

Security Blankets

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Isaiah 43:16-21 RSV

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.

Philippians 3:8-14 RSV

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Luke 20:9-19 RSV

And he began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, that they should give him some of the fruit of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant; him also they beat and treated shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third; this one they wounded and cast out.

“Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; it may be they will respect him.’ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours.’ And they cast him out of the vineyard and killed him.

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants, and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “God forbid!” But he looked at them and said, “What then is this that is written: ‘The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner’? Every one who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but when it falls on any one it will crush him.”

The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people; for they perceived that he had told this parable against them.

I don't go in for bumper stickers, but if I had one it would be the one that says, "LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT MY GRANDCHILDREN." It's a wonderful thing, as some of you know, to watch grandchildren grow up, going through all the stages: learning to walk, learning to talk, starting school, developing interests and abilities. Of course, their *parents* get to watch them do all these same things. The nice thing about being a grandparent is that you get the fun but not the responsibility.

I have to tell you about our youngest granddaughter, Becky. She's five years old, and she's unique. For one thing, she's a great actress. Her tears and smiles come quickly. When she was younger we used to watch her looking in the hallway mirror and practicing pouting. But Becky has another side. Recently her parents were talking to her and her older brother and sister about their other grandfather, and something was said about his being a little cranky with the kids. Becky piped up, "But *my* Grandpa isn't like that!" There's a note from Becky taped above my desk that says, "You're the greatest Grandpa in the whole world and I love you so much!"

If you know the Peanuts cartoons you remember Linus and his "security blanket." Many children have them. Now, little Becky had a security blanket that was famous in our family circle. It went everywhere with her. It went to bed with her, and it got up with her. It went to church, and it went to the store. It came to our house many times. When she had her "blanky" Becky felt comforted and protected. Without it she was frightened and insecure. Becky's blanket got so much use that eventually it wore thin. Then it developed gaping holes. Then it began to unravel around the edges, and parts of it fell off. I don't think Becky ever gave up her "blanky"; she just wore it out! By the time she was through with it there was nothing left but a few threads.

Becky's blanket is a kind of parable about our lives. It represents the security of the comfortable and the familiar. It represents a shield against the trauma of change. As we grow older and become more mature, we learn to cope with life without our security blanket. Imagine if I were standing here, at my age, holding a blanket in one hand! (Actually, I left it in the car.)

Seriously, as adults we think we've outgrown our blankets. But if we examine ourselves we might be shocked to discover that we've kept them in some other form — not a piece of cloth but an identity, a set of beliefs about ourselves, a habitual emotional reaction to certain situations, a pattern of behavior or a standard way of doing things, a facade we try to present to the outside world. Whatever it is, we hold onto it because gives us comfort and protects us from the risks associated with growth and change.

Yes, security is good, and we need the familiar in order to give us some leverage in dealing with the unfamiliar. But sometimes what we hold onto for security has become nothing but a few tattered threads. It doesn't help us to move forward in life. It just keeps us locked into the place where we find ourselves, and it deceives us into thinking that's a good place to be.

The Bible is concerned with this very question, in many ways. In considering what message to bring today I looked into the *Common Lectionary*, which is a list of Scripture readings assigned to the different Sundays of the church year. Many churches use this lectionary; there are usually lessons from the Old Testament and from the Epistles, and a reading from the Gospels. The lessons for today — the fifth Sunday in Lent — are the ones we're using in this service. To us they suggested the story of little Becky's blanket because they all touch on the need to get past the comfort and security of the familiar and to move on to a new phase of Christian growth — not just out of a desire to be different, or to be better, but *as a response to what the Lord is doing* in our lives, in his church, and in the world.

In the Book of Isaiah we hear the Lord speaking this message to the people of Judah who were exiled in Babylon. Because of the sin and rebellion of his people the Lord had brought judgment on the nation. A foreign enemy had defeated them, destroyed Jerusalem with its temple, and carried the leading citizens into captivity. It seemed like the end of the world for the Israelites, and in many ways it was. But still, life went on and the people actually became comfortable in their exile. They got used

to being second-class citizens in a foreign country. Like the Israelites in Egypt in the days of Moses, they found a certain security in their bondage.

