

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
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10:30 a.m. MT Worship
First Sunday in Lent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

STUCK: We Become Well When We Dream and Imagine

First sermon in the Lenten series, *How DO We Become Well?*

Isaiah 43:1-2, 9-10, 16-25

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Welcome to Lent, the 40 day season that reminds us of the 40 *years* the Israelites wandered in the wilderness between being delivered from slavery and reaching the Promised Land, and the 40 *days* that Jesus was tempted and tried in the desert between his baptism and his public ministry. In the Bible the number 40 is a metaphor for “a really long, hard, seemingly never-ending time in our lives” when we (perhaps) do not know where we are, where we are going, how long we will be here, what we are doing here, or how we’ll ever get out. Lovely, right? Like I said, Welcome to Lent.

The liability of Lent is that it is a liminal space. And in liminal spaces, transitional spaces, we are never quite certain of what will come next or where we might end up. So we might as well just lean in.

Here at Calvary, Lent will be a deeper dive into our yearlong theme, “*It is Well...*” We’ve

looked at wellness through the lens of the first part of the greatest commandment – loving God with heart, mind, body, and soul – and we’ve looked at the wellness practices of Jesus to see what we might learn from him and apply to our lives.

During Lent, we’ll explore a few of the barriers we experience that can often keep us from being well. Barriers such as Fear, being Stuck, feeling Shame, being Dismissed, experiencing Self-Doubt, living through Change, and holding Expectations. Some of the barriers are from within, some come from without, most are a mix of both, but they leave us asking, “*In light of such barriers, How DO we actually become well? How do we work through these barriers?*”

And it’s worth saying that barriers cannot always be knocked down completely or ignored or bypassed. Sometimes we just have to learn how to live with them...going beyond them

or through them in creative ways, or sometimes using the barrier as a sign that we need to detour in a different direction altogether. And yes, sometimes we can just plow over a barrier and tear it down. Or sometimes we can jump over it or dig under it. But sometimes, we can't.

This is especially true for barriers that have taken years, decades, sometimes even centuries to build and construct. We certainly see this kind of infrastructure of barriers in many of our flawed and oppressive social systems – which are present in our politics, in our institutions, and yes in our churches too. So we are not naïve about the death that barriers can cause, and yet as people of faith we will not let them keep us from resurrection and new life.

So today we examine the barrier of Stuckness. Sometimes feeling stuck feels like being knee deep in thick mud or quick sand, unable to make any traction even though you are trying to move your legs frantically and take a step forward. Other times feeling stuck feels like frenetic movement – but it's more of a hamster wheel of spinning around in circles but not actually going anywhere. Or sometimes it's movement, but

it's happening in a rut where you are going forward, but you can't change your direction because your wheels are so far into the rut that you can't get out. The track is so worn down, so well-traveled, that it just feels like you will always be in this path.

You don't have enough umph or energy to pop your bike tires up out of the rut and take off along the dirt road in a different direction, or you don't have enough imagination or experience to say, you know if I just stop running in place, the hamster wheel will slow down and eventually stop and I can just step off of it, or even, if I just stop frantically trying to move my legs in this quick sand or mud and just stay still and then reach out for help and ask someone who is on solid ground to pull me out and up – then I'll be free.

These are all possibilities, but when we are stuck it's because our brains, our minds, are stuck in one way of thinking or doing. It's what we know or what we've been taught or what has been (up to this point) 'tried and true.' But here's a hint: if you feel stuck it 99.9% means something in your life will need to change for you to get unstuck

(and if you are part of the .1% who got unstuck without changing a thing talk to me after church!). When we are stuck, we'll have to make a choice, take a risk, step out in faith, or maybe even dream.

And let's just normalize being stuck. If you feel stuck in your life right now – it's okay. Don't beat yourself up; you are human. This is a normal part of our human experience. The question is what do we do when we are stuck?

