

New Occasions, New Duties

My text for the opening of the new academic year comes from the 43rd chapter of Isaiah, the 18th and 19th verses: “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?”

The words are those of the unknown prophet to whom scholars have given the name Second Isaiah. He was addressing a faith community living in exile. Not only were they a long way from home, but they had been away for a long time. The prophet Jeremiah had urged the exiles to settle down in Babylon - to “build houses and live in them;” to “plant gardens and eat what they produce”, to marry and have children – and that is what they had done.

Now, along comes this prophet, telling the people that they should prepare to uproot themselves and return home because God was about to do a “new thing.” The prophet suggested that the “new thing” would in some ways resemble an old thing – the deliverance of the exiles’ ancestors from bondage in Egypt. The prophet’s images – of “a way in the sea,” of “a path in the mighty waters,” the images of “chariot and horse,” of army and warrior being “quenched like a wick” – were all meant to suggest that there would soon be a new exodus not unlike the old one. The captivity in Babylon would soon be over and the exiles could go home.

But the exiles seem not to have been overjoyed at the prospect of a return to Zion. They had accommodated themselves to their surroundings, it seems. Many were actually prospering in Babylon. Most had become comfortable there. Moreover, the prospect of a long, perilous journey across the desert made them nervous. Never mind the assurances of the prophet that the Lord would make rivers to flow in the wilderness. Never mind the promise that all the wild animals they were likely to encounter along the way would be pacified. The journey was likely to be perilous. And what they were likely to find when and if they got home gave them even greater pause. They envisioned towns and villages not fit for human habitation. Their reluctance was not unlike that of the exiled Iraqis of our time who are not inclined to return to a country and an economy devastated by war, still occupied by a foreign power, and still fraught with danger.

And what was so important about returning to Zion anyway? The exiles had learned to practice their faith, honor their religious traditions, in Babylon. It had taken awhile, but they had learned to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. They were able to cherish and celebrate the stories of God's powerful acts in the old days. They could and did recall with pride and pleasure the heroes and heroines of yesteryear: Moses and Miriam, Joshua and Rahab, Ruth and David. They loved what one commentator calls their "old time religion."

But in the eyes of the prophet, that old time religion was the problem. Their faith was all about what God had done long ago. There was nothing about what God was doing in the present. It was all about remembrance. There was no sense of expectation, no anticipation of God doing anything new, no hope for the future. And so the prophet told the exiles: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old."

Some of you will know that elsewhere in the Bible the counsel is precisely the opposite. "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt," Moses is reported to have told his people when they had begun to experience their God-given freedom. Every time we observe the Lord's Supper we hear Jesus' admonition, "Do this is remembrance of me." A few chapters on, 2nd Isaiah even contradicts himself, telling the exiles to "remember the former things of old."

There is indeed much to be said, not only for remembering "the things of old," but for cherishing them: our faith "traditions", our institutional "legacies". We need to "remember" them, cherish them, celebrate them, because they do for faith what roots do for a tree. It's the visible part of the tree on which the fruit grows, but the life and vitality of the tree are in its roots. When the roots die, soon the tree dies and there is no fruit. In much the same way, where there is no remembering of the "former things", faith is not nourished, and institutional identity is lost.

Remembering is vital – *unless* the act of remembering blinds us to new opportunities, new possibilities. And that, the prophet was persuaded, was the case with the exiles. God was about to do "a new thing", and they could not perceive it. Their "old time religion" had them so focused on what God had done that they could not see what God was about to do. So, in the

name of Lord, the prophet says: “Do not remember the former things. . . . I am about to do a new thing.”

Which brings us to our time, our place. In one form or other this Divinity School has been around a long time. 193 years! And goodness knows, it is easy to get comfortable here: this scenic campus, grand and gracious Strong Hall, the familiar classrooms, the offices, the library, this chapel – and the people who are part of the place! – colleagues, students, teachers, alums. It is not hard to understand why we might want to just keep things the way they are.

But the reality is, we are in a new day, a new place – as, by the way, in case you haven’t noticed, is the church. It’s a new day, requiring new forms of ministry, new ways of imagining how we do church. Here at the Divinity School a number of challenges confront us, most of which are financial in one way or another. We are far from unique, in this regard. We have lots of company. According to one keen observer of the world of theological education, there is not one seminary in this entire country that is financially secure – not even Princeton! And, all seminaries are confronting the question of how to do theological education in the 21st century when the old, long established patterns seem not very relevant for the church and world of today.

