

“Getting Back to the Future”

Isaiah 43:14-21 & Philippians 3:7-16

(fourth in a series of six)

Fifth Sunday Morning in Lent, March 28, 2004

I didn't see the movie, *Back to the Future*. Nor did I see the sequel, *Back to the Future II*. I think there may have been a *Back to the Future III*. While I'm not familiar with the plot of those movies and I understand they are excellent – Michael J. Fox is an brilliant actor, one of my favorites – I am intrigued by the title, “back to the future.” A purpose that God has for you and us is getting back to the future.

Now here's a question to go along with that purpose. How can you get back to the future if you've never been there? It sounds like an impossible feat, yet this title characterizes a purpose for God's people. Getting back to the future. Christians are to be a people who live for tomorrow no matter how difficult and different tomorrow may be. From the faith perspective, tomorrow's difficulty and difference is circumvented by the reality of God's promise that He is going to do a new thing.

Remember the Broadway musical, *Annie*? I've seen several versions of the movie and at least two performances on stage. Did you know there is a lot of good theology in *Annie*? Little orphaned Annie makes a profound declaration in song: “Tomorrow, tomorrow! I love you tomorrow! You're only a day away.” Why is it so profound and so truthful? A story from the Old Testament book of Joshua, chapter 3 will help us understand.

God's people were preparing to cross the Jordan River into the land God promised them and take possession of it. They were encamped at a place called Shittim. After breaking camp, they moved toward the Jordan River, camping on its banks for another three days. The people were encouraged by the officers, “*When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God with the Levitical priests carrying it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it ... that you may know the way by which you shall go, for you have not passed this way before*” (vv. 3b-4a).

What an encouragement! Don't be afraid to go a way you've never before gone! It is possible for us to go in a direction we've never gone before as long as we are following the Lord. Such encouragement by the officers prompted Joshua to declare, “*Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you*” (v. 5). Annie said it well, didn't she? “Tomorrow, tomorrow! I love you tomorrow! You're only a day away.” If the Lord really does do wonders among us tomorrow, then let's love tomorrow! Getting back to the future calls us to purposefully love tomorrow. And so you'll know: the Lord really does do wonders!

Getting back to the future is built on the premise that tomorrow God is going to do wonders among us. He is great enough to do among us what we perceive we cannot do and perhaps, unfortunately, what He cannot do. Nearly a decade ago, I read a book by an Episcopal priest named Loren Mead entitled *The Once and Future Church*.¹ Mead's premise challenges the church to build on and learn from its past, but not to always seek to reduplicate it because that which worked for the church in a prior era may not work in the coming era. He demonstrates this through a careful examination of the history of the church. The very first statement he made grabbed me as I set out reading this work nearly ten years ago: “God is always calling us to be more than we have been.” How true!

Now that truth is being renewed as I read another book by Reggie McNeal. He will be here two weeks from this Tuesday evening to lead Tabernacle's leadership in a time of self-examination. On Wednesday morning, he's going to spend three to four hours with the Pastoral Team as we ponder what we're doing. In preparation for that Wednesday meeting, each of us is reading one of his books entitled, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*.² Reading it has reminded me of Mead's book. Essentially Reggie says the future is literally upon us right now and the church is asking the wrong questions. It reminds me that being who we are right now is not enough - tomorrow the Lord will do wonders, far greater than we could ever imagine, among us.

Of course that is not an easy concept to grasp. You see this whole biblical idea of tomorrow creates a

tension for thoughtful Christians. We live for the future, yes; but we live in the present and to complicate it even further, a part of life is lived in the past. Faith always points to the future in the present as it builds on the past. Genuine faith understands that God has done something, is doing something, and will do something. New Testament writers affirm this in various places with the tenses of salvation: “I or we have been saved; I am or we are being saved; and I or we will be saved.” Past, present, and future.

Some sincere Christians become so satisfied with the past or the present or both that they are unable to seize the purpose of getting back to the future. That kind of satisfaction with who we were or who we are right now has the potential to paralyze ministry, even the faith and hope, to which God has called us. Failure to get back to the future can have a crippling effect. And if you don’t believe that then consider our Hebrew ancestors who were called to get back to the future in Isaiah 43:14-21.