In Isaiah 43, the prophet Isaiah speaking to a people who are very, very stuck between their past and the future. And their present moment is miserable. It's somewhere in the years 550-538 BCE, which may not mean much to you but it is in the middle of Babylonian exile. And if that doesn't mean anything to you, let me explain with a brief history lesson.

The Babylonian captivity or exile refers to the period in Israel's history when Jews were taken captive by Babylon. There were several "exiles" if you will. But I'll tell you about two of the bigger ones. First, just know that Babylon was a neighboring country and superpower, to Judah (the

Southern Kingdom). At this point, Israel (the Northern Kingdom) had already fallen under Assyrian rule – Assyria was another huge neighboring superpower, and they exiled the 10 tribes of Israel in the north, scattering them. As this happened, the kingdom of Judah (the South) was intact but living under the dominating rule of Assyria. This was around the late 7th century BCE.

When Assyria was overthrown by Babylon, the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, plundered Jerusalem and the Temple and took the King of Judah at the time, King Jehoiachin and all his officials and some of the most prominent citizens with him back to Babylon. It was one of the first significant 'waves' of exiles for the South. Zedekiah became king of Judah and stayed back with those who remained, but he revolted against Babylon (which is understandable), but Nebuchadnezzar didn't like that, and so he returned, and completely destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BCE – leaving nothing behind (all the houses were burned too), and King Zedekiah and a whole bunch of other citizens were taken into exile in Babylon as a whole other 'wave' of exiles.

It was one of the most devastating waves of exiles, because for the few who might have been left in Judah, I imagine it would be like living in Gaza right now...everything destroyed, nothing left, no life or way to rebuild, destruction and famine and rubble around. Perhaps as Hannah Massad, pastor of the Gaza Baptist Church (which has been destroyed by the way) reports, the cost of one bag of flour in Gaza which was \$8 is now north of \$200. \$200! This is inhumane, excruciating. And we can imagine this is what life was like in exile living under an oppressors' power. It's not just the destruction of property; it's the destruction of lives and livelihoods. In exile, Zedekiah's sons were killed right before his eyes, and then Zedekiah's eyes were literally plucked out. Torture was par for the course.

Eventually Babylon fell to Persia (do you see a pattern here of what happens to these empires that rely on funding military power and might and think they are "untouchable" in their power? They fall. Always. Assyria falls to Babylon, Babylon falls to Persia, and the cycle goes on. We should never really celebrate if it feels like

our country is 'on the top'; that's not cause for celebration, it's cause for pause and caution. And humility. But that's a sermon for another day.

So when Babylon falls to Persia, the Persian King at the time, Cyrus the Great, tells the exiled Jews in Babylon they can start returning to Judah, to Jerusalem, returning to their land. This decree is issued and people start returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and rebuild their lives.

But today's text lands us in this liminal exilic space. The people of Judah have been exiled to Babylon but this is long before they had any inkling that Persia would conquer Babylon and that Cyrus would eventually let their descendants return. Their ability to dream or imagine anything beyond suffering and destruction and being hundreds of miles from home in this oppressive and oppressed space was long gone.

They were just trying to survive day by day, moment by moment. They were just trying to not let their grief kill them, to keep the memory of their families, their land, their Temple, their history, their faith – alive. Just to remember their

past and their former lives was a labor; it was hard, hard work when everything before them was death and destruction.

