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Lent 5

Isaiah 43:16-24

This is what the LORD says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters,¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:¹⁸ “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.²⁰ The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen,²¹ the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

²²“Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel. ²³You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. ²⁴You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, nor lavished on me the fat of your scarifies. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. (NIV84)

Theme: A Lesson from the Past: The Lord is gracious in his Forgiveness

People love to dwell in the past. They talk about the “Good ol’ days.” They retell the same stories over and over again; and long for a return to way the way things used to be. What grandparent hasn’t told their grandchildren about the way things were “back when I was growing up?” Nostalgia is huge right now—that is why we see restaurants made to look like 50’s diners, reboots of mediocre movies and t.v. shows, and new versions of retro toys or games. Some will say that it is not healthy for you to live in the past—but that is not really true as long as going so doesn’t affect your life in the present age and in the one to come.

Today the Lord reminds us of the past so that we may have comfort in the present and look forward to the future; and as we look toward the past we see that the Lord’s forgiveness is full of grace.

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Isaiah’s job wasn’t the easiest. It was to warn the people of coming destruction. He was called 18 years before the fall of the northern kingdom, Israel; and he would continue in his ministry for another 40 years after that. During this time he warned the people of the southern kingdom, Judah, that unless they repented, they would end up like Israel. They would be taken into exile, their country and capital city of Jerusalem, would be destroyed completely.

This was because they rebelled against the Lord. They turned away from him. In general, they no longer cared about the Lord. They went after false gods, worshiping and offering sacrifices to the idols of the countries around them. They not only didn’t call upon him as they worshiped, but they also didn’t pray to him. The Lord was no longer a concern for them in their minds; they were too busy with other things in their lives to worry about God.

Others had soured on God. They thought that God was too overbearing, that he demanded too much of his people. He wanted them to be perfect and to always do what was right. He wanted them to bring certain sacrifices at certain times of day and under certain circumstances. He had special provisions for them to follow as they worshiped him and so on. And so they grew tired of the Lord, eventually rejecting him in favor of man-made religions. Many then, didn’t bring the sacrifices to the Lord that he demanded. Others only brought them because they knew God demanded them, but they were only going through the motions—an empty formalism, not done out of love and thanks to God.

And on top of it all, they wearied God with their own sins. They not only turned away from him in worship and to other gods; they also joined with the world in their wickedness and rebellion. God’s own people joined in the same sinful practices as the unbelievers around them.

Sounds like us at times, doesn’t it? We get busy with our lives—plans are made, things come up: we have to work, we have to take our kids somewhere, we had to stay up last night and decided to sleep in, we want to hunting or fishing with our buddies—we could go on and on. We often fail to call upon the Lord in worship. There are many times that we don’t make it to worship for any number of reasons—some of them, we may have not been able to anything about; but there are

many other times when we choose to do something other than worship our Lord. And on Sunday mornings, we call out our children's names, our own names, those of our friends, or bosses, but not the Lord's. Bible Study also takes a back seat. Whether it's at home or here on Sunday or Wednesday mornings. There are a lot of things we have doing on in our lives, and there is a lot more we could or should be doing. So the temptation is to take away from God by not studying his Word—that way we could get to something you've been putting off, or have that much extra time a day to get done whatever it is you haven't been doing.

And prayer? Oh, we might pray before a meal, maybe as we go to bed—before we fall asleep that is, but other than that; we go about our lives rarely thinking about the Lord let alone calling upon his name in prayer.

That is one way we are like the Israelites, but there is another way. When we do go and worship God or read our Bibles or pray to him, there may be times that we are simply going through the motions—not worshiping him with our whole heart, doing it because it is expected of us. We know the parts of the liturgy so well, that we can say them by heart without even thinking of them—and that is what we do; and we think that this is somehow pleasing to the Lord.

And our sacrifices, or our offerings—we may at times give them simply so that no one looks down upon us; because it's expected of us; but not out of love and joy in our hearts. We also may fail to give God our firstfruits—our first and our best, rarely lavishing on him everything we have to offer.

