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Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year C

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 29, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

The commentator on sacred scripture suggests that we ought to make the readings or at least the passage from the first reading today, from the book of the Prophet Isaiah, a part of our prayer every morning. God is saying to us, "See I am doing something new, even now it comes to light, can you not see it?" Isaiah was trying to get the people who were being kept in that terrible captivity in Babylon -- they had been there for many years -- trying to get them not just to remember all the great things that God did in the past. They did that so well, they remembered in their prayers, in their Passover feasts and other feasts, how God had worked such great wonders to free them from Egypt, how God had worked such wonders as they wandered through the desert for 40 years until they came to the promised land. They remembered all those things about how God was so great in the past.

But Isaiah was trying to get them to realize that right now, 700 years later and 500 miles from where all those events took place, that God is still working in your midst. God is still doing new things, better things.

That is what is happening in our lives too. We need not only remember all the blessings from the past, but we should be like St. Paul, who really heard those words and knew that God was doing something new in his life. Paul speaks about it in such a powerful way. He talks about how, "I was born of the race of Israel, and of the tribe of Benjamin. I was circumcised when I was 8 days old. As for the law, I was a Pharisee. As for working for religion, I was a persecutor of the church. As far as the law can make you perfect, I was faultless."

Then God did something new for Paul and he realized "because of Jesus, I have come to consider all of these advantages that I had as disadvantages." Not only that, but "I believe that nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus. I look on everything of the past as so much rubbish. If only I can have Christ and be given a place in him, live in him right now." And then Paul goes on to say, he hasn't reached the goal yet, but he is running toward it because God is doing something new in his life everyday.

Jesus in the Gospel lesson shows us so clearly how he does new things. Those Scribes and the Pharisees were trying to embarrass Jesus, or even worse than that, they wanted make Jesus be hated. They wanted to find something they could hold against him, so they could destroy his ministry, so they could destroy him even.

Jesus was known as a healer. A compassionate, loving, gentle, forgiving person. He was known as one who welcomed sinners; he ate with the publicans, the prostitutes. They were the ones he seemed to love best of all. He was always reaching out in mercy. And so these Scribes and Pharisees wanted to turn people against him by having the opportunity say "look he broke the law." Because the law did demand, as they said, that a person

taken in adultery, more specifically a women taken in adultery, needed to be stoned to death. So Jesus, if he had obeyed the law, would then lose favor in the sight of all those to whom he reached out with such love.

Because that's such a favorite scripture passage, many artists who have tried to project on canvas what happened on that day. I have a description of a work art that is presently in a museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. It's called "Jesus and the Fallen Woman" by Lucas Cranach the Younger. It was painted in 1570. Here's what it looks like: "At the front center of the painting are Jesus and the woman. It captures that moment when Jesus turns toward the accusers and tchallenges those without sin to cast the stone. His expression is stern but troubled, and his right hand reaches out toward the woman. Most remarkable the woman is not bowed to the ground in front of Jesus as in much art work, but is ttstanding to his left. She is very young, with eyes closed, looking forlorn and resigned to her fate. Her head is inclined toward Jesus' shoulder and her hand rests on his arm. Most striking as one follows the lines of the painting is that her right hand is entwined with the left hand of Jesus in a gesture of exquisite tenderness. The hands of mercy are joined to the hands of a suffering person facing execution."

Such a beautiful picture of Jesus holding hands with that woman. Such a loving, forgiving, compassionate way. Surely she was experiencing God doing something new in her life. And what we need to remember is that God is doing something new like that in our lives all the time. God is always reaching out to us in gestures of tenderness, of mercy, of forgiveness, of unlimited unconditional love. Mercy without bounds. That is how God is acting toward us at every moment. Not just in the past. We can remember those beautiful times when we experienced God's love at some profound way in our lives. But right now, every day, God is reaching out to us in that kind of love. Doing new things for us. If only we can experience that. How God is doing new things within our hearts, within our spirits, it will change our lives.

Today we commemorate the death of Oscar Romero on March 24, 1980. We remember that he was shot to death. It happened in a small chapel like this. The back door of the chapel was no further than the back pew of this chapel. So when he was standing at the altar he looked up after offering the gifts, when the door opened, he looked right into the eye of the assassin. It was that close. Oscar Romero was one who knew God was always doing new things, and so I am sure that as he looked up, the words he had said two weeks before to a reporter who was interviewing him, were words that were present in his heart at that very moment. Because that reporter had asked him: Why do you stay? Your name is on the death list. You're going to be killed. And Oscar Romero, who knew that God is always doing new things, said to the reporter: Yes, of course, I've been threatened many times with death, but I don't believe in death without resurrection. So even if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people. See God will do new things even through my death.

Oscar Romero looked at that assassin not in fear but with faith, and that's why he could go on to say to the reporter, and these are the words that must have been in his heart at that very moment, "As a shepherd I am obliged by divine mandate to give my life for those I love, that is, even for those who may be going to kill me." The first ones he thinks of are "those I love, the ones who may be going to kill me." And so he goes on and tells the reporter at the end of the interview, "look if in fact they kill me, you may tell them even now I forgive and bless those who do it."

Oscar Romero was one who really knew God was doing new things, even in the midst of all that suffering and killing and turmoil that was taking place in that tiny country at the time. He knew God was doing new things, so he could act in a new way, according to the way of Jesus.

Perhaps, if we look deeply into our own hearts everyday and see the new things that God is doing. The way God's love is continually being poured forth upon us, we too will be changed and will be able to act in the new way of Jesus. Live according to the way that is kingdom. Live according to the law of love, the law of mercy. Yes, God is doing new things always, and if we know that, experience that, we too will do new things, live according to the reign of God every day of our lives.

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