

10/5/25

**Can You See What God is Doing?***Isaiah 43:18-21***Pastor Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

After being in Spain and traveling for fifteen days, one more day than we planned, all of us who went were glad to finally get home on Friday evening. We had a great experience, and saw some amazing churches, museums, history, art, cultural events, and natural beauty. We had enough challenges, with illnesses and other things, that we dubbed the trip, “Survivor: the Spain Edition”, and there are likely some members of the group who are worshiping with us from home today, but I’m sure any of them will be happy to speak of the highlights of the experience for them. Jill and I are thankful for how the members of the group cared for each other, assisted one another, and provided mutual support and encouragement to one another, and to us. We’re also grateful to God for Blair and Paul Tingley, who graciously agreed to join us on less than a week’s notice, when our friend and colleague, Tom Ryan, whom Jill and I have worked with on all our pilgrimage trips, was unable to travel. Blair and Paul, with their diligence and caring leadership, were truly a God send.

Before those changes occurred, we had chosen the theme for worship today, **Can You See What God is Doing?**, from *Isaiah 43*, which I’ll read shortly. Seeing what God is doing — even when our plans, hopes, and expectations are being turned upside down or changed in unanticipated ways — requires openness, humility, and discernment, and without them, we can miss what God is doing in the present because we’re focused on what we wanted to happen, or thought should happen.

In Spain, we saw things as ancient as the ruins of Roman walls, buildings, and amphitheaters, and churches that dated to the 11th and 12th centuries. We worshiped at the cathedral in Avila, where St. Teresa — as she is known — had attended worship as a girl in the 16th century, and we worshiped at Sagrada Família, a Roman Catholic Basilica in Barcelona, designed by Antoni Gaudí and begun in 1882; Gaudí took over as chief architect in 1883 and remained the principal designer until his death in 1926. The iconic church is still under construction, with a hoped-for completion date in March of 2026, before Holy Week. It’s famous for its intricate, nature-inspired organic forms, blending Catalan Modernism, Art Nouveau, and Spanish Late Gothic styles. We saw a piece being taken up — by crane — to the steeple, when we were leaving worship. After

seeing more than a dozen cathedrals, churches, and basilicas filled with art, iconography, and painting, Ben Gregson commented that we “really needed to step up our game” at BBC.

The extent of what we saw in those churches is also a reflection of the historical fact that for 75% of Christian history, most believers were illiterate and didn’t have access to a Bible of their own, so the church needed to tell the story of faith in paintings and sculpture. In our day, especially as Protestants who place a high value on scripture, we need to be careful not to be guilty of making an idol out of the Bible, because we don’t worship the Bible, we worship the God to whom the Bible points. Having a copy of the Bible in our own language that we can read is not something Christians have experienced throughout history. There were millions of Christians — before the invention of the printing press and the Protestant Reformation, which began in the early sixteenth century — who didn’t have a Bible and couldn’t read. One of the things our pilgrimage trips have done is to help people to realize that we stand at the current end of thousands of years of the story of faith, a story that is still being written and created.

Sagrada Familia is famous for many reasons — and one of them is that the visionary architect who began it knew he wouldn’t live to see it completed, and so he worked to finish one façade, knowing that the other side — that would be finished in the future — would look quite different in style, and would be new.

If you had to choose, would you say you tend to spend more time looking back or looking ahead? Obviously, this is impacted by our age. A five-year-old doesn’t have as much to look back on as an 80-year-old. More than our age, I’m talking about your perspective on life. Do you tend to be Looking Back or Looking Ahead? Are you driving the car of your life by looking forward through the windshield, or trying to drive by looking in the rearview mirror? Are you dwelling on the past, or anticipating and looking for what God is doing now, and in the days to come? Listen to **Isaiah 43:18-21**.

***“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 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. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.”***

In *Isaiah 43*, God is speaking to people who have experienced loss, grief, being uprooted from their homes, living in exile as refugees in a new land, questioning — because of all they’ve gone through — if God is still with them or even exists, and God tells them — and us — not to dwell on the past; **“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.”** Why is it hard to do that? Maybe because we find comfort in what’s familiar, even if it’s not easy, or even good. But, at times, holding on to the past can keep us from seeing the “new thing” God is doing because we think God can only work in the ways we know from our own limited experience. In the middle scripture today, from ***Exodus 17:1-7***, the Israelites were having to adjust to the new thing God was doing, making a way in the wilderness without the predictability of their previous life in Egypt. Even though they had been enslaved, they knew what to expect, and some of them found that easier to accept than the unknown of following God in the wilderness.

Isaiah was talking about the return of the people of Israel after their time of exile in Babylon in the sixth century before Christ. The Lord saying, *“I will make a way in the wilderness”* reminds us of what God did during the exodus, leading the people out of slavery in Egypt, and of ***Isaiah 40:3***, *“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”* The section of Isaiah beginning in chapter 40 offers comfort and hope to people living in exile, away from their homes, weighed down by the consequences of their sin and fear of the future. God is trying to assure people, I’m still here, I’m still working, and you need to open your eyes and spirit because it may be in ways you don’t anticipate.

