

I remember very distinctly a card that I received from my aunt many years ago. I love my aunt but I wouldn't say that we were any more close than she is to my siblings or cousins which made this particular card stand out even more in my memory.

I was in school at the time. I was living in New Jersey, for the first time a long distance from my family and friends, which made mail, real live snail mail, all the more of an occasion.

I would go after lunch each day to my old box, number 616 and look to see if anything good was in there. Most of the time it was just the requisite envelope from Columbia House Records informing me that I could receive 12 free CD's, which being a student, naturally seemed like a good idea. Also Credit Card applications. I once tallied that between the free CDs and credit cards, I could live really well for a few months.

But I resisted the urge and exercised restraint, which meant eating just about every meal in the dining hall – I was on a scholarship with just enough money to cover my education and books so every penny counted.

Anyway, one day I opened my box and saw a card waiting there, completely out of season – it wasn't Christmas or my birthday and nobody had died. Immediately I recognized my aunt's distinctive handwriting, and wondered what could have precipitated her card.

As I opened it, two twenty-dollar bills fell out with a note.

She wrote to me, "When Gary (my uncle) and I were living in Florida while he was in graduate school, we didn't have two nickels to rub together. We lived on fresh air and sunshine, but those won't buy you a beer. Every once in a while a friend would send us a

little cash, not much, but completely out of the blue. I'd like to do the same thing for you. I just ask that you please spend it to have some fun."

Without making myself out to be more of a starving student than I was, I can't tell you how much of a welcome surprise those two twenty dollar bills were. I wasn't worried that I wouldn't be able to eat, but there wasn't much money left over in the month to go to a movie, have a date, buy a beer or do whatever fun, unnecessary thing I might want to do. It was a small grace, a little act of loving-kindness. I still remember it.

What a vivid image Isaiah has for grace in his 43rd chapter.

Surely the Israelites were in need of grace by the time we get to the 43rd chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah tells the story of fall of the people of God. The opening chapters warn of what is coming, the middle chapters chronicle the time when God's people were taken away into captivity. They were foreigners in a foreign land. When we read the psalms of Lament and hear of God's people lying down next to the waters of Babylon and weeping, they are talking about the time frame of the 43rd chapter of Isaiah.

The people are ruined. They lost a war they didn't want to fight in the first place, but nonetheless lost. The air was alien to them. Have you ever had to move to a strange place and had everything just be off?

I lived in Indiana for two years and a friend of mine moved from Indianapolis to San Francisco to accept a pastoral call. He went from the flat fields of corn-stubble that punctuate the Midwestern winter landscape to serving a church on Knob Hill. He had an apartment walking distance from Grace Cathedral. A couple of us went to visit him one summer for vacation and after we had taken in the beauty of the Napa Valley and settled in for dinner at a sidewalk café in sight of all the wonderful scenery of San Francisco, I

said to him, “You are walking in high cotton. This is one beautiful place. If I were going to leave the east coast, this is where I’d want to live. Do you just love it?”

“I miss Indiana,” he replied.

We all looked at him.

“It’s more than missing my family,” he went on, “though I do miss being able to see them anytime I want. I miss the angle of the way the sun hangs in the sky and I miss the smell of the dirt. It is home and it will always be home.”

Home – that is what the Israelites were dragged away from – that’s what they missed.

While the Israelites were sitting there missing home, we know that the Word of the Lord came to them from Jeremiah telling them to get married. Plant gardens. Settle in, you’re going to be here for a long while.

And indeed they were. For forty-nine years they stayed in this place where they were strangers, where the sun hung at the wrong angle in the sky and the dirt didn’t quite smell right. Where we are in Isaiah stands at the beginning of this long, lonely sojourn.

And right at the beginning, at the low ebb, God says to them, “I am going to do a new thing.”

It is a vision of salvation. It is a vision of grace. And God says, “I’m going to make rivers flow in the desert.”

That’s about as unexpected an image as we can expect.

In the Bible, deserts are dried up places. They’re appropriately inhospitable. No one confuses the desert for a garden spot, a place of lushness and plenty.

And yet, God says that the rivers are going to flow in the desert. There is going to be “water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink for my chosen people.”

That's unexpected.

Everything about the desert, the wilderness, says *not* to expect to find rivers running through it.

But isn't that the way that grace works? It's unexpected.

It breaks in where there is hardness.

When I was 28 my sense of invincibility came to an abrupt end when I experienced a compression of a cervical disc in my neck. I know perfectly well the completely pedestrian incident that precipitated it. I collected my baggage at the airport in Philadelphia and slung my briefcase, the same one I use now, across my chest over one shoulder and felt and heard a faint crunching noise. I had a minor twinge of pain, which passed, and I hopped into the waiting car of a friend with the words, "I think I just did something to my neck."