By the time our text for today takes place, the exile was already a foregone conclusion. Because of the unbelief and rebelliousness of the Jews, God had already decided that he was going to send his people into exile. The Babylonians would come, destroy Jerusalem, and take the people back to Babylon with them. So in the second half of his book, chapter 40 on, Isaiah's message takes a different tone. He focuses on the return from exile. His major point is that God will graciously bring his people back from exile—they will not be destroyed as a nation. That is his message here.

B. But first, God points back—allowing his people to dwell in the past for a bit. The Israelites lived as slaves in Egypt for about 400 years. And so God sent 10 plagues on the land of Egypt to convince Pharaoh

to let the Israelites go back to Canaan. But after they left Pharaoh realized that all of his free labor walked out of his country. So he and his army, the most powerful in the world went rushing after them. They caught up to the Israelites at the waters of the Red Sea. It seemed as if all the Israelites would be slaughtered. But God caused the waters of the Red Sea to split apart, and sent an east wind to dry up the lake bed. During the night the Israelites walked through the Red Sea, with a wall of water on their left and on their right on dry ground. When the Egyptians followed after them, the dry ground became mud. And when the last Israelites were safely on the other side, God sent the wall of water crashing down upon the Egyptians, completely wiping out the entire army and saving his people from annihilation.

But that's enough about the past God says, **Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.** It is fine to remember God's grace in the past—after all he did the reminding, but now God wanted them to look forward to what he was about to do. As he saved them from slavery in Egypt, so God was going to save his people again—this time from exile in Babylon. He would bring them back.

The Israelites would spend about 70 years in exile before the first of them returned to Jerusalem to rebuild their city. As he made a path through the Red Sea, the Lord would make a path through the Arabian Desert to give easy and safe passage. And not only that, but he would provide water in the desert for those returning from exile, a great and gracious gift of the Lord as they made their journey of about 500 miles! So even though God would punish them by sending them into exile, he would graciously keep them safe in exile and would bring them home to dwell in the Promised Land once again.

But God would do something much greater for them—something he also did for us. He sent his son into the world in order to save the world. It's okay to dwell in the past from time to time. Isn't that what many of our worship services are—mini trips to the past to talk about what the Lord has done for us? What have we been doing the last five weeks of Lent? We have been focusing on Jesus' passion—his suffering and death on the cross in order to save us. He lived a perfect life for us so that while on the cross he could give it to us as he took our sins upon himself. He suffered through the eternal scorn for our sins so that we wouldn't have to.

By his suffering and death on the cross all our sins have been removed and paid for. His perfect life is now ours. Christ paid for all of our sins—the sins of the whole world. God graciously sent his son to die for us. His son willingly gave up his life in order to save us. This is not something we earn or deserve, but God did this despite the many times we sin against him. So we dwell in the past for a while each Sunday to remember what the Lord has graciously done for us through his suffering and death. And this leads us to look at the present—the here and the now. We stand forgiven before God, no matter what is it we have done, we know that Christ has paid for our sins and stand as not guilty before the Lord.

But we also know that the Lord did something else—three days after he died he rose from the dead. His life means that we too will live; his victory over death is now ours. Death is not an end of life, but the beginning of eternal life for all who believe. On the Last Day, when the Lord comes again, he will raise all of our bodies to be like his glorious body; and then body and soul, together in perfect and glorious harmony, we will dwell with the Lord forever.

So even though we often look back during worship services, we also look forward. We look forward to the final goal of our faith—a perfect life with the Lord, a life that will never end. We long for his coming, and we eagerly anticipate it. And while we wait we realize that this too is a gracious gift from him. As the Jews looked with eager anticipation at the words of Isaiah promising them a return from exile so that they would dwell once again in the Promised Land, we have that same longing for the fulfillment of something much greater: The Lord's return to take us to the Promised Land of heaven!

And as we wait, we leave the ways of our past behind us—no longer do we want to live a sinful life as we have done in the past; but we live our lives for him. We call upon him at worship, read his Word, and turn to him in prayer. We serve him with our whole heart, gladly dedicating our entire lives to him, and willingly obeying his commands. Throughout our lives we dwell in the past so we can be comforted in the future and be confident of the future; for our Lord is gracious in his forgiveness. Amen.