“New occasions teach new duties,” is the way the old hymn puts it. Believing that to be so, I was led, almost a year ago, to recommend to the Board of Trustees that they form a group to consider options for the future. The Board agreed. The task force got to work. And last May, following commencement, the Trustees approved unanimously the recommendation of the task force to enter into formal negotiations with the Trustees of Andover Newton Theological School to combine the resources of the two schools so as to advance our common mission. It was not an easy decision, in many ways an anguished one. But near the end of our prolonged and intense discussion, Life Trustee Ken Williams rose to say: “You know, it may just be that God is at work in all this. It may well be that God is calling us to do a new thing.”

The negotiating teams from the two schools have met twice over the summer, the second time just this past Monday. Near the end of our first meeting, back in July, we adopted this statement of our purpose: “Believing that God is calling us to a new thing, we covenant to join our two institutions

in a way that will effectively and efficiently meet the needs of the church for transformative leadership in the 21st century.” There it is: a short and sweet statement of what we are about, the new thing we believe God is leading us to do. What has become evident to all of us engaged in these negotiations is this: a conversation that was born out of financial exigency has become one in which we see an opportunity – an opportunity to engage in a process which may serve as a model for others and, more importantly, an opportunity to bring into being a thriving theological school, one that will be a leader in innovation and in providing the kind of theological education required for the 21st century.

There is one thing we share with those ancient exiles: considerable anxiousness about the arduous journey we are on. Can we make it across that forbidding desert and arrive safe and sound on the other side? Many, if not all of you, are anxious. I know that. What will the new entity look like? Will there be a place in it for me? How much of what is important to us will be lost? There are many questions and, as of now, not so many answers.

We are early in the process. We are working hard. Our conversations have been fruitful. We believe the Holy Spirit is guiding and directing us. One thing we have agreed on: theological education will continue here in Rochester and on this hill. Much work remains to be done. We cannot be sure that what we are envisioning will be possible. We believe so, we hope so, but only time will tell.

This morning I want to make you a promise and give expression to a plea.

First, the promise: whatever the “new thing” that comes into being, we will honor the legacies of the schools which today make up CRCDS: Colgate, Colgate Rochester, Crozer, The Baptist Missionary Training School. An ancient proverb admonishes: “From the fires of the past, carry the flame, not the ashes.” That’s what we will do. Not only will “the former things” be remembered, they will become a part of the “new thing”, whatever it is. The legacies of Walter Rauschenbush and Martin Luther King, Jr., of Rumah Crouse and Howard Thurmond, of Marjorie Matthews, Snuffy Smith, and William Jones, the programs of Black Church Studies and of Women and Gender Studies, the commitments to academic freedom, to critical thinking, to social justice, and to serving the church and the world. I promise you, these will not be lost.

And here is my plea: that you not permit your remembrance of and your appreciation of these “former things” to blind you to the “new thing” God may be about to do - with us, and in us, and through us. I hope, instead, that you will keep your eyes open to new possibilities, new opportunities, to the new occasions that are requiring new duties.

I hope, in other words, that your reaction may be different from the one that Matthew says greeted Jesus that day he came back to his hometown. Who does he think he is?, asked those who had watched him grow up, who knew his family. Matthew says that Jesus could do no mighty works there “because of their unbelief.” What kind of “unbelief” was it? Not that of honest doubt with which Jesus seems not to have been offended. It was an unbelief, not of the mind, but of the heart, not of the intellect, but of the spirit. Such “unbelief” is sometimes referred to as “practical atheism,” and it can affect those who, in their formal beliefs, are as orthodox as can be. There are those, in other words who, while they believe in God, do not expect anything of God or from God. They don’t have the slightest bit of confidence that God can or will actually do anything new – in them, with them, or through them. It is the state of mind that inhibits movement toward goals of any significance by discounting them in advance as unachievable. It’s the state of mind that keeps us chained to the present, as if the present were the very best we can hope for.

Such was the nature of the “unbelief” that greeted Jesus upon his return to Nazareth. Nazareth was a tiny town of no consequence, and its citizens appear themselves to have been small-minded and meager in spirit. They had come to believe what others said about them, that nothing good could ever come out of Nazareth. So, when Jesus returned there they greeted him with ridicule, cynicism, sarcasm, and hostility. They dismissed him! “And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.”

My plea is this: let’s not be like them! My hope is that among you, within myself, and among all those involved in these conversations about the future of Colgate Rochester Crozer and Andover Newton, that the Lord will find an enabling faith, an attitude, a state of mind and heart, that opens the way, instead of one that blocks the way, and makes it impossible for God to do a new thing in our midst. Then, who knows? We may indeed find that there are rivers in the wilderness from which to drink. We may find that the wild animals we fear encountering along the way have all been tamed. We

may be able, not only to perceive the new thing God is doing, but we may be able to greet it when it comes to pass, not grudgingly, but with joy and thanksgiving.