There was no hope in this moment for freedom from bondage. They were not dreaming of the chains being loosed, or the captives being set free. Their physical exile had spread to their hearts and souls and it was a spiritual, emotional, and existential exile too. Sure, they knew that they had once been, as a people, enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt, and that God had freed them, but that memory was just laying in the distant past as almost a kind of betrayal, like, *“What’s the point, God? You delivered our ancestors in the exodus only for us to now be in exile?”*

So then, here in Isaiah 43 we have Yahweh, the Lord, coming to these people, in their time of deepest suffering and disillusionment telling them on the one hand to remember that God is with them, “I am your God, I created you and formed you, I am with you.” And, “Yes, please keep telling the story of how I (Yahweh) delivered your ancestors out of slavery and into the Promised Land (and sure, yes, there was a brief stint of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness in between, mind

you), please do remember this and keep telling this story – because if you do not tell it O Israel, then who will? Someone needs to tell my story over and above the stories of all these conquering superpowers...” but then the Lord says, on the other hand, *do not remember these former things or consider the things of old.*

What? This is a mixed message if I ever heard one. And then, *then!*, the Lord – through Isaiah – has the audacity to say, *“I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”*

No, God, no we don’t perceive it and as a matter of fact we don’t believe you! What new thing could ever happen in *this* place, in this situation or circumstance, those are nice words, but we’ll only believe it when we see it.

And there it is – the key words that have become cliché – *“I’ll believe it when I see it.”* This phrase implies that we should sit around and wait until external circumstances change and we SEE something happen to us. But waiting around for the world to change is not just a popular song by John Mayer, it’s become a way of our faith

too. And it's a way that keeps us stuck. That keeps us trapped...that keeps us from perceiving a new thing.

I wonder how many things don't happen because we stop *seeing*, that is, not literally seeing, but seeing in our mind's eye, in our dreams and imaginations what might be? Have you ever thought that maybe the 'seeing' in "I'll believe it when I see it" should have more to do with *our* ability to dream and imagine and *see* something different, a reality beyond the situation we are in now, rather than just waiting on something external to come or for the world to change?

Because here's the thing – one big way we get stuck in our lives is thinking that we want things to work out in a certain way or go a certain way or get fixed the way they have in the place or in the way we think they should. But when we are stuck in singular vision waiting for God to work in *our* way, we miss the very way God IS already working in *God's* way.

It's like the old story about the guy who was stuck on his rooftop in a flood. He was praying to God for help.

A man in a rowboat came by and shouted to the guy on the roof, "Jump in, I can save you." The stranded guy shouted back, "No, it's OK, I'm praying to God and God's going to save me." So the rowboat went on.

Then a motorboat came by. "The man in the motorboat shouted, "Jump in, I can save you." To this the stranded guy said, "No thanks, I'm praying to God and God's going to save me. I have faith." So the motorboat went on.

Then a helicopter came by and the pilot shouted down, "Grab this rope and I will lift you to safety." To this the stranded guy replied, "No thanks, I'm praying to God and God's going to save me. I have faith." So the helicopter reluctantly flew away.

Soon the water rose above the rooftop and the guy drowned. He went to Heaven. He finally got his chance to discuss this whole situation with God, at which point he exclaimed, "I had faith in you, and kept praying for you to deliver me, for you to save me, but you didn't save me, you let me drown. I don't understand why!"

To which God replied, “I sent you a rowboat and a motorboat and a helicopter, what more did you expect?”¹

It’s a funny story, but it’s not so funny when we realize how true it is. It is so easy for us to get an image in our mind of how we will get out of a situation or how we will get unstuck. And until *That* happens, we think we must remain stuck. But what if that’s not true?

We think we have to wait for our boss to change our responsibilities or our work environment instead of saying to our boss, can we consider doing a few things differently? We think that the only way out of our loneliness is to meet a life partner, and we miss the friends around us wanting to hang out. We are not able to have children, and we think it's not in the cards for us to be parents, until we imagine the possibility of adoption or being a really great aunt or uncle or mentor. We believe that the only way to think about our faith is one narrative of how God works in our lives – if we just pray hard enough, God will show up – but what if God showing up has

nothing at all to do with how hard we pray or whether we pray at all, but rather about whether we are seeing what God is doing in our midst already?! And what new thing is yet to be done!

All of these situations have realities that are tough and perhaps full of grief and difficulties, but grief, difficulties, suffering and struggle...they do not preclude or exclude dreaming and imagining something different. We think that they do. But what if – in the exile period of your life – God is inviting you to imagine a different way, a different outcome – maybe not even for you, but for the generation below you?

