

“I Am About To Do a New Thing: Do You Not Perceive It?”

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

March 17, 2024, Fifth Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 43:18-21; Philippians 3:4b-9, 12-14; John 12:1-8

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Fifth Sunday in Lent. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and that our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

In order to build a loving community that includes all we need to make sure that every person here feels welcomed, supported and at home, from the oldest member to the person new today.

Everything else we do here is made possible by being an extravagantly loving community. So please greet one another in that spirit again today, reaching out especially to those you do not know well and those who seem most different from you, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship We are blessed to live where the weather gives us perfect images for Lent, like mud changing to snow changing to ice changing back to mud again—our equivalent of the wilderness trials of Jesus and the lost confusion of the children of Israel.

Lent is a season of transformation. Change is in the air. We hear the first red wing blackbirds, we see buds swelling and the first tips of green shoots, glimmers of new life getting ready to spring forth.

We can see these outer changes as symbols of inner changes. Lent is an opportunity for us to be intentional about our own transformation. God wants to do a new thing in our individual life and in our life as a church and as humanity, as well. This service is designed to help us perceive it and open to that new thing. Let us worship together...

“I Am About To Do a New Thing: Do You Not Perceive It?”

“I am about to do a new thing,” God says through Isaiah, and in the Book of Revelation God says through John of Patmos, “Behold, I make all things new.” God says to forget the former things, leave behind what was of old, and trust.

It is not who or what God is that matters so much today as that we perceive a power, by whatever name we call it, that we can work with to do new things.

That is what the spirit or force or fact of nature we name God does. It explodes a new universe into existence, it takes old stars that have burned out and makes new stars, it took a 500 million year old earth and brought new life into being on it, it takes old life that has died and been composting all winter and raises spring gardens from it, it takes people who have grown old in heart and brings new love into their lives, it takes a community that has grown weary and discouraged, like the children of Israel carried off captive, and frees them and shows them a way through the wilderness and renews the desert with springs of living water.

This power the scriptures call God is always about to do a new thing. We can count on that, it happens every day, every moment, “Now it springs forth,” Isaiah says, “do you not perceive it?”

That is the key question. “Do you not perceive it?” Perceiving it is what makes all the difference.

It is possible to go through this life and not notice what God is doing, or to take it for granted. God is the force of love and life and light. God is the force of healing and forgiving and reconciling. God is the force of compassion and empathy and mercy. God is the force of generosity and lovingkindness. God is the force of transformation and resurrection. The force that we call God is constantly creating and renewing our world, and yet we can close our hearts and minds and not perceive any of it.

A very religious man named Saul did not perceive it. His perception was materialistic and legalistic. He was proud of the status he had from his family and tribe, he was proud of his purity and zeal as an upholder of laws and traditions.

Saul would have said that God was behind the laws, but it was not the God who proclaimed, “I am about to do a new thing.”

Saul was on the road to Damascus where he intended to persecute and kill followers of Jesus. Suddenly he was thrown to the ground by a force of light. God was about to do a new thing through Saul, and turn him into the Apostle Paul.

He was blinded, and by the time the scales fell from his eyes his perception had changed completely. It changed his entire value system. He said, “I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain the Spirit that was in Christ and be found in it.”

Paul perceived that what matters is where we come from, not in the sense of tribe or power or wealth, but where we come from inside. If we come from a place of being in the Spirit, what we do and say will naturally serve the new, creative thing God is trying to do. Paul urged us to value living from that place of Spirit within us above all else in life, and to strive for it with all our strength.

We need to be prepared, though, to be considered wrong or crazy by others. Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, opened herself wide to the Spirit and became a pure channel for its living water to flow from her heart into the world, and others attacked her for it. Mary sat at Jesus’ feet in one story, and Martha complained, but Jesus said that Mary had chosen the better part. Mary poured thirty thousand dollars worth of perfume on Jesus’ feet in today’s story, and Judas rebuked her, but Jesus defended her again.

It is important to notice that both complaints were justified. Martha was serving Jesus in the kitchen and could have used Mary’s help. Judas was helping the sick and people in poverty and people who were outcasts. He could have supported a large family for a year with what Mary poured out on Jesus’ feet.

If we are going to let God do a new thing, we need to let go of the judging mind that too quickly condemns old ways or automatically fears change.

Our Future Directions Vision from 2018 says, “We value traditions and also embrace evolution when change is necessary. We understand that to serve younger generations we need to find new ways of being a church that work for them.”

In the six years since the Spirit inspired that vision, the world and culture have changed dramatically—covid and climate, insurrection and war. It is a daunting but also exciting time, because the Spirit is still here, and the spiritual need is even greater as people go through the rapid

changes of this age. We can trust that the Spirit will guide us if we set out to discern what we can do to serve our changed community and world.

God is doing a new thing here in this church right now. It is springing forth. Do you not perceive it?

Look at our Story Sundays that have opened a door for a new generation of families and children. We have a great team that is excited to continue. Caring for children is an old thing in this church, and the Spirit is doing a new thing with it, doing it in new ways. Do you not perceive it?

Walk into the Parish Hall and you will see new cribs and toddler play stations. My daughter, Cary, attended the Creative Preschool when it was in the Parish Hall thirty years ago, and now we will have the Creative Nursery, thanks to the passionate commitment and huge amount of work by Jim and Becky, Joey and Danette, Glenn and Bob, Kate and Erik and many others.

We have had to let go of many artifacts of wonderful past ways of working with children as we prepare the space, which is a cause for grief—letting go to make room for change can be painful. We need to acknowledge that. We cannot fully enter a new time in any transition until we have emotionally processed the loss of the old. Yet even as we grieve, the Spirit is doing a new and exciting thing here. Do you not perceive it?

Listen to the newness in the air—and not just the calls of geese or loud songs of spring streams. This church has a proud history of music, and now the Spirit is doing a new thing. Electric Light Orchestra two weeks ago, Peter Frampton today, new words to old hymns, an original postlude by Rolf, and classical music the next two weeks first with Annemieke and then Sarah and the Cantornote Church Musicians. The Spirit is doing a new thing through musical diversity and innovation. Do you not perceive it?

Look at the Fulfilling Our Vision Committee. In a few short years they have helped found the Strafford Climate Group, promoted antiracism work in town and led us to become an Open and Affirming congregation. They are exploring what the concept of reparations means in relation to Native Americans today. God is doing one new thing after another through us. Do you not perceive it?

What is most important in all this is to see that it is not us, it is the Spirit that is doing a new thing through us. Our job is to open ourselves to it and throw ourselves into it with enthusiasm. Paul used the image of a race in his letter to the Philippians, straining forward, pressing on toward the goal.

Let us perceive with gratitude and hope the new things that the Spirit is doing here, and press on toward the goals that are calling to us now.

Let us pray together in silence, letting go of our thoughts and opening our hearts and minds to let the Spirit move us to something new...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Earth speaks to us.
Preserve woodlands, meadows,
wetlands for the nesting birds.