

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *We are for...*, No. 3

Valuing the Past

November 6, 2022

Isaiah 46:1-13 (NIV)

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low; their idols are borne by beasts of burden. The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary. ² They stoop and bow down together; unable to rescue the burden; they themselves go off into captivity.

³ Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel, you whom I have upheld since your birth, and have carried since you were born. ⁴ Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

⁵ With whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?

⁶ Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it. ⁷ They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Even though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer; it cannot save them from their troubles.

⁸ Remember this, keep it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. ⁹ Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. ¹⁰ I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.'

¹¹ From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do.

¹² Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are now far from my righteousness. ¹³ I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel.

We're in the book of Isaiah this morning, Chapter 46, if you'd care to turn back there with me. Isaiah 46.

In these weeks before Advent, with some playing off of this election season, we are reviewing some of the principles for which followers of Jesus stand. These are some of the boxes we check that, unfortunately, sometimes put us at odds with the surrounding culture.

We began this series by talking about the fact that Christ-followers are for **truth**—for the *existence of truth*.

There *are* some things in this world that are *not* relative. The absolute truth and rightness of some things do not depend on circumstance.

And our source for that truth, just as we saw that it was for the Psalmist, is God's revelation of Himself and His laws, which are, for us, contained in this [hold up Bible], His written word.

Christ-followers are *for* the **possibility** and the **reality of absolute truth**.

Last week, we also said that Christ-followers stand for the **possibility** and **reality of new beginnings**.

Just as the Apostle Paul described in Romans 6 by using the symbol of baptism, we who are in Jesus have died to lives of sin and self-exaltation and are now living new lives exalting Christ.

This is why the claim of the follower of Jesus to be "born again" is not just some meaningless saying. We have closed the book on one era and, with the help of the Spirit of God, we now live in another.

The day we seriously choose to follow Jesus—the day we repent of our sin and experience His forgiveness, as Barclay says—in that moment, our lives are cut in two, and a brand new start is given us.

Christians are *for* that sort of **new beginning** for everyone.

Today, followers of Jesus are *for*: **valuing the past**.

In this age of the disposable everything...

In this age of calling "passé and inferior" anything (including people) made more than a few years ago, Christians take a different route.

Followers of Jesus **remember** and **value** the past.

Now, what does that mean?

Well, let me say: it **does not** mean that we live in the past.

This is not horse and buggy Christianity.

Valuing the past doesn't mean you have to love antiques, or that you're bound to keep using an iPhone 6, or that you must believe the world is flat.

Valuing the past **does** mean, however, that we don't automatically discard or dismiss that which is old merely because it's old.

In this age that not only easily embraces, but in fact nearly **worships** the new **just because it's new**, Christ-followers are called to a different standard of valuation.

We assign value, not according to age, but according to **truth**. We assign value to what is good, what is right, what is proven to actually work, whether old or new.

You see how all this comes back to truth? To God's word and revelation?

Christ-followers don't toss out the past simply because it has passed. On the contrary, we **value** the past, because it is the **past** that shows us the way to a **workable future**.

Isaiah is calling the Hebrews to this workable future, here in Chapter 46.

Isaiah is writing here of things to come that he can see with Spirit-inspired eyes.

Specifically, he's writing of the impending destruction of Babylon, and he's revealing the lesson that Israel, now exiled, is to take from that coming event.

In the first verses of this chapter, you see Isaiah speaking of the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo: Bel being the chief of the Babylonian gods, and Bel's son Nebo being the god of learning and writing.

These were the greatest of the Babylonian deities.

Sarcastically though, Isaiah describes them there in verse 1 as having to be *carried around*, even hauled around on ox carts, when they go from place to place.

These so-called "gods," as Isaiah is pointing out, are actually a *burden* to their people.

"So, how are gods like that, gods who are dependent on their people, worth anything to their people? How can these gods ever actually *help* their people?"

That's what Isaiah asks and answers there in the first part of this chapter. "They can't," he says, "and they won't."

From verse 2 there, the gods cannot protect the people, and the people cannot protect the gods. They go off into captivity together.

Then on down in verse 6, Isaiah makes fun of the whole idol process: "They pour out their gold and silver and hire someone to make a god from it. Then they bow down and worship it. They carry it on their shoulders, and when they set it down, it stays there. It can't even move! And when someone prays to it, there is no answer. How can it rescue anyone from trouble?"

"It's crazy to expect help from something you have to create and carry around." That's Isaiah's argument against idolatry. So much for the "gods" of the Babylonians.