In the context of the entire chapter, we understand that Isaiah was attempting to get the exiled Hebrews to understand that God was about the task of changing people and thus do a new thing in their midst. They were in captivity far away from home. They could only remember the past and focused only on the misery of their present. If they could sing about anything, it was only about the Lord’s deliverance in the exodus. Had they forgotten the stories their mommas and daddies and grandparents and great-grandparents had told them about tomorrow? *“Tomorrow, the Lord will do wonders among you.”*

God said, in essence, “Forget about your captivity. Remember I did something for your ancestors in the first exodus as I parted the Red Sea and allowed them to cross through it on dry land. Remember how I defeated the Egyptians? Now forget about all of that for a moment. Put it aside and consider that I am about to do a new thing. It will be an even greater exodus. It will be a greater deliverance as I lead you across all these miles – hundreds of miles of wilderness and desert. I’m going to make a road for you there. I’ll make a river there. You’ll drink and declare My praise as you will soon head home in a new exodus, a new deliverance.” In short, God’s liberation from exile and wilderness transformation would even be greater than the liberation from Egyptian bondage. That was hard for the Hebrews to imagine.

It may be hard for us to imagine, too, because we, like the Hebrews, often feel as if we are in an exile. We are paralyzed – sometimes paralyzed in the past, sometimes in present, and even sometimes in the future. More often than not, though, we get stuck in yesterday and today. This is why we are always being challenged to break the pattern of some of those previous generations which have resisted God’s call, and vow to hear, believe, and trust in Him to guide us in exile.

You and I are called to adjust our lives and ways to the plan God has for us and trust that He will be with us when passing through the water. We are called to believe that God will pave a way in the wilderness places of life. He is going to make a road for us and we’ll imbibe all of the blessings, seen and unseen, as we journey into the future – sometimes a future that is known and at other times one that is not. Hopefully in the process we’ll declare His praise to all we encounter for His future direction.

Now I don’t think Isaiah is suggesting that we forget where we’ve been. God is working in our midst even if we find ourselves in exile. We are to remember our past so we can know where we’ve been and how God worked in our midst then, thus reminding us that He is at work now. We are to never ditch our heritage as Baptists, let alone Christians. I am a Christian who is as ecumenical as they come. This afternoon I’ll attend the installation of the new pastor at Carrollton Presbyterian Church, Jan Tolbert. Jan is a gifted woman of God. She has family in Tabernacle. I enjoy living ecumenically. But I have chosen to express my Christian faith with a vision that is Baptist. I’ve said this previously and I’ll continue to say it: “I was Baptist born and Baptist bred, and when I die I’ll be Baptist dead!” As long as I am your pastor, we shall maintain this standard of excellence in celebrating our Baptist heritage.

We are not to ditch our heritage as Christians who live out the faith as a local body of believers called Tabernacle Baptist Church. As a faith family we are in our 105th Year and will observe our 105th anniversary in October. In 1899 this congregation was constituted. We are to remember the efforts of our ancestors, many of them faceless. Many of you can recall great days in this church and you should. Those of us who haven’t been here very long are to listen to the sharing of the story of God’s working in our midst over these years.

But we must not make “the way we were” and “what God did” the constant focus. If we do, we’ll find ourselves paralyzed and unable to see that even greater days are ahead. Remember only the glory days are to be held in check. Otherwise we’ll never be about that purpose of getting back to the future and therefore miss the new thing God is about to do.

This is why some five or six centuries after Isaiah’s word, another Hebrew challenged a group of our Christian ancestors in a place called Philippi to be about the purpose of “*forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead*”(v. 13). Philippians 3 is a rich chapter. In verses 7-8, the Apostle Paul encouraged Christians to consider the former life and then in verses 9-11 he challenged them to aspire to the new life provided in and through Christ. “The former things were good,” he said. “But the new thing in Christ is far better. The former way just will not do anymore. Christ is the only way for the future.” So Paul encouraged those Christians in Philippi, and now you and me in Carrollton, to focus on true zeal in living for the future in verses 12-16.