But that wasn't God's plan for his people — to be comfortable exiles in a land ruled by alien religious values. No, they were to have a land of their own where they could serve the Lord and be faithful to his covenant. To these people Isaiah said, in effect, get rid of your security blanket:

*Do not call to mind the former things,
Or ponder things of the past.
Behold, I will do something new,
Now it will spring forth (43:18-19).*

The prophet seems to be telling his congregation that they shouldn't let their present situation, or their past history of failure, define who they are. Instead, who we are is defined by how God made us at the beginning. Our destiny is not to live as victims and exiles, however much we might have gotten used to that, but to be servants and worshipers of our Creator:

*The people whom I formed for Myself,
Will declare My praise (43:21).*

The apostle Paul builds on this thought in the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians (part of which was in our responsive reading). In Christ, God has done that "something new" he had promised through Isaiah many centuries earlier. He has sent his own Son to break the curse of bondage to an outworn belief system and to offer a new covenant in his life, death and resurrection. Paul writes of those things that were his security blanket, the things in which he used to put his confidence:

*But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.
More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ
Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in
order that I may gain Christ . . . (3:7-8).*

The context for these words is Paul's description of his former life, in which he was "zealous for the traditions of his fathers." But one day when he was on the way to Damascus to persecute the church, Jesus Christ appeared to him and knocked him off his horse. Somewhere between the saddle and *terra firma*, Paul lost his security blanket! (Of course, the Bible doesn't say he was on horseback.)

What if Paul had chosen to hang on to those last few threads of his "blanky?" What if he had refused to abandon his habitual pattern of behavior and his traditional identity? He could never have known, or been part of, the new thing God was doing in his life, and the life of his people. He could never have said these words: "Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:13-14).

Isaiah said, "Do not ponder the things of the past." Paul spoke of "forgetting what lies behind." They were able to say these things because God had shown them what he really had in mind for them. They understood that God was doing "something new" for his people, and that unless they gave up their security blankets and moved out of their comfort zone, they were going to be left behind in the move of God.

What happens to us when we hang onto our threadbare security blankets for too long? Let me tell you about Tim and Cindy — not their real names, of course. Tim and Cindy have been married less than a year, and their marriage has been a rocky one. They are Christians, and we believe God could do wonderful things with their marriage, giving them great happiness and fulfillment and using them powerfully in his work. But they've brought into their marriage a lot of baggage from their past.

Tim's a compulsive sort of guy. Everything in his life has to be lined up in a row. He can't make a move until he writes down a list of what he's supposed to do. He thinks of himself as Mr. Responsible. As a Christian he knows he's a sinner, but he has trouble naming any sins he personally has

committed. Actually, he has some real problems with relationships. As a result of the parental models he had when growing up, he has little concept of how a husband is supposed to nurture and bless his wife. (His parents' marriage ended in divorce.) We've heard him say some very critical and cruel things to Cindy, complaining about her lack of responsibility. He has no idea how these things he says can hurt and destroy; he is only concerned with protecting himself. He says that when he tries to be a compassionate and loving husband he is living a lie, because that's not who he really is.

The trouble is, Cindy's patterns fit right into Tim's. She is irresponsible and deceitful, and gives him plenty of ammunition. As a child she was abused by her father, and cooperated in maintaining secrecy about the abuse. Her mother's alcoholism provided a poor model of responsible behavior. Her mother taught her that "the rules don't apply to you." So Cindy is undependable; she goes wherever she pleases whenever she pleases, doesn't show up for work and doesn't stay home. To Cindy, her husband is the enemy. She deeply resents Tim's criticisms and feels that if she were to change it would be a victory for him and a defeat for her. She wants to stay the way she is, so she won't be responsible to anyone. Cindy's a great actress and can talk a good line about being Christian when she wants to. But when push comes to shove, she admits she is more comfortable doing it her way instead of God's way.