This is why God says, “Yes, remember the ways I acted in the past, remember how I delivered you then, but do not watch and wait for me to only act in *that* way. That is not actually remembering. That is nostalgia...longing for what was.” Nostalgia only serves to set us up to never be satisfied, with the present or the future. To long for What Was is a real thing we humans do. Yet, it’s

¹ Story access on February 18, 2024 at <https://truthbook.com/stories/funny-stories/popular-stories/the-drowning-man/>

my experience that we will never get unstuck if we only long for What Was. God is calling us to perceive something new, God is calling us toward What Will Be.

Nostalgia is longing for the way things were in the past, but remembering is different. Remembering is drawing strength from the past as a foundation of hope for the future. Remembering is what we do around the Lord's Table.

"Do this in remembrance of me." We are not actually saying that the only way we remember Jesus is by breaking bread. No, Jesus is saying, *"Do this in remembrance of me,"* as in *"Remember how I loved God and loved others, remember how I lived and moved and had my being in the world, remember the truth and the love within my acts of healing and teaching than the specific acts themselves. They cannot be replicated but my love can be."*

God is saying through Isaiah in chapter 43, "I know I delivered you through parted waters last time, but if you just stand staring at the sea waiting for the waters to part, you'll miss your whole deliverance and future! I am doing a new thing! I am not taking you to a shoreline and

parting the waters of the sea like the exodus. No this time (verse 19) I am actually putting water in the middle of the wilderness, creating and putting rivers into the desert; it will surprise even the wild animals who have always had to search for water in the desert. Now it will be right before them; it will change the whole landscape. I will give drink to you, my people, again, God says. But it will be in a new way. Perceive it! Stop staring at the sea and the shoreline and turn around and look at the river that is flowing right behind you! And in order for you to perceive this new thing, you're going to have to forget the things of old. Yes, remember the love and liberation that happened in the past, but do not cling to that understanding or those actions as the only way to be freed. Watch for what is new. Allow yourselves to dream of what might be."

Such words would be hard for anyone to hear, but even more so for people who are in exile. No one would think a river in the desert is possible, but that's precisely the point. Liberation doesn't start with our thinking; it starts with God's dreaming.

As I've been diving into black history this month, I have been

so blessed by stories of dreamers and faith-keepers and world-shakers.

Who would ever think that someone who is ensnared in the oppressive system of slavery could be freed? Harriet Tubman did. Most of us know her story as this: After escaping slavery, Tubman made some 13 missions to rescue approximately 70 enslaved people, including her family and friends, using the network of antislavery activists and safe houses known collectively as the Underground Railroad. We know this story, but do you know where she got the strength to even think about engaging in such a risky endeavor as escaping from slavery? It started with her dreams.

Tubman's chronic suffering from a traumatic head injury that caused a lifetime of seizures and debilitating pain reminds me of the hemorrhaging woman we read about last week. These are both women who had no choice but to reach out beyond the conditions of their present state and hope for something miraculous or different. There is a courage within them born of

circumstances that they just could not accept as true for their lives, for their belovedness. And so they reached, they dreamed...they imagined that something could be different for their lives.

Sarah H. Bradford notes in her biography about Harriet Tubman:

*"... before her escape from slavery, Harriet used to dream of flying over fields and towns, and rivers and mountains, looking down upon them 'like a bird,' and reaching at last a great fence or sometimes a river, over which she would try to fly, but she would say, it appeared like I wouldn't have the strength, and just as I was sinking down [just as I got stuck], there would be ladies all dressed in white over there and they would put out their arms and pull me across."*²

Dierdre Cooper Owens reflects on this dream, saying: *"In Tubman's dream, when her strength wanes, a band of 'ladies' stretches out their arms to protect Tubman from her fall. These women cradle her as she [is physically*

