

Isaiah 43:18-19a

¹⁸Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

As you know, I have been on a journey these past couple weeks. Fifteen days. Three Fridays ago I flew to Dallas / Fort Worth, Texas. The main reason was the Presbyterian Theological Education Fund's annual meeting. I am our presbytery's representative to the Fund. It began this past Tuesday and ended on Friday. But, since they were paying for my flight, I took advantage of the trip and added a few other destinations as well. I rented a car at Dallas / Fort Worth on Friday evening two weeks ago and immediately headed east. Spent the night in Texarkana. Then a long drive to Nashville, Tennessee. My older brother Andy (who has been a Presbyterian missionary in Japan) was being installed at two small Presbyterian congregations south of Nashville. Those two churches have not had an installed pastor since their last pastor was killed in an automobile accident thirty-two years ago. It was to be a day of great joy and celebration. My brother did not know I was planning to attend his installation. Saturday evening, as I was driving into Franklin, Tennessee (about ten miles from his home), he called me on my cell phone. He needed to know the date that our great-grandfather Andrew was ordained as a Presbyterian pastor. I told him that it was in April of 1891, almost exactly 117 years ago. He was wanting to put that kind of stuff in the bulletin. He then asked what I was up to – I told him that I was just driving down the road. I wished him well on his installation. I stayed in a motel a few miles from his home. Next morning I drove near the church. I parked across the street and waited. Once everyone went in and the service began, I slipped into the last pew. Ten minutes

or so into the service, he slipped to the back of the sanctuary to take a picture. He was scanning the sanctuary in his camera's view finder when he spotted me. He lowered the camera and looked at me, stunned. Then tears went flying off of his face. The effort was absolutely worth it. He ran over and we embraced and whispered for a few moments, both of us crying. He then went to the front pew and brought my mother back to sit next to me. Somehow she recognized me enough to be comfortable sitting with me, but I'm not sure she really knew who I was. Then during the hymn, I took Mom back to the front pew to sit next to my father who had a part in the installation service. He stepped into the aisle to let my mother into the pew, and then he looked up at the one escorting my mother to the front of the sanctuary. A look of shock and then the tears again. Then my sister-in-law saw me and my niece and two nephews. By then the congregation was figuring out what was going on. After the service, one of the elders came up to me and laughingly scolded me for shocking Andy. She said that if, after 32 years of waiting for a pastor, had Andy died of a heart attack, I would have been in a heap of trouble.

But I did not stay in Nashville. I had other errands to run. I drove to Marshall, Michigan next – about an eight hour drive north. Students and leaders from the middle school in Marshall have stayed in our church for a few days every June and July for about the past fourteen years. I had a great day with them.

Then down to Berea, Kentucky. Spent an evening with our friends Joel and Naomi Johnson and their little boy Luke. It was great to see them. Also visited Mike and Anne Panciera, and my folks, and another of my brothers and his family, and another niece. Thursday evening I drove across Kentucky, stayed in a motel in Bowling

Green, Kentucky, then the next morning drove on back to Nashville, Tennessee. I had been invited to speak with the missions staff at First Presbyterian Church in Nashville. It is a 4,500 member congregation with a 3½ million dollar budget and they are wanting to explore partnering with our presbytery to help support mission here. The presbytery was anxious to get someone down there. I had a great two hour meeting with them.

I then was planning to spend the weekend at Andy's home, but he called and suggested I not come – he was suffering from quite a bad flu. So, where to go? Leisa and I talked about it – trying to find a retreat center – but then decided to drive to Houston, Texas to visit Leisa's sister who works with what is essentially a modern day orphanage for children born with AIDS, or whose parents are in prison. Then on to San Antonio, Texas to visit Bob and Pam Drake. Then back to Dallas / Fort Worth for my conference. When I rented the car it had 179 miles on it – I was the car's second renter. When I returned it, it had 3,771 miles on it. The guy checking it in thought that there might have been a mistake, but when I told him my itinerary, he just laughed and laughed. The conference was great. Bumped into Bruce Berget at the Salt Lake City airport, and we drove home together early yesterday morning. That was my trip.

But now, another side to the trip – the very same trip – a very strange part to the journey. I had heard that there had been severe weather in the southeast over the past month. I entered into it when I crossed into Arkansas. Amazing amount of flooding. Forests and farms under water. In one wooded area, I saw the trees had been cut in a straight path. I wondered if that might be a road. Then I saw the very top of a road sign peeking out of the water. Wow. In some places I saw flood waters for a mile or so before even getting to the rivers from which they flooding and then the flood waters

continued a mile or so beyond. The highway was elevated. In some places it seemed that I was driving across a bridge – water in every direction except for on the highway itself. I then entered Tennessee. A couple dozen miles past Memphis, I was driving in a wooded area. Then I saw a path where a tornado had obviously passed. Huge trees snapped and laying in every-which-way along a path which crossed the freeway. Again, wow! Then to Nashville and on to Marshall, Michigan. On the way to Michigan, in northern Indiana, I found myself paralleling a thunderstorm. Clear blue skies to my left. Absolutely black to my right. The wind was whipping across the highway – the spray from the car in front of me was blowing straight to the left. There was lightening in that very dark storm. I kept looking around, wondering if I would be seeing my first tornado. In Marshall, as I was watching the evening news with my hosts, the story was about tornados following up the route I had just taken a few days before – from Texarkana to Little Rock with quite a bit of damage. That night a major wind hit Marshall, Michigan – a wind blowing off of Lake Michigan.

