

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**October 31, 2021 – Reformation Sunday**  
**Isaiah 43:1–19**  
**Romans 12:1–2**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

But now thus says the LORD, God who created you, O Jacob, God who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, 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, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, 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 them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away 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.” Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Who among them declared this, and foretold to us the

former things? Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, “It is true.”

“You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am God. 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, says the LORD. I am God, and also henceforth I am God; there is no one who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it? Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation.

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 out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 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.

### **Romans 12:1-2**

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Today, many protestant churches will mark what is known as Reformation Sunday. This commemorates the moment when Martin Luther, a catholic priest, posted his 95 theses on a church door in

Wittenberg, Germany, way back on October 31, 1517. Luther was concerned for his church. The church that he loved. He did not set out to start some new thing, he only wanted to correct where he thought the church was going astray. If you will forgive the metaphor, he didn't want to overhaul the engine, he just wanted to switch out the spark plugs and maybe change the oil.

But once he posted his theses, it was out of his hands. Others took up his ideas and ran with them, expanded them. They didn't think Luther went far enough, and they were interested in starting their own thing. John Calvin, a French theologian and lawyer was in Geneva, Switzerland. John Knox, a Scottish pastor, went to Switzerland and studied with and under Calvin. When he returned to Scotland, Knox continued the work of reformation in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, often arguing with Mary, Queen of Scots. The Presbyterian Church in Scotland is where the Presbyterian Church (USA) traces its roots.

Out of all of this came a motto of sorts, in Latin, it is "*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbi dei.*" It translates roughly to, "the church reformed, and always being reformed according to the word of God."

On the surface it might seem nice. It makes sense because we recognize the church should change, we can't always remain the same. Can we? And, certainly, when you look at the history of the church, it has changed. A lot. But a good portion of that change has come from infighting. From some disagreement that then leads to people leaving and maybe going to another church, or even starting their own denomination. Maybe this idea of the church reformed and always being reformed isn't so great.

This week I did a Google search – I actually did several iterations of searches – along the lines of "Why the church hates change," or "why

the church resists change.” In less than one second, I got almost 75 million responses. We really don’t like change!

Change is hard. And we have seen a lot of it lately. We don’t like change because it is unfamiliar. We often go to a fearful place when things are uncertain. We are really good about thinking about the worst-case scenarios. But change is a part of who God is and being able to change is something God wants us to be.

The reformation motto I mentioned earlier that talks about the church reformed and always being reformed might sound like it is the church, or humans being responsible for the change, but it’s God. The verb in that phrase is passive. We become the recipients of the activity of the Holy Spirit working in the world to help the church become something new.

In our text from Isaiah, it is God who tells the people of Israel that God is going to do a new thing. In Romans, Paul reminds us that we should work toward being transformed. Change is a part of who we are and who God is.

The prophet Isaiah is talking to the people who are in exile. Unlike the first part of the book of Isaiah, or other biblical prophets that warn the people of their wrong doings, this section of Isaiah is a word of encouragement and comfort. It is poetry full of reassurance, hope, and invitation. Isaiah is offering the people who are displaced a way forward that can give them confidence and expectation of a Jerusalem that is open to them once again.

These displaced people, who seemingly had no hope and future, are told the radical notion that God is doing a new thing. Into their despair comes a preposterous message. God reminds them of God’s faithfulness, and tells them that neither floodwaters nor fires will harm them. Note that it doesn’t say there won’t be fire and water, but they will not be consumed.

God will be with them in their struggles, they will not face future dangers alone.

Isaiah starts this message from God in a stunning way. Verse 1 and verse 7 tell the people not to fear. But they also reiterate for the people the promises of God. Isaiah is making God's purposes clear. Verse 1 says, "But now thus says the LORD, God who created you, O Jacob, God who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (43:1) verse 7 says, "everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (v. 7). Isaiah reminds the people they have been created by God, formed by God, redeemed by God, and named and claimed by God. No matter what, no matter the past, we are created, redeemed, called, and claimed by God. We are loved and chosen by God.

"God formed the church, loves the church, calls the church, enables the church to survive to do its work. Even if the church passes through the rivers of controversy and the fires of conflict, God will be present with the church. God's affirmations of Jesus at his baptism confirmed God's work through Jesus, but certainly did not protect Jesus from harm. The church may face danger, but God will be with the church, empowering its ministry and work."<sup>i</sup>

But one of the things I find most interesting about this word in Isaiah, is that God, after declaring all the faithfulness of the past, tells the people, not to remember the previous things. Isaiah declares, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old!" It's a surprising thing to say and perhaps it is a way to get the people's attention. It's a way for people to remember God's faithfulness of the past, but not to live in the past. Not to just remember the good old days.

One writer says, "The prophet aims to create an imaginative space in the minds of the people so that their conception of the past can transform

their understanding of the present and, thus, the future: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” In a seemingly hopeless situation, the prophet calls on the people not to lose heart but to look with anticipation for the signs of God’s approaching redemption, for the “new thing” that is coming.”<sup>ii</sup>

And that can be difficult when you are in the midst of the hard stuff, to look forward. To find the hopeful thing. As I mentioned before, change is hard. Many people don’t like it. But that is what God does. God does a new thing. Gives new possibilities. It isn’t just a return to the way things were, it’s a whole new thing. It’s not that we forget about past faithfulness, it’s that because there has been past faithfulness, we can hope for that faithfulness of God once again.

Isaiah is reminding the people of the past so that they can imagine the new thing, to create an imagination for things yet to come. We often like to stick with the things we know. That is why there is the adage, “the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know.” We crave stability and certainty. Isaiah, and the reformation, remind us, compels us to view our past experiences with God and use that as a springboard for hope.

Even in the midst of change, there are some things that have not changed. It has not changed that God created us, redeemed us, called us, and claimed us as God’s own. Our identity is interconnected and intertwined with God’s identity. And God is God. God is faithful.

Even amidst so much change, our God has not changed. God’s grace and power have sustained us, is sustaining us, and will continue to sustain us. God is present with us in our past, our present, and our future, whatever that may be.

The church is not now what it once was, and, friends, that's a good thing. The world is not now what it once was, and some of that is a good thing. Systems and institutions are shifting all around us. Rapidly. The church is speaking to injustice and addressing sexism, racism, systemic poverty, patriarchy, ableism, and classism. It is hard, this change. But that's ok. As civil rights leader and author Valerie Kaur talks about being breathless and in the dark, she says, "what if this is not the darkness of tomb, but darkness of the womb?" She says, our breathlessness is not a sign of our weakness, but a sign of our bravery. It means we are awake to what is happening now. That the world is in transition, and out of the darkness we have the chance to birth a new world.<sup>iii</sup> Or to put it another way, "see, I am doing a new thing."

We are people of death and resurrection. That is how we understand God, that even out of death, life can happen. That no matter what, God is with us in Jesus Christ. My hope is that we continue to pay attention and reform when necessary, adapt when necessary.

That we are open to being co-creators with God to whatever God has in store. That we can be open to surprise. Open to try new things, and even open to failing and making mistakes.

I know this to be true, the future is not completely clear, and God was, is, and will be with us, no matter what.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-isaiah-431-7-4>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-isaiah-4316-21-2>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://valariekaur.com/>