

Hespeler, 7 April, 2019 © Scott McAndless – Lent 5
Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

I remember one perfect afternoon when I was in grade 6. It was a winter's day and after school a friend and I had stayed late. We were having fun in the schoolyard. The hills behind the school were covered in ice and snow and we were sliding down them. And we were having so much fun particularly because my winter boots at that point were kind of old. The tread was all worn away and so I was able just slide all the way down the hill on my feet. It was so much fun. It was a perfect afternoon and I never wanted it to end.

And then my mother came along. You see, she had been waiting for me at home and wondering why I was taking so long so she came to look for me. She had decided that today was the day I needed to get new boots. She had noticed something. She had noticed that my winter boots were really old. So old, in fact that the tread was, like, completely worn away. We had to go shopping for new boots and we had to go now.

So I went. And my mother has never said anything, but I suspect that what happened next was probably one of the most frustrating experiences has she ever had shopping with me because, well, none of the boots that we tried on were what I liked. I couldn't, or at least I didn't, explain what was wrong with every pair of boots that I tried on, but I'll tell you right now what was wrong with them. They were all winter boots and, as winter boots, they all had treads on the bottom. And that was the last thing that I wanted because if I got boots with winter treads on them, I would never be able to go sliding down the hills behind the school standing on my feet again. I would never again have that perfect afternoon.

Well my mother was not going to leave that shoe store without a new pair of boots for me. So there was nothing for it but that I choose a pair and finally I found them. They were ugly. They had these weird high heels on them. They were actually really kind of heavy so that if you walked too far your feet would drag. But they had one thing going for them: they had virtually no tread. I don't know what my mother thought about my taste in boots. I'm quite sure she didn't know what I was basing my decision on. But at that point, I'm sure she just wanted to get out of the store. My winter boots had been chosen.

I'm sure you can guess the rest of the story. Spring came soon after. I graduated from that school and went to another school that was a much longer walk. I never again had the opportunity to slide down those hills on my



feet. And I was stuck trudging along in those ugly, heavy boots for many years to come.

And I think I've gleaned a little bit of wisdom from that experience. It is probably not a very good idea to make a life decision based on wanting to go back to one perfect afternoon. And I've noticed that nobody ever talks about that side of success and perfection. When something goes extraordinarily well, it can sometimes doom us to future failure.

You know, the people of Israel once had a perfect afternoon. It was amazing. There they were, trying to escape from lives of slavery in Egypt when they were caught, red handed, between a hostile army of horses and chariot drivers and an uncrossable body of water. They were sure they were done for. They were getting their affairs in order. And then, a miracle happened. God made **“a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters.”** It was a path that they could follow on foot but when the chariots tried to chase them their wheels stuck in the muck. **“They lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.”**

It was perfect – they were saved, chosen and beloved by God and their enemies got everything that they deserved. And so they told the story of that perfect afternoon over and over again and who wouldn't forgive them if the story grew a little bit in the telling over the years. But here is the thing. The story was so perfect that, generations later, they were still trying to make it happen again. They were still buying winter boots without treads just in case they might have the opportunity to go sliding down the hills on their feet. No, wait, that's not quite right. Let's say that they kept buying rubber boots just in case they had to go wading through the Red Sea again.

And you might think that that should be a good thing, that we should remember those moments in our history when God did something truly amazing for us. And of course that is true. But the fact of the matter is that that perfect afternoon was creating big problems for the people at one particular moment.

You see, the people were in a position once again where they needed God to save them. But they weren't slaves in Egypt. They were exiles in Babylon. And you might say to that, fine, what's the problem with that? Surely the God who could save them from Egypt could save them from Babylon too. You would think. But it seems that they were having problems. There wasn't a Red Sea between Babylon and their homeland. What there was instead was a huge uncrossable desert. They were so stuck back in the time when God saved them by creating a path through the sea that they couldn't imagine that God could save them by creating a path through an uncrossable desert. They had bought rubber boots and they were no good for walking in the desert. That is the only way that I can understand the message we read in the Book of Isaiah this morning.

