

We gather together this morning on the first day of the year 2017, with the echoes and memories of the past at our back, and the hopes and anticipations of the future before us. New Year’s Day affords us the opportunity to reflect on what has been and to consider what could be in the days before us. New Year’s is also the day when we pursue the new beginnings in New Year’s resolutions - which usually start out with good intent but ultimately as time goes on, good intentions fade away with the reality of life. Probably one of the best ways to keep a resolution is to set a low standard, like drinking more water or going to bed early. The old adage says, “If you aim at nothing, you’ll hit it every time.”

Surveys tell us that the most common New Year’s resolutions are focused on losing weight and exercise. While it is important that we keep our *physical bodies* in shape, God’s Word tells us it’s even more important to keep our *spiritual body* in shape, as God Word tells us in 1 Timothy 4:8 that *“bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”* As we sit together in this room, we represent the *spiritual body* of Jesus Christ, and as so we are responsible to keep this body God has given us healthy and in shape. As we begin this year together I pray we would resolve to commit our hearts to becoming a stronger, healthier body of Jesus Christ for the glory of God. Philippians 2:12-13 tells us if we set ourselves towards this end God will empower us towards spiritual health: *“work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”*

God’s Word emphasizes the need for spiritual health in the body of Christ *because* of its intrinsic value in fulfilling the purpose for which God created us. While most of the time most of us live out our lives for ourselves, God created us to live out our lives for Him. In ancient China, the people desired security from the barbaric invaders to the north, and so they built the Great Wall of China. The wall is 30 feet high, 18 feet thick, and more than 1,500 miles long. The purpose of building the wall was to erect an absolutely impenetrable defense - too high to climb over, too thick to break down, and too long to go around. But in spite of its overwhelming immensity, during the first hundred years of the wall’s existence China was successfully invaded three times. It wasn’t the wall’s fault. During all three invasions, the barbaric invaders never climbed over the wall, never broke it down, and never went around it. They simply bribed a gatekeeper and then marched right in through an open door. The wall failed to hold back the invaders because the gatekeeper failed to live out the purpose of the wall.

The same is true for the people of God. When the body of Christ is not spiritually healthy, it loses its power to protect itself from foreign invaders that seek to penetrate and confuse and destroy, which distracts the church from pursuing the purpose for which God created it. We see this at work in in the biblical history of God’s people in both the Old and New Testaments - and we still see this at work in the history and everyday life of every contemporary church in existence today. We’ve seen this here at Arrowsmith as we’ve experienced hurts and healings, defeats and victories, good times and bad as we’ve pursued the mission and vision of “seeking to passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people.” This is the normal experience of a fallen, but restored people of God in their pursuit to follow Jesus and gain ground against the enemy of our souls, in this fallen world we live in. When we pursue spiritual health we will experience struggles because we are sinners who live in a fallen world.

The context of our verses for this morning occurs at a time when the people of God were spiritually unhealthy. The words that we will read were written when they were experiencing the struggles of hurt and defeat - because of their blatant idolatry and their deliberate ignorance of God and their woeful neglect of worshipping God. And so, as a result God had allowed His chosen people to taken captive by the Assyrians and enslaved by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. There they would remain in captivity for seventy years, during which time a whole generation would die off - with the exception of an elderly prophet named Daniel and others like him who had gone into exile as very young people.

Most who were hearing these words had been born and grown up in captivity, who had sat at the feet of their elders and heard the stories of the deliverance of their ancestors out of slavery to Egypt and the plagues and the downfall of Pharaoh. They had been weaned on the great stories of the conquest of Canaan and of the rise of the kings; of Saul and David and Solomon, and they would have been told of the dividing of the kingdoms after Solomon's death and the evil kings of Israel and Judah that would follow him. And though God had sent prophets to warn His people over and over again regarding their wandering from God - they did not come back to God and so they ended up enslaved and in exile.

