

Holy Cross, Daggett and St. Mark, Wallace Lutheran Churches, Michigan
March 17, 2013
Isaiah 43:16-24

This is what the LORD says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

“Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel. You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.

One of my hobbies that I have, which I must confess I got from my dad, is to study and invest in the stock market. One of the things I've noticed when studying advice for beginning investors in a magazine or an online article is how the magazine or the article usually has this phrase, "past performance does not guarantee future results." The warning is fairly simple. Just because something has done well in the past doesn't mean it will continue to do well in the future.

This phrase could be applied to a lot of things in life. We could apply it to starting our cars. We've been able to start our car without thinking about thousands of times, but this past history doesn't promise us it will start the next time we want it to. We may have gone skiing or sledding dozens of times without ever getting hurt at all, and consider ourselves somewhat of an expert when it comes to these things and we won't get hurt when we go, but our past experience can't guarantee us we won't get hurt.

But does this phrase, past performance does not guarantee future results, apply to God at all? Do we have to look at all the good things God has given to us in the past and wonder if God will continue to give them to us in the future? The short and simple answer is no. No, unlike our cars which sometimes fail to start or our bodies which get hurt in a sledding or skiing accident, we don't need to worry about God goodness and love which he shows us suddenly stopping.

If the short and simple answer is no we don't have to worry about God's suddenly stopping his goodness and love he shows us that I can just say amen and be done with this sermon? I suppose I could, but we know from experience life isn't always so simple and easy. It is hard and complex with issues we don't always understand and sometimes it looks and feels as if God's past performance in our lives always doesn't always promise us future results.

Our lesson today comes from one of those tough times in Israel's history where the Israelites would think God's past performance wouldn't promise positive future results. Our lesson comes from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament. We read his wonderful prophecies about Jesus both at Christmas and at Easter. These prophecies were amazing and brilliant, but I thought I mentioned before Israel might not believe God would show it love in the future. What gives?

Isaiah lived during divided kingdom of Israel. Recall how after Israel's three first kings (Saul, David and Solomon) had ruled over all the tribes of Israel that the nation split in two as punishment for Solomon's sins of following other gods. The two kingdoms were the 10 tribes of Israel in the northern part of Israel and the tribe of Judah in the south. However, both kingdoms don't learn from Solomon and continue on in their sins of worshipping false gods.

Isaiah, during the first part of his book, prophecies and warns the Judahites they will be taken into exile in Babylon because of their sins. Our lesson takes place with the image and picture that the Jews are in exile and captivity in Babylon. Do you think the Jews who were in exile and taken from their homeland might have been tempted to doubt God? Do you think they could have looked at their past experience and see poor results and doubt God would promise anything better in the future?

God did and so he had Isaiah their past results with him. "This is what the LORD says-- he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army

and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.” God knew and understood the Jews would have a hard time in captivity so he pointed them to how he previously delivered them from captivity.

God pointed them to the dramatic rescue he performed for them by rescuing them from Pharaoh when they were coming out of Egypt. Pharaoh and his army, which was the most powerful army in the world at that time, were chasing and pursuing the Israelites, but God rescued them and saved them by parting the Red Sea and killing all of Pharaoh’s army which was chasing them. He showed them how he had rescued them not because of anything they had done, but because of his love and mercy for them.

God has shown us great love and mercy too. We live in an amazing country. How many of us have to worry and wonder if it will be safe to go to work today or if we won’t be able to because an army has invaded our land? How many of us worry about our safety going to a grocery store because we might be blown up by a suicide bomber? How many of us wonder if it is safe to drink the water from the faucet or if we might get sick from drinking it?

We often don’t worry about these things because God’s mighty and merciful hand protects us and makes sure we live in safety and have clean water to drink. He has kept us safe and brought us this far, but how often do we worry and wonder what the future will bring? How often don’t we forget God’s good and merciful hand in our lives and focus on the negative things in them? How often don’t we think we are one misstep away from God hating us and taking out all of his anger on us?

How often don’t we worry God’s goodness and love to us are things he has shown us in the past, but his love should carry the warning which says, “Past performance doesn’t guarantee positive results” because we doubt that his past love promises us his love in the future? The answer of no I refuse to believe God will remove his love from me is simple and easy when things are going well for me in my life, but it is incredibly hard to believe when life gets hard and difficult.

What should we do when life becomes hard and the simple becomes hard for us? “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.”

Isaiah told the captive Jews, “Yes, the Lord has done great things in the past, and it seems like it is all in the past, but he is going to do even better things for you. He is going to create a whole new way to rescue you from exile. He is going to create a road in the desert where there is no road. He is going to provide water for you to drink in a place where there is no water to drink. He is going to bring you safely home and take care of you.”

This rescue which was coming would be great, in fact it would dwarf the rescue from Egypt, but it was only a shadow of an even greater rescue which God would provide through Jesus. This great rescue by Jesus wouldn’t be one from a kingdom which held them in slavery. It wouldn’t be from rulers who were

cruel and treated them terribly. No, this rescue would be from their spiritual enemies. It would be a rescue from sin and Satan. It would mean peace with God forever.

Isaiah had pointed out numerous times how the Israelites were slaves to sin and Satan, but now he is pointing out how God will rescue them. Why would God rescue them from their slavery to sin and Satan? Was it because they were better than all the other nations? “Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel. You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices

“You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.” I would guess that would be a no. So why did God rescue them, “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.” He rescued them because of his love and mercy for them. He sent Jesus because of his goodness.

Guess what? All these things which I’ve mentioned about the Israelites being slaves to sin and the dramatic rescue God staged for them? They apply to us today too. Look to this reading when you feel tempted to believe God’s love has a catch and it feels like it won’t continue on in the future. Look and see how our earthly safety and security pales in comparison to the eternal security Jesus has won for us because he has wiped out our sins and as a result God remembers them no more.

When life gets hard and we doubt whether God really will take care of us we can look to our past experiences with him and see he has kept us safe from our enemies and provides safe water to drink and food to eat. These things are great indications of God’s love for us, but they make us realize we haven’t seen anything yet when we compare them with God’s love he has shown for us in Jesus because God’s love for us in Jesus secures our eternal future and not just our earthly future.

Past performance doesn’t guarantee future results. People use this phrase because they can’t predict the future and don’t want to be blamed when something goes wrong. We’ve seen how this phrase doesn’t apply to God because his past performance of love which keeps us safe here on earth is nothing compared to his future performance of love which will keep us safe for an eternity spent with him in heaven. Amen.