

**Present Happiness**  
**Isaiah 43: 16-21; Psalm 126 (UMH 847); Philippians 3: 4b-14**  
**March 17, 2013 (Fifth Sunday in Lent)**  
**Rev. Dr. Charles Parker**

## **I Introduction**

I had a very early call into ministry and I really started having it when I was sitting in the pews at Foundry United Methodist Church downtown where I grew up. I knew exactly what ministry looked like. We were in a big, tall, steepled church and I got to listen to Ed Bowman, one of the great preachers of his day, very week. I had a very clear picture in my head about what my future looked like, which was preaching in a big, tall, steepled church, and I'm helping to shape a community.

So, I went through college and then seminary and got out into a church and hated it. It was a great church and wonderful, wonderful people who I loved, but I hated the preaching. I was dreadfully unhappy doing it and so eventually, after three years, I left the parish. I had a very low period in my professional life. I was unemployed and trying to figure out what to do with a Master of Divinity degree, which is frankly not a lot, and figuring out where I had heard God wrong.

We're spending some time this Lent looking at the issue of happiness, which for those of you who haven't been here, may sound like an odd topic for Lent which is, of course, the classic penitential season in the life of our church. But we've been reflecting on John Wesley's wisdom that we are created for the sole purpose of being happy in God. We've been looking at Lent as the time when we can start to shed some of the pieces that are keeping us from embracing the happiness that God is seeking for us, a time when we let go of some of the baggage that keeps us from being happy, and get to

the spiritual core, which is where we find God and where we experience our true happiness.

Today, we're going to be looking at how our past - our past failures, our past expectations - often keep us from experiencing the happiness that God is offering us right now in this moment.

## **II. The View from Babylon**

All of us have experienced periods in life, as I just described in my own, where we feel like everything is very clear and moving very directly along the path that we had expected and somehow life takes an unexpected turn. We find ourselves on an entirely different road or maybe even crashed into a gully and wondering what happened.

The children of Israel, in the passage from Isaiah today, are in that place as people. This wonderful passage from Second Isaiah is shared with the people of Israel during the Babylonian captivity. This writer, this prophet we called Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah because he follows a lot of the themes that the original prophet Isaiah had laid out in the 8th Century, but he's writing much later to a people who have experienced the incredible loss of war and deportation. They've seen their capital city, Jerusalem, destroyed. They've seen their temple, the center place of their worship, burned to the ground and now they are in captivity in Babylon. Their whole political and religious world turned on its head and apparently no future and a past that seemed to mock them.

In the midst of this, Isaiah speaks his very powerful words to the people. He starts off reminding them of their own history, reminding them of the Exodus event.

God, speaking through the prophet, says, “I am the one who defeated the horse and chariot and freed you to move into the promise land.” But then there’s this interesting shift in which God says, “But don’t get caught up in that past. That’s done. That chapter is over. Look at what’s happening right now.” God has reminded the people of God’s own great power and of God’s faithfulness, but then says, “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.”

In other words, God is going to do something both totally unexpected and apparently impossible, putting in place a road from Babylon through the desert back to their homeland where they want to go so desperately, causing the desert, this place of desolation and fear, to spring up like a garden. The prophet wants the people to understand that as long as they’re mentally and emotionally locked into the past and grieving, they are never going to see the places where God is working new things right now.

### **III. Letting Go**

The question that it raises for us is what are the pieces that have you hooked and living in the past, grieving the past, regretting the past that keep the blinders on so that we can’t see the new things that God is doing around us? Is it, maybe, a job that you have lost? There’s been a lot of that recently where you thought you had your career laid out in front of you, and then all of a sudden the rug got pulled out. Was it the death of a loved one that came unexpectedly and left you lost and unmoored? Was it the dissolution of a marriage and a relationship that you thought was going to last your

whole life and now is broken? Was it that job or that school that you had so planned to attend or the job you had planned to move into that got given to someone else? I will tell you parenthetically, a lot of clergy go through their life absolutely sure that God has called them to be a bishop, and then when they get far enough along to realize that isn't going to happen, they spend a lot of time angry and bitter and not looking for where God might be moving in their life right then.

This happens on a corporate level too, of course. As a church, we get totally locked into what the church looked like 30 and 40 and 50 years ago when we were in our heyday. We spend a lot of time grieving the time at which all our pews were all filled and we had to expand the sanctuary because we were bursting at the seams, grieving the time when politicians paid attention to the voice of good Protestant ministers, and Protestants walked in the halls of power. We spend a lot of time trying to figure out how do we get back to that place where everything made sense and we understood who we were and who God wanted us to be, instead of looking at where we are in a very, very different world and looking for the new thing that God is doing in our midst.

Paul reminds us that it's not just the places of loss and grief in the past that sometimes hook us. Sometimes it's the fact that we did everything right and we can't let go of that. Paul starts off talking to the Philippians about the fact that he had done everything he planned to do. He was raised in a good Jewish household. He had been circumcised at the right time. He was born into a multigenerational Jewish family. He studied hard. He joined the strictest sect of Judaism that he could - the Pharisees. He persecuted the church. He had all the pieces in place and was still angry, and bitter, and persecuting those who didn't see the world his way.

Paul wants the Philippians to understand that sometimes the past that hooks you is the things that you did really well, and you can't let that go either to move into a new time of life. Paul, of course, had to get knocked off his horse to figure out it was time to start doing things a different way. Paul wants the Philippians to understand that they may have done a lot of things right, but the question they need to ask themselves now is where is the spirit calling you as you move into the future? He says, "This one thing I do forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the price of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ."

So, what I want to suggest this morning is that one of the pieces that we can let go in our Lenten discipline is the past. Not that we don't learn from it, and not that it hasn't shaped us. Paul uses a very interesting word in this passage from Philippians when he's talking about all of the achievements of his past. It got translated in the passage that Bob read as *rubbish*. It's actually better translated as *dung*, which it has a rubbish context, but it's also you use dung, right? It fertilizes what's coming next. So, Paul wants us to understand that all of that stuff makes up who we are. It gives us the fertile ground from which to grow. But if we're hooked by our past, if we can't get past our old way of doing things and look at what God is doing in our midst right now, we can't go to where God wants us to go; we can't be the people God wants us to be; and we can't be happy in the life God desires for us.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

I want to suggest that one of our Lenten disciplines is figuring out those places in our past that have us hooked through regret, through grief, through embarrassment,

through pride, and to let those go and to look around us right now at the places in our life that God is offering us a new thing, a new way of relating, a new way of engaging the world around us because that's where we will find the happiness that God wants to offer us.

In my own life, I had to let go of the idea that I was going to be a preacher in a big, steepled church so that I could move on to the next phase of my life, which was the rich and transformative work I had the chance to be involved in right here in the city for many years and getting involved in all of the social justice work that was most of my career. I could never have done that if I was stuck in where I had thought God wanted me to be. Now, if nothing else, that should be a warning to you that sometimes God has a very rich sense of humor as well.

Amen.