

“Jazz 2020”
July 5, 2020

Isaiah 43:18-25
II Corinthians 1:15-22

I really shouldn't listen to the radio on my way to church.

Driving over here this morning—it's the Fourth of July as we record this—I heard a brief report about the president's divisive speech at Mt. Rushmore last night—stoking anger, keeping old wounds open, creating new ones—and about his new executive order creating a park with the statues of “the greatest Americans” and, as is often the case when I listen to the radio on my way to church, I thought, “Well, I really need to have a different sermon.

Of course, there's no time for that. And that's OK. Even after the Fourth, we're going to need to give further consideration to our nation's history and future, to the nature of patriotism, and to the new thing that God is doing in us and among us and through us. And, really, this morning's sermon isn't that bad.

So let us turn our attention to the prophet Isaiah as he imagines God speaking to the people: “I am about to do a new thing.”

What will this be like?

The unexpected will burst forth.

There will be a path in the wilderness.

There will be rivers in the desert.

There will be new possibilities for living that spring out of the wonder of forgiveness.

Half way through 2020 now, we have certainly experienced the unexpected bursting forth. How did CNN put it on Friday? “We regret to inform you that 2020 is only halfway over, even though it feels like it's been going on for half a century.”

I won't even begin to try to list the events, but it seems that every week—if not every day—in stunned surprise we say: “I didn't see that coming.”

And so it seemed to me that it would be good to include at least a little jazz in our worship service this morning—as we have done on this first Sunday in July in recent years. We do this to make a connection with the Iowa City Jazz Festival, which, like our worship, has gone online this year.

But this year, we need jazz not just for the music but also for what it can tell us about living in surprising times.

Through jazz we encounter something new in each performance.

A musician takes a theme and explores it in a different way each time.

As we listen, there are times when we are delightfully surprised.

There are times when we hear an old song in an entirely new way—like when Ray Charles first gave us his version of “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies” nearly 50 years ago. We’d been plodding through those amber waves of grain. Suddenly we could really see the majesty of the mountains, we could confess our every flaw, we could pray for the grace of God.

And, yes, there can be times when we are troubled because that new thing seemed, well, *too* new, *too* strange, *too* unfamiliar. A few years ago I checked out John Coltrane’s album “A Love Supreme” from the library. From the opening gong and cymbals to the end it was, to me, *unheard of*. I didn’t understand it. So I played it again. And it still disturbed. So I played it again. And again. To this day, I can’t explain it. To this day it continues to trouble me. And to this day, each time I play it, I feel as though I gain new understanding not just about this music but about life, about a love supreme, and, indeed, about God, to whom, as Coltrane wrote in the line notes for the album, “to whom all praise is due.”

Great jazz stretches us and reminds us that the *new* is, by definition, unfamiliar; that like water in the desert, the new is unexpected, unexperienced, unknown until it is brought forth—and even as it is brought forth. The path that a saxophonist takes through the wilderness bring us into uncharted territory—just as God keeps pushing us, pulling us, and leading us in new directions.

In this way it helps us recognize the jazz-like nature of our faith: We start with the basic theme—God’s love for us and for all creation shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—and then we go off on various riffs and improvisations on that theme. We expand and expound on God’s love, we explore our understanding of Jesus, we discover new variations in our own lives—and then we come back to that original theme. Each generation, each life adds its own beautiful interpretation.

And as we listen to the scripture along with the music this morning we begin to perceive the even deeper significance of jazz for the church and for our nation.

In this year, with the unexpected bursting forth all around us, we can’t go on simply playing the same old tunes, merely repeating the same old refrains. Monuments to old, failed ways are coming down. Old, failed ways of living and relating to one another are collapsing. Simply saying “No” to the past and the present, however, will not bring about the new world we need and desire.

For the new to rise up within us and among us and through us, we need to open ourselves to the affirming power that Paul commended to the church in Corinth—the power of God’s “Yes.”

“Yes” allows us to receive with openness rather than defensiveness. “Yes” allows us to recognize the incompleteness, the injustice, and even the *sin* of the past and the present—in our common life and in ourselves—and still move into the unknown future in hope.

“Yes, and...” thinking suggests that we hear and receive and accept what another person has stated and then expand on it. Yes...And...

You hear it happening in music. A musician takes a theme, expands on it, and passes it on to another musician. That second musician then takes the new theme and adds her own interpretation.

Yes...And...

We won't always agree with each other—and that's OK, too. Miles Davis and John Coltrane revolutionized jazz, but they also had a volatile relationship that was marked by rivalry, tension, *and* mutual respect.

So as we look toward our future, as we open ourselves to the new, let us beware of shutting down meaningful conversation with: "No...But..."

Rather let us say: "Yes...And..."

It is, I think the way of jazz. It is, I will even dare to say, the way of God with human beings, shown in of Jesus Christ whom Paul proclaimed as the One in whom it is always "Yes." For in the Christ we seek to follow every one of God's promises is a "Yes."

These times that try our souls are also the times when we most need a jazz approach to our national life.

We need first to return to the original theme of our nation expressed in the Declaration: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

We know that, yes, it was a theme that not all could pick up and carry. To many, it was not self-evident that all were created equal or that they had an unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—and so this new nation, our nation, emerged out of what has been called our "original sin"—the slave trade in which both the North and the South we complicit.

Nor was it self-evident that women, and poor people, and indentured servants were also endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, as they, too, were variously denied life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

These root sins have given rise to a cacophony of hatred and injustice that have often all but drowned out the tune that inspired more and more people to join in and play it and to invite more and more people into the set.

Yes. And...

This is central affirmation of and vision for our nation—all *are* created equal. It gives us an identity as an American people to guide us in the way that we must, ultimately, go. Indeed, the great sorrow and great anger felt by so many is a result of that vision being obscured, that dream being deferred.

We still have six more months left in this year. The way it's gone so far, that's kind of a scary thought, isn't it? It is true now as always, that there is a lot coming our way that we don't see coming.

Yes.

And...

God is, each day, doing a new thing—offering forgiveness and challenge, making a way out of no way,

Let us then follow in that way and find a way to say “Yes...And...” May we a church and we as a nation not give in to despair, but even now lift every voice and include all in the great song of freedom.