Any accomplishments, any victories of the past cannot compare to the new things God desires to do tomorrow. The future is always better than the past and present because it means we are just that much closer to Christ. Sure things may get worse in the world. Of course moral and ethical standards may continue to devaluate. But the future is better for the believer because it is in the future that our redemption will be consummated. Paul hit the mark when he told the Roman Christians in 13:11b, “*for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.*”

I have always said in each of the churches I’ve served, “The best days of this church are in the future.” I really believe that. The best days for Emmanuel Baptist Chapel in Bowling Green, Kentucky where I pastored for six and one-half years, while a college and seminary student, are in the future. The best days for Greenwood Baptist Church in Bowling Green, Kentucky, where I pastored for four years, are in the future. The best days for Lewis Lane Baptist Church in Owensboro, Kentucky, where I pastored for eight years, are in the future. The best days for Springfield Baptist Church in Springfield, Tennessee, where I pastored for five and one-half years, are in the future. And I believe that to be true for Tabernacle Baptist Church. The best days are always ahead of us.

If we take the scriptures seriously and believe them, then we are obligated to affirm that better days are in the future. It takes courage to do this. Remember how I talked about Joshua earlier and have used his word to the children of Israel a few times this morning? “*Tomorrow the Lord will wonders among you.*” Consider that Moses was gone. The glory days were in the past. Those days were sweet and good for the most part. But Joshua realized the best days were ahead and he knew it would take courage to maintain that realization and so did God.

So God challenged him, according to Joshua 1:6-7, to “*be strong and courageous.*” Be strong and courageous to receive the new thing that God is about to do, whatever it may be, and do not let the past or present frustrate His efforts.

So how do we go about the purpose for you and us called getting back to the future? Isaiah says by understanding that God is about to do a new thing, even if you don’t know what it is. Paul affirmed Isaiah’s counsel with his own good counsel: “*press on toward the goal*” (v. 14). We can do that by focusing on Jesus Christ and when we do, we’ll see ourselves, over a period of time, maturing which will result in the bliss of unity, not uniformity, in the church.

We are not to focus on self. We are to put self aside, praying that God will enable us to be emptied of self and filled with the Holy One. This is what we press on toward: Jesus Christ, who calls us to make a decision – a decision to survey the wondrous Cross on which He died and follow Him. The Cross is our past. It is our present. And it is our future.

Some of you remember the charity anthem from nearly 20 years ago, “*We Are the World.*” It was the

theme for an all out celebrity campaign to help ease the suffering of children worldwide. The organizer then, Quincy Jones, is organizing again – mounting another all-star campaign to ease the suffering of children. This time it's called, "*We Are the Future*" and the multi-act concert is expected to draw more than a million fans to Rome and millions more worldwide who'll watch it on television on May 16.³ We are the future. That sounds good, doesn't it?

The truth be know, we really are the future, aren't we? We the church, that is. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of His church is Lord of our past, present, and future. I am especially thankful that He is Lord of the future. Long ago a man named Jeremiah, one of God's spokespersons in the Old Testament, sent a letter to the first group of Jewish exiles in Babylon around 595 BC. In that letter, detailed in Jeremiah 29, he called the people to be about the purpose of getting back to the future. In Jeremiah 29:11 he announced, "*For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.*"

A future. A hope. A future with hope. A hopeful future. Oh, dear family God is waiting for us to decide whether we will survey the wondrous Cross, on which Jesus died and follow Him or not. Following Him is nothing more than getting back to the future. There is hope! And there is a purpose for you and us. It's called getting back to the future. I'm ready. Are you?

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
Tabernacle Baptist Church
Carrollton, Georgia**

All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995.

¹ Loren B. Mead, The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for A New Mission Frontier. Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1994.

² Reggie McNeal, The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

³ Edna Gundersen, "Quincy Jones Reaches Out to Help Kid" USA Today Monday, March 22, 2004, Life Section, p. 1D.