In the midst of this cloud of hurt and defeat they were experiencing, they often thought of and spoke and dreamed of the Exodus and the battles that were won by God's sovereign hand - hoping and praying that God would come again and deliver them from their captivity and lead them back to the promised land God had once given to their fathers. What we are hearing this morning is God speaking through the prophet Isaiah to encourage and assure the people of Israel who were in exile that He would not only sustain them through this time of pain and struggle - but He also would at some future time deliver them from captivity, ultimately to claim them and gather them back to Himself and lead them again into the land He had promised them. On this New Year's Day, in the words of Isaiah 43, we will hear God speaking both to the nation of Israel and to us - *reminding us of who He is and of why He created us and of what He has promised us when we follow truly Him*. In the context of Isaiah 42, where God reminds His people of His promise to send them a Savior, and then God chastises them for their failure to look to God and to listen to God, after which God then says to them:

*But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." Isaiah 43:1-7*

While these words are written for us, the primary interpretation of this passage is directed toward the nation of Israel; God is promising to sustain them, to deliver them from captivity, and ultimately to claim them and gather them together in His millennial Kingdom. God's main point here is to encourage His people that they need not fear what man or nature can do to them. This is the command repeated in verse one and verse five - *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you... Fear not, for I am with you."* After each of these commands - *"Fear not"* - God gives His reasons why His people should not fear. In verses one through four God tells Israel they should not fear because He has proven Himself *faithful in the past* - *"for I have redeemed you (from the bondage of slavery); I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you (parting of the Red Sea); and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you (crossing of the Jordan River). "When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you (the desert experience of the exodus/the consuming fire of God's presence/the three men who were cast into the fiery furnace in Babylon)."*

*"For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life."* Here God is saying, "I have conquered and crushed and vanquished other people of the world in order to save you; I have ransomed other nations for you, allowed them to pay your penalty, exchanged their lives for yours because *"you are precious in my eyes... and I love you."*

Past history proved that God loved His people. In verses five through seven God tells Israel that they should not fear because just as God has proven Himself faithful in the past towards His people, He will also prove Himself to be faithful in blessing them with a glorious future. *"Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."* In these verses, God reminds His people that they have a bright future and great hope far beyond what they could ever imagine. He promises to gather them together and bring them back once again to the Promised Land. When our Lord Jesus returns, this will become a reality; the long conflict between the Arabs and the Jews will be resolved, the Middle East crises will end, and Israel will again rest in peace.

All this will come to pass because God sovereignly created His people for His purpose. For what purpose did God bring into existence a people whom He would ultimately regard as precious, a people whom He would love and whom He would choose to occupy the promised land? Verse seven gives us the answer: *God created the nation of Israel for His glory.* The existence of Israel was planned and conceived and created because it was God's desire to reveal His glory through those particular people whom He had created for that particular purpose. Such was God's plan as He revealed it to Abraham, the great patriarch of the Hebrew people when God told him, *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing"* (Genesis 12:1-2). Through the generations that followed, as the world watched the blessing of God work through His people, the power and the presence and the preeminence of His glory was manifested through them to the world.

This was God's plan from the beginning. In Genesis 2 we read that God created man in His own image out of the dust of the ground and breathed into man's nostrils the life-giving glory of God. Not long after, in Genesis 3, man and woman chose a lesser glory than God for their lives and sin entered the world. In verse 15 of that chapter we read of God's promise to restore His glory unto sinful man, in pronouncing judgment on Satan for causing the fall of man, as God said, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel"* (Genesis 3:15). God would plant His seed, His Son Jesus Christ, into human flesh, who would then come to bruise, to crush, to destroy the consequences of sin by death on a cross, in order to restore God's life-giving glory in the lives of those who would receive him as Lord and Savior.

*"Everyone who is called by my name . . . whom I formed and made . . . I created for my glory."* These words speak not only to the people of Israel; *they also call us deep into God's heart.* It is here that the question of the purpose of our lives is answered also: *From the beginning we were created in God's image so that we might mirror and reflect and reveal the glory of God.* That is our purpose, our mission in life. We are called to live out our lives with God and for God so that *"the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea"* (Habakkuk 2:14). But ever since the fall of man, the world has resisted and refused to embrace this divine purpose of God. But ever since the beginning of time, all that God had been doing, is doing, and will do is aimed at seeing that His purpose for us, the purpose of His glory, be fulfilled. And just as Jesus Christ came to fulfill the law of the Old Testament, the New Testament tells us time and time again that we were created in the image of God and that the purpose of our lives is to reflect the glory of His image in our lives: *"For a man . . . is the image and glory of God."* (1 Corinthians 11:7). What is the *"glory of God"*? Defining God's glory in human terms is difficult. The Hebrew word for *"glory"* in Isaiah is rooted in the idea of *"weight, heaviness, or worthiness"* giving a sense of great importance. God's glory is the perfect harmony of all His attributes gathered into one infinitely beautiful, intimate, and personal being. In putting all these together, we could say that basically God's glory could be described as the reflection and revelation of God in His presence, His power and His preeminence. We glorify God when God's presence and God's power and God's preeminence is reflected and revealed in everything that we think, say and do.