But the God of Israel is different. That's the case Isaiah is making there in verse 8. He tells the Hebrews, "*Remember this, keep it in mind, take it to heart, you who are so easily swayed by other gods. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.*"

You see, in contrast to the dead deities of Babylon, the Lord, the God of Israel, "*created His people and cared for them since their birth.*" (vv. 3-4)

This is the difference, you see, between the gods *whose people have to carry them* and the God *who carries His people*.

In verses 10-11 there, the God of Israel says, "*Remember... I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please...*"

"*What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do.*"

Remember all that I have already done. Look back to your history and recall how I've worked and loved and protected and saved. Remember what's past, so that you aren't carried away by the moment — by the allure of the new, or by the crazy notions of a people who worship gods that are no gods at all.

"*There is utterly no comparison between the gods of Babylon and the God of Israel.*" That's Isaiah's message.

History proves it. The past gives witness to it.

That's why Isaiah says — to a people suffering exile, to a people in trouble — what you must do is remember.

We realize what is real through remembering what is past.

Depending on the translation, and if you count all the different ways to say it, the Bible calls us to remember nearly 550 different times.

Why? Because it is the rehearsing of the past — remembering what God has already done (and also what other so-called 'gods' have *not* done) — that builds our faith to trust Him for the future.

That's really what walking by faith and not by sight means. It is backing our way into a future that we *cannot* see, while keeping our eyes fixed on what we *can* see — the past work of God.

That's why we don't just toss the past.

That's why we don't dismiss something or someone just because they're old.

That's why we don't automatically assume that "progress" means "better."

We count on the past to give us perspective and faith for tomorrow.

As I've said before, we'd be so much further ahead as a people, as a nation — and certainly as the Church of Jesus Christ, if more people took the time to learn history.

Our culture believes that history is useless and dead and not worth our time. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Nobody learns what works from studying the present or from trying to predict the future.

Yet humanity does it all the time: in economics, in politics, in philosophies, in family dynamics, marriages, parenting, leadership strategies and a hundred other ways.

We take the latest thing, the newest thought, the most modern, as the best. And we put all else out to pasture.

And then when that fails, we wonder why.

When will we learn?!

Nobody learns what works from studying the present — or from trying to predict the future.

We learn what works from studying the *past*.

Knowing what's already been tried and has failed — like the gods of Babylon.

That's why Isaiah addresses the Jews here as, "*rebels, sinners, transgressors, stubborn-hearted,*" depending on your translation.

He can't understand why any thinking person would dismiss that which has proven to work, and embrace that which has proven totally ineffective.

Why would any thinking person do that?

Here's why: because unredeemed people have self-focused hearts and *want their way* above *all* else. It's the problem of Eden; it's what happened to us in the garden. Unredeemed people want their way, period. And they will go to any length, no matter how senseless, to get it.

And you see, the only way to get *our* way is to ignore or deny or dismiss the God who made us.

The God of history.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who has proven Himself over and over and over again.

You see, you have to push Him out of the equation—out of history, if you insist upon getting your way.

You can't work with Him, if you insist upon your way. He's too big, too powerful, too prevalent, too proven.

You can't work with God, and insist upon getting your way.

You have to get rid of Him somehow.

You have to forget what's past: who He is and what He's done.

That's the way of our world.

But that's not the way of those who follow Jesus.

Christ-followers value the past for what it teaches us about God, about ourselves and about the future to come.

Just as Isaiah urged Israel in those difficult days, so does God's Spirit urge us today as we face challenges and temptations, and as more and more around us think us to be strange, misguided, old-fashioned, or unsophisticated for following Jesus and for standing for truth—for believing in new beginnings.

As Isaiah said, so does God say again today:

"Remember—keep in mind—take to heart—remember the former things, those of long ago. I am God, and there is no other. I am God, and there is none like me.

I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.'

What I have said: that I will bring about; what I have planned: that I will do."

That is our God, the one true God of past, present and future. And He is with us.

Not just for our own sake, but for the sake of our neighbors; for the sake of their future, we *must remember* Him— who He is and all He'd done. And then we must tell them—so they might have hope for tomorrow.

We actually do this every time we come around this table, you see? Just as God the Father told Israel, so Jesus tells His church, "remember me."

Do this in remembrance of me.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*

Benediction: I think there are two things the Lord has promised to do to those who want that: to renew and to revive. But those things typically start with another "re" word, and that is "remember." We have to remember who He is and what He has done in order for Him to renew and to revive and to bring new life to the present and the future. Let us lead our people—let us lead our nation—in remembering, being a people who remember, so that the Lord might renew and revive this place. Thanks for coming to worship here. The Lord bless you and keep you.