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,” says the prophet. Now normally that is not something that we would expect to read in the Bible. Usually the people are being told to remember what God has done for the nation in the past. But, no, this prophet insists that they must forget it. Why? Because God says, **“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.”** You see, that is their problem. They do not perceive it. And the reason why they do not perceive this new thing that God is doing is because they can’t forget that perfect afternoon that they had so long ago. They can’t stop trying to go back there.

I sometimes wonder if this isn’t the problem that we also have as the church these days. It’s not that God is unable to save the church, that is, to give to the church a future that is exciting and meaningful. God is doing that and it’s going to do that. Our problem is that we do not perceive it. The reason why we don’t perceive it? It’s probably because we remember one perfect afternoon. and the perfect afternoon that we remember doesn’t include sliding down snow-covered hills or jaywalking across the Red Sea. The perfect afternoon that we remember is that moment when everything seemed to be just right in the church. And I realize that that perfect afternoon occurred at different times for different people. For some people, the perfect afternoon of the church happened back in the 1960’s and 70’s when Sunday Schools were full to bursting with the children of the baby boom. I don’t know how many times I have had people paint the picture of that particular perfect afternoon for me. But other people may locate that perfect afternoon of the church at another point in time – especially at a moment when the ministry of the church may have fulfilled a particular need for them or touched a particular nerve.

The problem is not that we have such perfect afternoons in our memories of the church. Nor is the problem that we may sometimes remember them in some idealized way (forgetting some things about them that were less than perfect). The problem comes when we are so fixed on that perfect afternoon that we do things like try to revive programs that no longer work, or we reject new ideas or new ways of doing things because they do not look like that perfect afternoon or we criticize something that is happening that is really good because it doesn’t look like or measure up to something that happened during the perfect afternoon. When the memory of that perfect afternoon means that we cannot perceive the new things that God wants to do and is already doing among us, then we are certainly better to **“not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.”**

So, I do think that the wise words of the ancient prophet do apply very powerfully to our collective life as the church today. But there is also an individual application that the Apostle Paul would bring to our minds in the reading from his Letter to the Philippians today. Paul is speaking to the

Christians in Philippi in this passage about his own struggles to be a faithful follower of Christ. He looks back on the perfect afternoon of his own life and says he was **“circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”**

Paul is here looking back at a very idealised time in his life. It was basically a time when everything made sense. He had answers to every question. He knew what was right and he knew what was wrong and he knew what he had to do in every circumstance. Yes, that sense of certainty that he had made him do things, like persecute the church, that now horrify him, but he cannot deny that it just felt right at the time. And Paul could have held onto that perfect afternoon, kept trying to go back there, but it would have meant missing out on this incredible new thing that God had done in Jesus Christ. It would have meant missing out on the wonders of God’s grace and the power of Christ’s resurrection.

But even after Paul had given in and become a follower of Christ, he could still have spent all of his energy trying to get back to that perfect afternoon. He could have become one of those Christians who was always trying to say he was better than everyone else and that he had it all right. Paul knew that that was the danger and so he made a conscious choice. He would forget what lay behind and strain forward to what lay ahead. He would press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

My friends, we have all of us been blessed to have had perfect afternoons in our lives both individually and communally. We have those moments in time where everything just seemed to go so well. That can be a wonderful blessing but the warning of Paul and of the prophet is that it can also be a curse. I invite you – I invite all of us – to examine the things that we do in our Christian life. Ask yourself, are you buying boots in the hope of recreating a perfect afternoon that will never happen again? Think of some of the decisions you make, some of the things you buy. Are you doing things, trying to recreate a memory of a time that may be wonderful but just won’t happen again?

I don’t blame you for doing that. I’ve done it myself, as I have confessed. But I will remind you that the danger is not that you might end up wasting your mother’s money on boots that you don’t really like (if you know what I mean). The real danger is that you might not perceive the new thing that God is doing in our midst. And I’ve got to admit that that is my greatest fear, that I, that you and that we together as the church might miss out on the great new thing the God has probably already begun to do in the world today.