This is the final Sunday of our “Leave Something Beautiful Behind” series, and one of the ways we can be motivated to do that is by remembering people of faith like Teresa and John of Avila, Antoni Gaudi, and others, who can inspire us to join in the new work God is doing today, both locally and globally, that can have an impact on future generations. You may recall, last month, Pastor Joe Greemore shared that on August 9, he attended the ribbon cutting at the birthplace of missionary Adoniram Judson at 145 Main Street in Malden, which was dedicated as the Adoniram Judson Heritage Center. It’s the city’s oldest structure, originally built as Malden’s first meeting house in 1651, and rebuilt in 1724, after a fire. The Center will serve as a museum and cultural hub to honor Adoniram and Ann Judson and their legacy. Talk about doing a

new thing — the Judsons were among the first of America's foreign missionaries, as they sailed for Asia in 1812, and spent 40 years in Burma (now Myanmar), where they're credited with translating the Bible into Burmese. One way of leaving something beautiful behind is by giving to the World Mission Offering that supports the new things God is doing through our Global Servants, the heirs to the Judsons' legacy. Our giving to missions helps touch lives in ways that bring hope and joy, and will leave a great and eternal impact in Jesus' name.

God brings about newness in our lives in a host of ways. Some of those experiences are fun and joyful, some are sad and even heartbreaking, and others are challenging and stretching. On Thursday, we went to the airport in Madrid, expecting to check in and fly home. Instead, we dealt with terrible customer service, as we found out that our entire group had been bumped off our flight without any communication to us. The last of us got to one of the two hotels the airline put us up in for the night, about five hours after we arrived at the airport. Ten of our group were situated at a five-star hotel close to the airport. The rest of us stayed at a more humble, but still fine, place further away. It quickly became clear that our hotel wasn't just for tourists who had to deal with the inconvenience of cancelled or overbooked flights. It was also a long-term residence for refugees from other countries. As I said when I began, seeing what God is doing — even when our plans, hopes, and expectations are being turned upside down or changed in unanticipated ways — requires openness, humility, and discernment, and without them we can miss what God is doing in the present because we're focused on what we wanted to happen, or thought should happen. We were a frustrated and tired group on late Thursday afternoon, with many of us — including Jill and myself — dealing with a bug, but it was Jill who helped to change the narrative for many of us, from complaining about what happened to recognizing that, while we had been inconvenienced, the other people we were seeing were living in these rooms as their homes. Like the people first addressed by *Isaiah 43*, they had left their homes and were trying to find a way to survive in a new land.

If you're listening to, or reading, the Bible with us this year, yesterday you heard ***Psalms 116:7***, “*I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord.*” One of the persons we shared about with our Spain group was John of the Cross (1500-1569), who was a contemporary and friend of Teresa of Avila. They both

emphasized a personal relationship with and experience of Christ and mystical union with God. John wrote, **“One act of thanksgiving when things go wrong with us is worth a thousand thanks when things are agreeable to our inclination.”** John’s quote is helpful to remember when we find ourselves irritable, frustrated, or complaining about our circumstances.

Next week, we start a new series, “Six Things About God that Don’t Change”, based on the prophet Malachi. While it’s not one of the six aspects of that series, one thing about God that doesn’t change is that **God is always doing new things**, whether we perceive them or not. The first chapter of the Bible begins with the newness of creation. The last two chapters of the Bible are also about God doing a **new** thing. ***Revelation 21:1-6*** states, ***“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’ And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.’”***

In *Exodus 17*, *Isaiah 43*, and *Revelation 21*, there is a promise of water in barren places — from the rock, in the desert, and even after death as a gift from the spring of the water of life. All of these are new and unexpected experiences, yet they are life giving. As you go into a new week, stay attentive and keep looking, so you don’t miss the “new thing” God may be doing in your life, in our community, or in the world.

## Questions for Discussion or Reflection

Looking Back vs. Looking Ahead – In *Isaiah 43:18*, God tells people not to dwell on the past. Why do you think it's hard for us to let go of "former things"? How can holding on to the past keep us from seeing the "new thing" God is doing?

God's Provision in the Wilderness – Both *Exodus 17* and *Isaiah 43* highlight God providing water in barren places. What "wilderness" places have you experienced in your life, and how did you see God bring refreshment or hope there?

Recognizing the New Thing – God asks, "Do you not perceive it?" (*Isaiah 43:19*). What helps you recognize when God is doing something new? What makes it hard to see?

Mission and Legacy – Thinking about the Judsons' missionary work and the new heritage center in Malden, how does remembering stories of faith from the past inspire us to join in the new work God is doing today, both locally and globally?

God's Glory and Our Praise – *Isaiah 43:21* says God formed His people "so that they might declare my praise." How does experiencing God's renewing work naturally lead to worship? Can you share a time when God's provision turned your despair into praise?

The Ultimate New Thing – *Revelation 21* speaks of God making all things new and wiping away every tear. How does this promise shape the way we live now, especially when we face loss, injustice, or suffering?