It was a nice day on my drive to Kentucky. The next evening as I drove across Kentucky from east to west, it was rather stormy. Next morning on the television I learned that Frankfort, Kentucky and Highway 64 had received over eight inches of rain overnight and there was quite a bit of flooding – even parts of the highway was closed due to flooding. But I had driven on a parallel highway just south of Frankfort. Leisa pointed out about then that I had been spending my trip dodging the storms. Then I drove south. I called Leisa and told her that my target for the evening was Jackson, Mississippi, but about thirty miles north of Jackson, I was getting rather tired and I saw a motel, so I stopped for the night. Next morning as I drove into Jackson, I noticed

highway signs blown down and debris here and there. I stopped to get gasoline and noticed the headlines on a newspaper. A major storm had hit Jackson overnight, with 22 people injured, lots of trees down, many houses damaged, including one that burned down after a tree falling on the house ruptured a natural gas line, and there were pictures of many cars mostly covered with flood waters. I dodged the storm again.

Then on back across a swollen Mississippi River and into Texas. The weather was nice – very pretty. Then onto my seminar at the American Airlines Conference and Training Center at the Dallas / Fort Worth airport. That night the storms finally caught up to me. At about two in the morning I was awoken by a storm. Lightening flashing every fifteen to thirty seconds. It was quite spectacular. But there was more to come. The next night – at 3:30 on Wednesday morning, we were all woken up when lightening hit our building. When I looked out the window, I could not believe what I was seeing.

Lightening was flashing continuously – like a strobe light – producing the continuing growl of thunder. Wind was howling through, whipping the huge oak trees around outside my second floor window. Every few minutes a lightening strike very close by producing an almost simultaneous explosion of thunder. Then I heard the tornado sirens out in the distance. I got dressed and was getting ready to go into the hallway, which was the tornado shelter in that building. I stood back from the windows for a while, but then, almost hypnotized, I was drawn to stand right at the window to be as close to it as I possibly could. I found myself wanting to even go out and to walk in it, but I didn't. After a bit over an hour, the squall line moved north – I could hear the thunder more in the distance and lightening not surrounding our building any more. The weather service determined that six tornados touched down that hour around Dallas /

Fort Worth: Three were on the north side of Dallas, and three were on the south side of Fort Worth. Many buildings were blown down. Semi trucks blown over onto their sides. Trees down everywhere. As of yesterday, the damage was estimated to be at least 35 million dollars. The meteorologist on television the next day said that during that hour when the storm was most intense, over twenty thousand lightening strikes were recorded. Twenty thousand lightening strikes around Dallas and Fort Worth in just one hour. I had never experienced anything like that in my life. Gave new appreciation for that almost lullaby the monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani softly sing at their compline service every night just before retiring to their beds. I have sung it to you before:

Before the ending of the day,
 Creator of the world, we pray
 That with thy gracious favor thou
 Wouldst be our Guard and Keeper now.

From fears and terrors of the night
 Defend us, Lord, by thy great might;
 And when we close our eyes in sleep
 Let hearts, with Christ, their vigil keep.

I have now told you two rather different stories about my journeys over the past two weeks. Same journey, but very different stories. Now for a third dimension to the same journey. When this trip began developing, and before I had made airline reservations, I knew the main purpose was the four day conference in Texas. Then the date of my brother's installation service was set by his presbytery. Initially I was a bit frustrated that there were eight days between his service and the conference. What to do with that week in-between? I tried to make reservations at a couple of monasteries in the area, but the guest houses were full. So the travel plans began to develop. But I still was longing for a retreat – I try to go on one every year – and often it has been right after Easter. So, I decided to make a retreat on wheels. Alone in a car for thousands of

miles. But it is not wise to try to read while driving, so I had someone read to me. I took along an audio Old Testament. The reader has a very rich voice and speaks with a British accent. Sounds kind of like the actor Patrick Stewart who played Captain Jean-Luc Picard on Star Trek. The audio Old Testament takes 54 hours of listening to complete. I completed it in thirteen days – a few hours before the lightening struck our building. After having spent the better part of two weeks listening to the Old Testament, somehow that storm touched me in a very interesting way. Many times storms and lightening were associated with the presence of God or even the wrath of God. Only a couple days before I had heard these opening words from Ezekiel:

I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north – an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures... The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning. (1:4-5,13-14)

