - we *will* gain what we expect. If we expect *little*, we will gain *little* . . . if we expect *much*, we will gain *much*.

Charles Dickens' classic novel *Great Expectations* is one that almost everyone reads in high school. It is a wonderful novel, full of Dickens' passion for social justice and for social change. I love this title, *Great Expectations*. If we were to rename the Bible, I think it could be renamed “*The Great Expectations*.” From beginning to end the Bible is the story of human hope founded in God, full of expectation, full of promise, full of joy. It teaches us that if we expect much, we will gain much . . . if we expect little, we will gain little. I invite

you to have great, faith-sized expectations for yourself and for Memorial Church as we look to our future together.

Finally, because this is God's world that God dearly loves, we are invited to have great expectations for what God is doing in the world. We can look at the world and look at all the strife and all the injustice and all the violence and all the troubles of the world, and grow discouraged. Listen again to God's agenda for the world: food for the hungry, sight for the blind, liberty for the oppressed. God's agenda for the world is an agenda of health and justice and hope and peace for all God's people, and if that is God's agenda, if that is God's program of redemption, if that is God's design, why are we expecting anything else or anything less? Why do we think we are losing, not gaining? Don't we believe in God?

I invite you to have great expectations this morning ...for yourself ...for our church ...for the world. After all, if I can't make that invitation and mean it, then I better do something other than preach. "We're *winning*," I say, "we're *gaining* ...we're on the victory side!" Believe it, *not* because I say so, but because you believe in God ...in Jesus Christ. Believe it because you are Easter people; believe it because there was a cross on a green hill far away outside a city wall where the dear Lord was crucified; believe it because the tomb was empty, putting us on the victory side. Believe it, and you'll never be a loser ...not in this life, nor in the life to come!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.