*Bring out the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! All the nations gather together, and the peoples assemble. Who among them can declare this, and show us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right, and let them hear and say, It is true. "You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "and I am God. Also henceforth I am he; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work, and who can turn it back?"* Isaiah 43:8-13

In these words God declares that God's people are to fulfill the purpose of glorifying God by becoming His human "witnesses." In other words, God's people exist in order to reflect God. Isaiah imagines a great gathering of Israel and other nations where God challenges anyone to match His sovereign ability to achieve His purposes in history. In this great trial and testing, God's people are His powerful witnesses to His exclusive reality as God. He has no serious rivals in the universe. We glorify God when we *witness* that God is sovereign. We glorify God when we *witness* that God is God and there is no other. We glorify God when we *witness* to the great truth that God is a Savior — the one and only great, sovereign Savior. Of this John Piper writes: "The reason we have a gospel through Jesus Christ is because we have a sovereign God who sent him with unstoppable purposes and power. If we lose the sovereignty of God, we will eventually lose the gospel. The sovereignty of God is the foundation of our hope. By itself, the sovereignty of God is not the gospel. But it is the massive Rock under the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and triumphant over death and sin and hell and the devil and unbelief and apostasy and backsliding and temptation and every weakness and sin that threatens to destroy the faith and the soul of his saints. This is our calling: to know, believe and understand that God is God, that God is sovereign, that God is Savior through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever."

*Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "For your sake I send to Babylon and bring them all down as fugitives, even the Chaldeans, in the ships in which they rejoice. I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King." Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing 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. The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.* Isaiah 43:14-21

In direct words to the hurting and defeated nation of Israel - God sovereignly promises that the Babylonian conquerors of the Jewish people will themselves be conquered and exiled. Isaiah's language evokes the image of the exodus through the Red Sea and across the Jordan river at the nation's birth - and God promises He will release His people from exile through a new exodus, reflecting the release from their bondage of slavery to Egypt and exodus through the desert that will ultimately lead to the promised land. The original exodus did not exhaust God's power but provided a pattern of new exodus-like deliverances. Isaiah tells the Jewish exiles that they should not live in the past but should look for God to bring them home from Babylon through another "exodus." Where there is no clear path forward, God creates one. Where there is no natural relief or refreshment, God will provide it.

*"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.*

*Behold, I am doing 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 43:18-19

The God who sovereignly made a way for God's people through the depths of the sea and through the flood waters of the Jordan River and through the heat of the desert – is the same God who sovereignly will also make roadways in the dense wilderness experiences of our lives, and bring forth rivers of refreshing water when we are in dry spiritual deserts. Whatever struggles we have been through, whatever trials we are currently experiencing, or whatever pain might come our way – our most sovereign and supreme and preeminent God says: *“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.”* God is telling us, instead of living in the past or brooding on the present or worrying about the future – remember that *right now* *“Behold, I am doing a new thing.”* Right now, in spite of past broken dreams, present frustrations, or future expectations – God is sovereignly doing something *“new”* in your life, in my life, in our lives through our Lord and *Savior* and *Redeemer*, Jesus Christ.

In his classic poem, *The Road Less Traveled* By Robert Frost wrote: “I shall be telling this with a sigh, somewhere ages and ages hence; Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--, I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.” The prophet Isaiah, in his poetry here in Isaiah 43, talks not about a road *less* traveled by – but a road *never* traveled by. Isaiah talks of a *“new”* road that the Lord has created for His people that leads to the *new things* of God. Isaiah concludes that taking the road never traveled by of *“new things”* will make all the difference. But if it's a road less traveled by, we will find ourselves with no way out of a wilderness, lost in the dry desert of our own choosing. Our God is a God of *new things*: He joyfully creates and redeems and recovers and restores and rescues. For us, the *“new thing”* of God which is deepest and greatest and most wonderful and beautiful of all is *the new life we have been mercifully given in Jesus Christ*. Jesus is the *“new thing”* of God's rescue and recovery and redemption and restoration and that He has sent in our lives by His most sovereign grace.