² Deirdre Cooper Owens, "Harriet Tubman's Disability and Why it Matters," *Ms. More than a Magazine, A Movement* (February 10, 2022), accessed on February

11, 2024 at <https://msmagazine.com/2022/02/10/harriet-tubman-disability-democracy/>.

resting], while simultaneously laboring [in her dreams] to ensure her freedom. In her dream state, she envisions [these] women as saviors, as the rescuers of her enslaved body... ”³

“Most 19th-century writers focused on Tubman’s [own] bravery and strength. Her supporters praise her for her successful solo journeys into the slave-holding South to free dozens of enslaved people. Yet, as an enslaved woman who lived in a patriarchal and anti-Black America, Harriet Tubman’s freedom dream and [her] fugitive activism demonstrates something else. [This is not a solo/hero endeavor. In her ‘dreamings’ and in her ‘doings’] she offered up a version of freedom where a disabled Black woman sits at the center and where Black women are liberators, and where liberation is communal and [imagination-led].”⁴

This is precisely what the Underground Railroad was. A mutual, communal place where dreams begin, a portal into resurrected life.

And Tubman wasn’t the only one who in exilic like conditions, dreamed and imagined a different life, and acted on it to make it so.

In her book *Rest is Resistance*, Tricia Hersey writes, “A hidden history that is not well known by most in our culture is the story of the American maroons. ...The maroons were Black people navigating the terror of chattel slavery by refusing to be a part of it. For close to two centuries, they leaped off slave ships as they pulled up to the shores of North America to never be seen again, they organized and left plantations for the caves and deep woods of the South, they created their own communities outside of slavery, and they were not fugitives and instead, living in a Third Space, a temporary place of joy and freedom. They liberated themselves and each other in community. Existing in two worlds. Being in the world of chattel slavery, but not of it. They claimed their autonomy and sovereignty while the violent system of plantation labor raged around them. They told the systems, ‘No you cannot have me. I don’t belong to you,’ and they embodied this

³ Owens, *ibid.*

⁴ Owens, *ibid.*

call intensely.”⁵ They did not stop with dreaming about *not* being enslaved, they took risks to see if they could make that dream come true.

Nothing about ‘perceiving a new thing’ is promised to be easy. We are just asked – even in our exile spaces – to take risks for the sake of liberation and love – for the sake of God’s dream – the kin-dom of God here on earth.

Tricia Hersey writes, “I am astonished at what my Ancestors were able to accomplish and create from an exhausted and sleep-deprived [and oppressed] state. I place it in the category of divine miracle, and it creates a deep spaciousness for my hope about the future. I wonder about what our bodies can do in this dimension and this time from a rest and imaginative space. What could we heal? What could we figure out?”⁶ Where could our dreams guide us? Where will they lead us?

We cannot let the world or the injustices we experience every day or the news cycle you see on TV or even the challenges

and realities that seem daunting and overwhelming in your life – we cannot let these be the only images that we see in our mind’s eye. We must dream beyond what we see before us. Create different images. Dream different dreams. This alone is an act of courage, an act of wellbeing, an act of defiance, an act of looking toward the future with hope – and yes, with faith too.

And just in case you are so stuck you cannot dream or perceive the new thing right now, keep reading to the end of Isaiah 43. God doing a new thing IS NOT based on the people being faithful or worshipping God the right way. God makes it clear the people haven’t been doing that in exile. They’ve blown God off and ignored God and yet, guess what God says? “*I do not, I will not, remember your sins.*”

The people’s obedience or faith is not a condition for God doing something new. God does not remember our sins or dwell on our past. God looks at our potential and what can be and creates a new dream and possibility for us.

⁵ Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (Little Brown Spark of Hachette Book Publishing, New York, NY: 2022), pgs 133-134.

⁶ Hersey, pgs 160-161.

Do we perceive it?

I hope so. Because we become well when we dream and imagine.

Amen.