As I mentioned a bit ago, at first I backed up from the window. Then when I heard the tornado sirens, I changed into my clothes, ready to head into the hallway. But then it was as though I began to be hypnotized by the rushing wind and the continual flashing of the lightening. I walked up to the window and watched for a very long time. It did not seem real. I could not believe that when I went to sleep a few hours before, it was clear and still. Then when I awoke, I was presented with such incredible power. Again, it was like a dream, but it was as though my weaknesses and sins and failings and struggles came bubbling to the surface. The heartaches and hurdles of the past year came to the surface as well. Frustrations. Angers. Self-pitying. Insecurities. Surrounded by an hour-long tornadic storm seemed to provide plenty of time to allow waves and waves of thoughts and memories and hurts and sadnesses and lonlinesses

to surface. In the midst of it, I found myself almost wishing for a tree to crash through my window. A noble death.

But the storm continued on without letting up in its intensity. The encounter was not over. I had just completed listening to the Old Testament. On the trip, because of all of the storms I was dodging, I was taking particular notice of all of those storm images which repeat over and over. In many ancient mythologies, violent storms were often associated with the gods – consider Zeus throwing down those lightning bolts. But, in the Old Testament, the storms were not God, but were being used by God to get the people's attention. The storm in Ezekiel. Stand up and take notice. God is present and is about to do something. The story of Jonah. Jonah running from God, but a violent storm came upon the sea. That storm turned him around. Turned around to obedience to God. The storms were a statement. Something new was about to happen. God was on the move and it was time to sit up and pay attention.

I was at the window, still in disbelief at what I was seeing happening right in front of me. Then something changed within me. Self pity seemed to be draining away. After all, it is not about me. It is about God. That is all that matters. The storm was not a scolding for some crummy self-doubts and lousy abilities. God used the storms to get the people's attention – to point them and to lead them into the future. Turn around and move into the future. Don't be held hostage by the past. Time to move into the future.

Last October, Garrison Keillor wrote in his column about visiting a church in Baltimore. This is part of that article:

In Baltimore with friends Sunday morning, a splendid fall day under blue skies, we marched off to the nearest church and found ourselves in an old brownstone temple of 1852, wooden box pews, stained glass on all sides, old tiled floor, for a high Anglican-Catholic Mass, a troop of choristers in white, altar boys, bearded priests in medieval

vestments, holy water and puffs of smoke and bells and chanting of scripture, precision bowing and genuflecting, all rather exotic for an old fundamentalist like me but deeply moving.

It was formal high Mass, none of that hi-and-how-are-we-all-doing-this-morning chumminess, and the homily only summarized the scripture texts about healing, it didn't turn into an essay on health care. Ten voices strong and true in the choir and positioned as they were under the great arch of the chancel, their tender polyphonic Kyrie and Gloria infused the whole building with pure kindness.

The singing was O my God just heartbreakingly good. There were less than thirty of us in the pews, fewer than the names on the prayer list, and to hear "Behold, how good and joyful it is; brethren, to dwell together in unity" sung so eloquently as the priests swung to their tasks was to be present in a moment of extravagant grace that does not depend on numbers or any other measure of success for its meaning, just as the Grand Canyon does not depend on busloads of tourists to be magnificent.

But here in an old brownstone church at an ancient ceremony, there is a moment of separation from all the griefs of this world. Ten men and women are singing a-cappella, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name," and their voices drench us fugitive worshippers kneeling, naked, trembling, needy, in the knowledge of grace, and when we arise and go out into Baltimore, the blessing follows us. (The Old Scout: "Went to Baltimore and Saw That it Was Good" 10/16/2007)

Even in the midst of the storm I was critical of myself – always self-analyzing. To think that that extravagant storm had anything to do with me only confirmed my conceit. It was silly to think that God was using that storm to break through to me. "The Grand Canyon does not depend on busloads of tourists to be magnificent." That storm did not need me to be there in order for it to be powerful. God does not need my faithfulness or my worship in order for God to be Almighty.

Another biblical storm story came to mind. This one about Elijah.

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a sound of fine silence. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. (I Kings 19:11-13)

A sound of fine silence. A still small voice. A sound of sheer silence.

Garrison Keillor's image of the worship service: "Their voices drench us fugitive worshippers kneeling, naked, trembling, needy, in the knowledge of grace, and when we arise and go out into Baltimore, the blessing follows us." The blessing follows us. The blessing follows us. To be in the presence of the Almighty. The blessing follows us.

The storm finally faded, heading northeast – on its way to take its fury to other parts of the country – a tornado south of Nashville, Tennessee and another tornado in Bowling Green, Kentucky. I had spent nights in both of those cities the week before. But that night at the conference center next to the Dallas / Fort Worth airport, lightening was still flashing but moving away. I was very tired. Very, very tired. I changed back into my pajamas and crawled back into bed. I fell into a deep sleep. When I awoke, it was morning and the sun was shining in the window. I had slept too long. I missed the morning worship service at the conference. But yet, somehow, I don't think I missed worship. Amen.