Yet there is a price to the *“new thing”* we have been given by God. Though the payment for our sin guilt has been paid on a bloody cross at Calvary in our place, God also demands a payment from us for the *“new things”* of God in Jesus. The price of knowing the *“new things”* of God through Jesus Christ is *change* – because once we've truly meet and know Jesus, we will be constantly in a state of *change* until we are gloriously changed by God forever in heaven. The *change* that the *“new things”* of Jesus brings into ones' heart and life carries with it a blood-saturated, tear-stained price tag – which can only be redeemed in the brokenness of God's sovereign purpose for each one of our lives.

*“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing 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.”* While these are words of hope and promise, they would have been difficult words for God's people. They, like many of us, resist *“new things”* - even when they are from God. The nation of Israel that left Egypt for the exodus, rebelled against the *“new thing”* of being released from bondage of slavery for the freedom of the exodus; and they grumbled and complained about the *“new thing”* of eating manna given to them by God; and they rejected the *“new thing”* of being under the authority of Moses rather than the authority of the Egyptians. And as a result, only two of those who left Egypt on the exodus arrived at the *“new thing”* of being in the promised land 40 years later.

The Lord said, *“Behold,”* in an attempt to awaken and activate the perceptive abilities of his people. *“I am doing a new thing!”* He said. With their minds oriented toward the past and therefore comfortable with the captivity of the present, they were not able to perceive the *“new thing”* that God was doing. The *“new thing”* is a new exodus, the creation of a *“roadway in the wilderness”* back to the promised land and *“rivers in the desert”* to provide the people with water on their journey. But this would have been a surprise for the exiles. The one place they wouldn't expect to find roadways and rivers was in the desert, but that's where God would sovereignly create them. Neither would they expect to find a path through mighty waters, but the Lord made a way through the sea as well. But God is sovereign. God is God and there is no other. And God is our Savior — the one and only great sovereign Savior.

*“The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.”* Isaiah 43:20-21

These verses hint that a greater, grander exodus still awaits God’s people. The Lord's redemption of Israel, and his provision for them, will cause desert animals/beasts – *“jackals and ostriches”* - to glorify God as His people pass by on their way to the promised land. The animals are groaning for God's people to enter into the total freedom of their humanity and rule wisely over creation, and their return from Babylon is a sign that God is sovereignly at work. The apostle Paul wrote of this in Romans 8:19-21: *“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”* God’s ultimate goal is all of creation will declare his praise. All creation glorifies God when we move toward him. All creation is waiting for us to do precisely that so that it may enter into its own freedom.

In Isaiah 43:2, waters and rivers were connected with the Lord's judgment on his people. They had to pass through those waters, so to speak, as they were taken into captivity. Now, the waters and rivers of judgment become the waters and rivers of provision for the homeward journey. The Lord judges the sin in our lives, and we pass through the waters and rivers of judgment, but only that we might taste the waters and rivers of refreshment on the other side. We have been chosen by God to drink from his living waters as we journey through the wilderness toward Him. After all, we were formed by Him for Him, for His pleasure, so He will take care of us as we seek Him. As we drink from his living waters, as we move toward Him on the wilderness road, we are the ones who praise Him for the great new thing he has done, for making a way back to him. The Lord brings back to himself those he has formed for himself. His purpose in doing so is to glorify Himself through our witness. 1 Peter 2:9-11 says: *“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

God has chosen us to glorify Him by being powerful witnesses to the new things He does in us and through us in Jesus Christ. The truth is, God is doing *“new things”* at Arrowsmith in these days. And I pray that if you do not *“perceive”* it God would open the eyes of your heart to see the *“new thing”* God wants to do in you through Jesus - so that His power, His presence and His preeminence would shine with great glory in your life. And because God is faithful even when we are faithless, He is still at work in our midst redeeming and recovering and restoring and rescuing us from our sin and from ourselves – in order that we might live for Him, so that He might be glorified. He’s working in our midst through our victories and defeats, through our hurts and healings, and through the good times and the bad – all the while doing something *“new.”* And he invites us, exhorts us, commands us to forget what has happened in the past and what could happen in the future, and simply praise Him for what He is doing right now. God declares: *“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine . . . I will be with you . . . you are precious in my eyes . . . I love you . . . I created for my glory . . . I am God . . . I am doing a new thing . . . You are my witnesses . . . that they might declare my praise.”*

Brothers and sisters, watch for and take the new roads the Lord creates. Embrace the new things of God. One day God will do something completely new, and we will walk through the wilderness of this world into His presence in a new Jerusalem: *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband . . . And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new”* (Revelation 21:1-2, 5). Amen.