



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# From Waste to Gold

SCRIPTURE:  
Isaiah 43:16-20

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April 24, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Melanie Hardison

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**I** am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I want to tell you a story of perseverance, faithfulness and love. This is some of the story of the Israelites, the group of people our scripture is addressing. And this is our story, as the Israelites are our ancestors in the faith. At one time they were living in the land around Jerusalem and life was pretty good—until they were conquered by their neighbors, the Babylonians, and exiled to Babylon. So imagine the Israelites as a conquered people. This isn't hard to do right now because we see images every day of what Russia is doing in Ukraine. What's different for the Israelites though, all those years ago, is that they didn't flee their homes at the start of Babylon's invasion (like the Ukrainians have done). They were rounded up at the end and driven out. Exiled to Babylon. Strangers in a strange land.

At the time this scripture was written, the Israelites have been living far from home, in poor conditions, for years. Elders have died, babies have been born. And the Israelites have started to become hopeless; lethargic in their faith. Wondering if God has forgotten them. Wondering if they will ever get to return home, or if they even want to return home. If they ever get back, their homeland will look more like a wasteland—not at all what they remember.

So God speaks this incredible word to them—of the past, present and future. Reminding them that God has delivered them before. That imagery of warriors and chariots drowning—that's the story of the Red Sea. When out of slavery in Egypt, God parted the waters and their ancestors crossed safely on dry land. God is saying, "Remember, I have delivered you in the past. And now, I am about to do a new thing again! I will deliver you again. It will be a treacherous journey back to Jerusalem, but I will make a way in the wilderness and give you water in the desert."

The people have become despondent, so God must remind them that they are God's chosen ones. And God reminds them who God is: The one who delivers and provides, the one who will deliver again, the one who is always doing a new thing.

God also asks them a question: I am doing a new thing—do you not perceive it? Well, of course they don't perceive it; they're human. Just like we don't always perceive what God is doing because we're human. God's ways can feel mysterious to us, hidden, like someone working behind the curtain to get the stage all set up, and then one day, *voilà!* The curtain goes away and we realize what God has been up to all along. The '*voilà moments*' are the easy moments of faith. "Oh! God! I see it now, thank you!"

But this passage speaks not only to the *voilà moments* and the "I am doing a new thing" moments. It speaks to the fact that God is always God, always doing a new thing, whether we perceive it or not.

This past Tuesday, I had a morning like any morning: I got up and got ready, I ate breakfast and drove to the church. I turned the key to my office door, and took one look at my empty desk and realized: No laptop. I had walked out of the house without it. Dang it, I thought. Now I have to go all the way back and get it. What a waste of time. But, you know, I could enjoy a good cup of coffee on the way. So I sat and waited for some coffee to brew, and in that moment, a thought came to me: Could I work without my computer for a day? Well, I have a sermon to write for Sunday and daily devotions to write for next week and a workshop for the PW retreat and a grief class on Wednesday... that's a lot of writing and planning. Maybe I could do it *without* the computer.

Thankfully, there's no shortage of good old-fashioned pencils and paper in this building. So I got my coffee, assembled my supplies and sat down with paper and pencils and books—good, old-fashioned

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books (no internet for me that day!)—and I started writing all the things that needed to be written. And lo and behold, I worked at the church all day without a computer. I checked email on my phone but mostly, I sat with my paper and pencils and books.

It was *freeing*. I had one of the most productive days I could remember in a long time. I didn't have all the distractions of email and notifications and calendar reminders. I felt my creativity a little closer to the surface, I could focus better and it was actually more enjoyable. In fact, I liked it so much, I almost left my computer at home the next day!

What I learned is this: Sometimes it takes just pausing—for a cup of coffee or a deep breath—to hear God saying something new. I could have gotten irritated about wasting time but I paused, and in the moment it took to make the coffee, I slowed down and breathed. And God spoke: “What if?”

One of the images I have of God is that God is always there, next to us, patiently waiting for us to notice what God has to offer. Sometimes it's like this, “I have this for you... would you like it?” And I'm over here, busy busy busy, doing all the things. And sometimes God's like, “Hello, do you see me doing this new thing?”

I'm not always good at paying attention. So it's a good thing God is God. I'm not always consistent and attentive and watchful. But God is. God is the One who delivers us and provides for us. But if God is to do a new thing, sometimes we have to work for it. Sometimes we have to be open to it. We have to be willing to perceive that God is present and doing a new thing. That's the work that's ours. God can be God and do God's thing, but if we are turned away, or distrustful, or closed off, we cannot be attuned to what God is up to.

Some of you know that I love to garden. The garden is a place where new things are always happening. New sprouts here, new growth there. Oh look, a zucchini! Oh my gosh, the first ripe tomato of the season! All of it's a miracle, really. Every single thing, all season long. You nurture the plants with good soil and water and sun, you harvest the fruits and flowers—and then they die, and you turn them under. Those spent plants break down and their nutrients

feed the soil for next year's crop. There's no waste. I think there's more hope in that than in the first fruits of the season. I can turn the spent plants under or put them in the compost bin with all the kitchen scraps and grass clippings and leaves (O Lord, so many leaves). And they all break down by nature's process. Which is how God ordained it at the beginning: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. That which dies gets born to new life.

We remember this on Ash Wednesday and all through Lent to Easter and beyond. We're a resurrection people, after all. And good, old backyard compost is one of the best reminders I know that what has died will be raised to new life and that God is always doing a new thing. Even if I didn't love to garden, I would keep my compost tumbler and continue to feed it. Not just because it keeps waste out of the landfill and saves me from buying fertilizer—but because it turns waste into gold and reminds me every day that this is what God does with us. Even when we don't perceive it.

I wonder if there's a part of your life that feels like a wasteland—empty, broken, forsaken. I wonder if there are parts of the world (and I pray it will be Ukraine), where God will do a new thing and the people will rise again one day, able to return home, just as the Israelites did so long ago.

Do you know that God is a God who delivers? Do you perceive that in your own life, in your relationships, or in nature's processes? Of course we often don't perceive it. We don't often have the ‘voilà moments’ where we realize, clearly, what God has been up to. But that's where faith and trust come in. When we're open, we see it more clearly. Sometimes it takes a while to get there. We may not always perceive that God is doing a new thing. But like the biodegrading process that happens all day every day in my compost bin—and all over the face of this earth—we can trust it. And like God reminding the Israelites, “I am doing a new thing and I will deliver you from exile,” we can trust it.

God is turning waste to gold right now, perhaps in your very life. God is doing a new thing. Do you perceive it? Whether you do or you don't, you can trust it. Amen.