

Nothing's the Same

Isaiah 42:9-16

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Wesley J. Gabel

Bethany Church

The end of the year provides us with an opportunity for review and reflection. How have you seen God Almighty, your Father, answer your prayers in 2008? (Take time to let people share.) In our church family we have seen God negotiate us through conflict and give us a compassion for one another. I don't think any of us choose conflict. God knows who we are. He knows our differences, and he puts us together, knowing that conflict will arise. It is up to us to walk through the conflict with love for one another, and faith in God's wisdom and power. As God led us into conflict, some of our ministries bore less fruit than we anticipated and the church slipped into debt. Yet, we've been asking all of the Bethany family to pray at least a minute a day for fruitfulness in our ministry and for provision, our daily bread, as a church. We've also asked you to fast a meal a week for the church. These are activities we can all do together. God has responded to those prayers. More than a third of the individuals and families who pledged to Bethany in 2008 gave way beyond what they pledged, thousands of dollars more. Even as we raised money for special projects, our operating debt has been reduced. When the Apostle Paul wrote the Romans, he asked:

I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. (Romans 15:30, NIV)

Then in the following verses he told them three things to pray for. One, Paul asked them to pray that he be rescued from unbelievers in Jerusalem. The rescue took two years. It involved ambushes, plots, false testimony and finally a legal appeal to Rome. Two, he asked the Roman

Christians to pray that his service in Jerusalem would be accepted by the saints. The acceptance came quickly. Three, he asked them to pray that he would be able to join the Roman believers for time of fellowship and sharing. When Paul escaped the danger in Jerusalem, he was nearly lost in a shipwreck, nearly executed by soldiers and then bitten by a deadly snake; but he finally made it. The Roman Christians joined his struggle in prayer.

Similarly, you joined our struggle when you began praying for your church family's fruitfulness and provision. Weekly these last four months, Lloyd Wasson provided me a financial update that showed our debt shrinking, and we have been on that trajectory since July, but the threat of falling further into debt loomed big with our large, annual, six to seven thousand dollar insurance bill due on December 26th. Week after week, Lloyd would report that there was no reserve from offerings to pay it. Guess what happened? The insurance company somehow didn't send us the bill. Therefore they have delayed the payment deadline. It is now due January 26th. Moreover, the delay has afforded us some time to certify the upgrade in our fire alert system in order to reduce our insurance premium. I feel like we're on Paul's journey. Having just been rescued from the unbelievers in Jerusalem, we need to give thanks. God has done a good and unexpected thing among us in answer to our prayers. However, we need to continue in prayer with vigilance for we are now boarding a ship headed to Rome, and January 26th is ahead. We've been blessed by our Father, but we cannot see the future.

I identify with a word from Isaiah the prophet.

See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you... I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them. (Isaiah 42:9, 16; NIV)

God has worked mercifully in our past, but we are not to expect the past. New is coming. God does not abandon those who put their faith in him. He will guide us to a victorious outcome.

Over the Christmas break, I asked my father-in-law if he had ever remembered hearing before the kind of dire economic news we've listened to the last three months. Although he was born in 1928, he could not think of a time when week after week such foreboding news was given.

Think of the former things that have passed. Like in the prophecy of Isaiah 42, think of rivers that have become islands, pools and vegetation that have dried up. Ten years ago some computer savvy people were making a mint. Computer science majors were landing lucrative jobs right out of school. At the time I had a church family that began making electronic parts in their garage. The son was a design engineer, the father was a mechanic, machinist, and the mother kept books. In a couple years their work ballooned into a multi-million dollar business. The son drove around in Jaguars. The men in the family acted as if this was all their doing. The mother didn't. She knew better. Right before I came here, they sold the business. They were blessed because months after the sale, the dot.com bubble burst and many web and computer related companies went bankrupt. Their company no longer exists. The new conventional wisdom about a technology-driven economy proved to be flawed. Then there was new wisdom about housing. With population growth and immigration, housing prices are bound to rise. That bubble burst. Since its peak in October 2007, the Dow Jones industrial average has lost almost 40 percent of its value, retreating by nearly 5500 points. Last summer oil prices rose to over \$120 a barrel and gas cost \$4 a gallon. This past Wednesday, oil retreated to \$35 a barrel and February gas futures were being sold at 80 cents a gallon. Nothing's the same. Things that we think we can rely upon are temporary. They are disappearing mist.

Are you still enjoying Christmas celebrations? Although Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus, the Christmas story and celebration is not confined to a single day. It is a season. Christmas replaced a pagan festival that lasted 12 days, but the Christmas story stretched well beyond those limits. Eight days following the birth, Mary and Joseph had their little one circumcised and gave him the name Jesus. So on the eighth day of Christmas, whatever the actual birth date was, Jesus got his name. After 40 days, Joseph and Mary took baby Jesus to the temple where he was recognized by Simeon and Anna as the Messiah. Later yet, Magi from the East arrived in Jerusalem. They were looking for a child-king who had already been born. King Herod met them. He understood that these wise men associated Jesus' birth with the appearance of a star. He asked for a specific date and calculated that if the baby was born with the appearance of the star, Jesus was nearing two years old. When these wise men arrived in Bethlehem, they found Jesus in a home. It appeared that Joseph, Mary and Jesus were settling in Bethlehem, and that this wonderful Christmas season we celebrate with Advent and the twelve days of Christmas lasted about two years. However, suddenly it was interrupted. The great Christmas story ended with horror. When the Magi didn't return to Jerusalem, King Herod, threatened by the mention of a child-king, ordered the execution of every male child two years old and younger. Warned in a dream, Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled to Egypt. Was a loving God still in charge? Nothing was the same. Joseph's neighbors and kin in Bethlehem suffered calamity; and though spared such horror, Joseph now walked a foreign land seeking to provide for and protect Mary and Jesus. No longer did shepherds meet them in awe. No wise men came to worship. In what could they hope? On what could they depend?

He who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of

your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. "I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you." (Isaiah 42:5-9, NIV)

God had them on a journey to save the world. God has you on that same journey. If nothing is the same as it was for you, so what? Nothing was the same for Joseph and Mary. If you can't see, so what? God will smooth out your path, so that you can walk it by faith. If you are a believer, if you embrace the salvation of Christ by faith, God is bent on making a name for himself by what he does through you. Indeed, he makes a name for himself by what he does with us together.

If you are five or ninety-five, look forward to a journey that makes a difference for those you love, that makes a difference for the city and nation that has blessed you, and that reveals the heart and hand of the one you walk with. Make it your aim to believe and act in belief. Make it your aim to face, confess and repent of unbelief and choose belief.