

Pastor Darwin is taking a few days of vacation. Wendell Cochran has written the meditation for this week.

"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." – Isaiah 43:19

New things. Do we like them? Or do we fear them? Or is it a little bit of both?

When I was in high school I attended a National Science Foundation summer program at West Virginia University. Towards the end of the program, I remember attending a lecture about DNA. This was in 1964. I had never heard of DNA, nor I suspect, had any of the other students from around the state who were in the program. But DNA's discovery by the British scientists James Watson and Francis Crick was already more than 10 years old. Still, no one really understood yet how that discovery would change our world, everything from medical science to criminal justice.

If things had gone as planned, I would have delivered the message to our churches on the Sunday after Easter. And I had intended to talk about new things. Somehow, my introduction to DNA came to mind as I was thinking about those first few hours and days and weeks and, yes, even years, after Christ's resurrection.

Sometimes I think we are a little bit critical of the disciples in those early times. Why, on the road to Emmaus, they did not even recognize Jesus, despite living and traveling with him for three years. Thomas said he wouldn't believe Christ had risen until he had seen his bloody hands and side for himself. Jesus told them he would usher in a new kingdom, one based on love of God and love of our fellow humans, not based on the historic law of Moses. But it is doubtful that they really understood what he meant by that. After all, more than 2,000 years later we are still struggling to know how to live the promise of Christ's life and death.

I also thought about the Israelites in the desert. They were used to being slaves and now they were free. They had seen miracles in Egypt and been saved from the Egyptian army by a miracle at the Red Sea. They had the light of God to guide them and a holy cloud to protect them. And what was their reaction to this new way of life?

They complained. We read in Exodus 16:2-3: ² *The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.* ³ *The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."*

So, God sent manna, literally bread that fell from the sky. Every morning they could gather as much as their families needed, and the next day there would be just as much. Still, they weren't satisfied. God started to burn their camps, but the people begged Moses to intervene with God, and he did. God relented, but the complaining continued.

Numbers 11:4-6 tells us: *“⁴ The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat!’ ⁵ We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶ but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”*

We are called on all the time to deal with new things. We never know what God will put in our paths: Sickness, death, financial challenges, family issues; the list goes on forever. Sometimes we might even be tempted to be angry with God, we might be tempted to lash out at those around us, at those whom we perceive to be causing our troubles. But is that really the way God wants us to react? I would guess not.

The people of Israel were saying they were happier with their former lives as slaves in Egypt than as heirs to God’s Promised Land of milk and honey. Moses was at the end of his rope and pleaded with God for help. Numbers 11: 11-14: *“¹¹ So Moses said to the LORD, ‘Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹² Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors’? ¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.”*

God responded in two ways. First, to help Moses, he appointed 70 elders from the clans to assist with managing the people, and he instructed Moses to have the people purify themselves and promised them meat. Second, God sent the meat. Oh, did He send the meat as Numbers 11 continues: *“³¹ Then a wind went out from the LORD, and it brought quails from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, about two cubits deep on the ground. ³² So the people worked all that day and night and all the next day, gathering the quails; the least anyone gathered was ten homers; and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. ³³ But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague. ³⁴ So that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving.”*

Yes, God was angry with His people. But time after time, He did a new thing because He also loves His people. Consider, for example, the promise of Jeremiah 31: *“³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”*

Of course, centuries later, He sent His son, Jesus, to fulfill that promise to “remember their sin no more.” Not only did Jesus come to live and die for us and to take away our sins forever. He made provisions for us for all time. Jesus promised in John 14:16 that “...I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” This advocate, of course, is the Holy Spirit, the third being of the Holy Trinity.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, and it is a day when we celebrate something truly new and powerful and magnificent. It is the day that the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles. The story is told in Acts 2:1-4: “*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*” The people who heard them thought they were drunk, because they didn’t understand this new thing God had done.

And no doubt the apostles also were astonished to be speaking in tongues. Peter, who had been a fisherman before he met Jesus on the shores of Galilee, gave a powerful sermon. More than 3,000 people were saved in what is truly the beginning of Christ’s church on earth. Now, perhaps, the disciples began to grasp the instruction from Jesus in Matthew 28 to “¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Of course, this was joined by his promise to be with you always “even unto the end of the age.”

Contrast the ending of Acts 2, with the story from Exodus and Numbers about the Israelites in the desert. “⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

Here we have a happy people, doing good works for others, content with the knowledge that they had been saved. They had become, as Paul writes a few years later in 2 Corinthians: “a new creation” because they knew Christ. May we embrace our new lives in Christ, as well, continuing with God’s grace and power to serve Him and His world.

In Christ’s name,

Wendell Cochran