Two days later I went to the gym and picked up a dumbbell to curl with my left arm. I flexed. Nothing happened. The weight was a heavy one for me, so I dropped ten pounds. Still nothing happened as I tried to lift it. I dropped ten more. With great labor, I was able to lift it half way. I knew something was wrong.

Later that night I sat at the piano to play. As I began a piece I knew well, I realized I couldn't feel the thumb and forefinger of my left hand. I called my brother in a panic. "You've compressed your fifth cervical disc," he replied. "And it will take time to heal. If the pain gets too great, there's surgery, but one year out, the outcome is usually similar for folks whether they get cut or not. Call your doctor, but if you can stick it out, stick it out."

I will gloss over the medical details, but the recovery was long. Once an avid runner, I was grounded and quickly gained thirty pounds. I smelled like Aspercreme for six months.

One day, when I came into the office, with the smell of eucalyptus announcing my arrival, I stopped and sat for a moment to speak to the volunteer who was on the church reception desk.

Judy was a good friend. We agreed on relatively little theologically – I’ve always considered it a wonder, in the best sense, that we were part of the same church because where I was liberal she was conservative and in the few places where she was liberal, I was conservative.

“Are you still having trouble with your neck,” she asked?

“Yes,” I replied, “There are more good days than bad, but there are still bad days.”

“I’ve been praying for your healing,” she said, “Each night.”

I hadn’t asked her to pray. I’m a fairly private person and I had not made widely known the pain that I was in, though in retrospect the thirty pounds and whiff of Ben-Gay were a dead give-away. The knowledge that she – and we knew we disagreed theologically about a great deal – that she was praying for me, for my healing, was a river in the desert.

Isn’t that always the case with rivers in the desert, that they surprise us?

Have you seen any rivers in the desert recently?

They’re there.

God told the Israelites, “I’m going to do a new thing. There’s going to be water in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people.”

That they had gone down the wrong path was abundantly clear.

The Israelites knew that... who do you think was writing down the stories of their exile? They were looking at everything that had gone wrong and were looking for redemption – they wanted to know the same thing that anyone wants to know when they are in the hole, that *how it is now is not how it's always going to be*.

Don't we all need to know that sometimes? Don't we all need to know that what we're looking at right this very second isn't the end of the line?

I could rattle through a litany of things that we could think on that we would want to change.

That's one of the great promises of the Gospel, *that things can be changed*.

We pray prayers of confession. This past Sunday I was privileged to share some time with our confirmation class as they learned about worship and as we went through the pieces of the order of worship, Chris had pulled a prayer from the history of the church and in the confession we prayed that we prayed that God would “open us to a future in which we could be changed.”

The word of Christian faith is one of redemption. It is a word of unexpected grace; rivers in the desert.

Sometimes it seems to me that is what we're here to affirm week in and week out – and by the way, if you're here today, you may as well recognize that you are grace junkie because you came to church during Lent across a marathon – we are here to say that God is *still* doing a new thing!

Don't you think the world needs to know that God can do a new thing?

You know, sometimes I get discouraged when I think about the things that divide us as a culture, as a society. I think about gun violence and our absurd political polarities and

things like the death penalty and access to mental health services and I think to myself, aren't we ready for some redemption?

I don't go around thinking things are all that bad most of the times, but I have to admit that now and again I want to know that God can do a new thing.

And so we hear from Isaiah that God is about to do a new thing.

We hear that there are going to be rivers in the desert.

And we could almost miss it, but God adds that little line, "for my chosen people."

Do you know why God chose a people?

It's so that the world might know who God is. God wanted this little group of rag-tag nobodies to live their lives in such a way that the folks who ran into them on the street would think to themselves, "There's something different about them. I wonder what it is."

I know sometimes the Levitical codes seem odd to us, but there's something about a God who loves creation enough to say that when you want to eat an animal there needs to be a clean kill. That if you must take retribution for a wrong, it must be proportional, you can't take an eye for a fingernail or lop off a leg from someone who gave you a black-eye. There's just something about a God who says, "when you get old you need to know that someone will care for you, so start caring for the elderly now so that when it's your turn people will care for you."

You know what I think?

When God chose a people, God wanted to make some rivers in the desert.

God has always been in the business of doing a new thing. God made us for this wonderful experience of humanity, and God is going to settle for nothing less than that

for us. When the whole thing went off the rails from the very get-go, God started working immediately, from all eternity, the Bible tells us, for redemption.

Unexpected kindnesses. Unsolicited prayers. These are rivers in the desert that I have seen.

Have you seen any recently?

Because they're there – they're there to see.

And what's more, they're here.

You – we - are the rivers in the desert.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.