In the light of the Scriptures we've been looking at, you can see what Tim and Cindy's big problem is. Like the Judeans in exile, like Paul in his former life, they find security in their bondage. Neither of them is able to grasp that "something new" the Lord wants to do in their lives because they're both still holding on to the habitual patterns of behavior out of their past. You and I can see that these old identities aren't serving them at all in their current situation. You and I can see that their security blankets are nothing but tattered and useless rags. But Cindy and Tim haven't reached that point, in spite of all our efforts to help them. To this couple the words of Isaiah don't make sense yet: "Do not call to mind the former things." To them, Paul's idea of "forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead" still sounds like defeat, like giving up and becoming nothing. They're so preoccupied with protecting themselves that they don't see what they could really be together if they would let God do his "new thing" in their lives.

Do you see yourself in this story? Are you fighting the same battle? Are you holding on to your security blanket and fending off what the Lord wants to do to give you Jesus' resurrection life? Are you resisting the wholeness and the peace that come from being not who you think you are, but who God created you to be? Does it frighten you to think God's words might apply to you?

*The people whom I formed for Myself,
Will declare My praise (Isaiah 43:21).*

I can't answer this question for *you*. I know it's been a difficult struggle for *me*. All I can say is that I want to be one of those who declare his praise, even if it means being willing to discard the frayed remnants of an outworn past. I don't say we should make light of those good things we have learned through Scripture, history and experience. But when *who we think we are* — or who we want *others* to think we are — keeps us from seeing God at work in us, it's time to let go.

One further point. God says that it's *a people* whom he has created to declare his praise. Our Christian maturity isn't just a matter of our individual relationship with the Lord. God in Christ has called us into community, into covenant with others who love and serve him. He is concerned about how we obey him together. That means that when we hear him inviting us to lay aside our security blanket, we need to think about how this applies to church life also.

I don't know a lot about your church, so I have to put this in the form of a series of questions we could ask ourselves. What are the false securities and the comfortable bondages we're hanging onto as a congregation? Do we have a certain image of ourselves as a church that is no longer serving us? Have we tried to discover that "something new" which God wants to do with our congregation, and are we willing to sacrifice familiar patterns and procedures and "press on in order that we might lay

hold” of it? What would have to change in the life and worship of our congregation if we were to become what God has created us to be: a people declaring his praise?

The Gospel lesson appointed for today is from the 20th chapter of Luke, Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants. In this parable the owner of a vineyard goes on a journey, leaving the vineyard in the care of tenants. At harvest time, he sends a servant to get some of the produce of the vineyard, but the tenants beat him and send him away empty-handed. They do the same to a second and a third servant. Finally the owner sends his son, thinking the tenants will respect him. But they say, “This is the heir; if we kill him, the vineyard will be ours.” And they kill him.

Jesus asks, “What will the owner of the vineyard do to these tenants? He will come and destroy them and give the vineyard to others.” The people who heard this parable knew very well what Jesus meant. He was warning the religious community of which he was a part that if they refused to accept the “new thing” God was doing through him, the promises of God would be fulfilled through someone else. And so it was; the institutions of the old covenant came to an end, and God raised up the church as the new “Israel of God.”

God wants to renew his church today, and he can do that in some sovereign and surprising ways. He wants to move his people out of that place of comfortable security and into the place where they’re willing to declare his praise with boldness and conviction, even if that means taking some risks and making some changes. I believe God loves his people and wants to renew them in whatever situation he finds them. He’s going to do his “something new,” whether we participate or not.

Jesus’ resurrection life will not be stopped. Will we reach out to embrace it? Or will we sit by and watch while God blesses someone else? Like little Becky clutching the tattered threads that used to be her “blanky,” we’re always tempted to take refuge in the comfortable and the familiar. But God is calling us onward to still better things, forming us into that people who will declare his praise to a generation yet unborn.

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