

Dreaming God's Dreams

Part 4 of 4 in the Stewardship Series, *What Gift Can We Bring?*

Isaiah 43:16-21 – October 31, 2010 – Browns Point UMC

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I've been out of the office for continuing education events for much of the last five weeks. It's tough to be gone so much – I'm bordering on exhaustion, my family has pitched in more than their share of parenting, I've neglected some of your emails and phone calls, and poor Darrell, Andrew, and Lin have had to put up with even-later-than-usual worship orders and Sunday morning plans.

But I've learned a lot in the last five weeks: hopefully enough that it will have been more than worth it. The events I attended were all different: a regional clergy meeting with a speaker on church in the digital age, a training to learn strategies and practices of leading from a coaching perspective, a young clergy meeting focused on church finances and reading the culture of the mission field, and finally this past week, an event designed to help church leaders discern about and plan for starting new faith communities.

Everywhere I've gone, people have been talking about our changing world: post-Christendom, postmodernism, financial recession, not only the digital age but digital age 2.0. Many church leaders and pastors seem awfully anxious about what to do about the church, and particularly the mainline church, in such a crazy time, when we're not even really sure what's happening around us and the only thing we can be certain of is that monumental change is happening faster than it's ever happened before. What does it mean to be church in an age of digital communication that streams information at us instead of making us go get it; that allows us to participate in the creation of nearly everything; asks our opinions; caters to our high-sensory, attention-deficit needs; and allows us to know more about more things and people and events all over the world than we've ever known before?

They're good questions to ask, of course – questions that we at Browns Point should be asking. After all, trying to understand what's happening in the world is basically a full-time job, so doing it as a community is bound to be more successful than each of us going it alone. I personally still don't have a super-clear understanding of what postmodernism even *is* after all these conferences, but I do know that in this day and age, the more we know, the less we know. And we can't really know it, anyway, unless we know ourselves, because truth is more subjective than we think and there's a lot more gray area than black and white.

All of this is well and good, interesting stuff, and important to think about as a church; but I wonder if one of the side effects of all this thinking about our culture is that we're a little bit more skeptical than we might have been. I have more friends than I'd like to admit who are pessimists and cynics. Sarcasm rules our rhetoric, and the eye-roll has become a part of global language. We are only certain that disaster will strike when we least expect it, and many of us are appropriately negative and fearful as we wait.

What ever happened to optimism, to hope, to big dreams becoming reality?

The place we find ourselves is, of course, not entirely new. The people for whom the Prophet Isaiah spoke and wrote were pessimists, perhaps cynics. They had experienced their share of disaster. Their lives were quite different than ours in the details, but they understood tragedy and fear with the best of us. They had lost their land, their homes, their jobs, their families. They had lost the center of their religion, and they wondered if maybe they had lost God, too, the same God who had called them the "chosen people" and promised to be with them always. They questioned God's fidelity, God's goodness, God's power, even God's presence.

It's in tough times, like ours, when folks are losing their homes, their jobs, their families, when life is changing faster than we can keep up, that it's easy for us to question God's presence and God's faithfulness, too. Thankfully, the prophet Isaiah still speaks to us today: this text really begins in chapter 40 with "Comfort, comfort, my people." Then come those famous lines: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable..."¹ For two long chapters, God (through Isaiah) tells God's people to take courage, assuring them that God is present and will help, that idols are futile. And then in chapter 43, those beautiful words: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

When things have been tough – when financial markets have crumbled and relationships have struggled and friends have fought and churches have split – it's easy to forget God's promises. And so we go back to the Word, where we hear a reminder that no matter how fast the world is changing, no matter how little we understand, or how muddy the waters have become, God is still present, still speaking, still powerful, still loving, still faithful. And the most hopeful, perhaps, of all the verses in this part of Isaiah, we heard this morning from chapter 43: "God is doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

This is the God who rained bread from heaven and poured water from a rock, who cured the sick and healed the lame and set the prisoner free, who came to earth in the body of a man, died and rose from the dead. This is the God who fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes, who turned water into wine, who made the blind to see. This is the God who consistently and repeatedly throughout history for thousands and thousands of years has done extraordinary things: and is doing yet more even now. All we have to do is open ourselves to perceive what new things God is doing in our midst. All we have to do is dream God's dreams, letting ourselves believe that the extraordinary can happen, and we can take part in it. All we have to do is dream that God is transforming our crazy, fast-paced, mixed-up world and making all things new. Do you not perceive it? This is why we give. This is why we volunteer. This is why we commit. This is why we *are church*: not to do the same old ordinary things, but to take part in the extraordinary that God is preparing, the new things God is doing even now.

Would you take a moment to dream, and then share some of your dreams for Browns Point UMC with the people sitting nearest you? Or, if you're reading this at home, share some of those dreams with me at 253.927.3188 or pastorschindler@gmail.com?

¹ Isaiah 40:28.