

February 23, 2003
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 43:18-19, 21-22, 24b-25
2 Corinthians 1:18-22
Mark 2:1-12

When Jesus declared that the sins of the paralytic were forgiven and demonstrated that forgiveness by healing the man, he was doing something new and astonishing, yet older than time. It was new and astonishing, because Jesus was speaking and acting with the authority of God. It was older than time, because God is love, and love without forgiveness is no love at all.

Jesus acted on that day in response to the faith of the paralytic's friends. So, what is faith? It is trust in a God who works for the good, it's putting ourselves in God's hands. It's believing that ultimately God is in charge.

I remember a time – from my late teens through my twenties – when I had very little faith. I was quite sceptical of Christianity's claims and Christianity's God. I also remember when I received the gift of faith. Yes, faith itself, our capacity to have faith, comes from God. I still do not think that I could prove scientifically that what we believe about Jesus is true. But I am learning to trust.

The people of the Church have helped me to understand my experiences of God, to catch faith as it were. Here's an early instance. Over twenty years ago, I had an overwhelming feeling that the Catholic Church was home, and that I should stop fighting this feeling and look into becoming a Catholic. So I made an appointment with Fr. Tim Horan, who was on the Assumption staff at the time. When I tried to explain what I was doing in his office, he smiled and said, "It's the Holy Spirit." Upon hearing that, I wanted to run right out the door, but I stayed and listened, and eventually accepted the Spirit working in my life. A non-believer might have had a different explanation for what was happening to me. A believer would recognize in this situation the God who is always with us.

I suspect that many of us struggle with having faith in a God who forgives and who makes all things new. In our first reading from Isaiah, God declares that he IS doing something new in the life of Israel. He speaks of a path in the desert, of rivers in the wasteland. It sounds almost like God is recreating the Garden of Eden. And why is God doing this? To bring the exiled people back to their land.

There some verses that have been skipped in this reading. One, which impressed me, states that the wild animals will honor God for bringing water to the wilderness. Jackals and ostriches are specifically named. Lovely creatures,

right? How could jackals and ostriches possibly honor God? By being all that they are meant to be. Easy, isn't it? Well, maybe for an ostrich.

Human beings are intended among other things to be creatures who give praise. But that is not the case with the Israelites in exile. Instead of being joyful over the promise of their return to their country, they are acting like they're sick and tired of God. And it sounds like God is getting sick and tired of them--all their sinning and their crimes.

Let's stop here for a moment. What is God trying to communicate? Does God really get sick and tired of creation—or at least the more presumptuous parts of creation, meaning us? Is God really “burdened” with our crimes? Can we attribute human emotions to God? I don't think so. What is going on in this scripture, however, is that God wants to get the people's attention, for they are not being all he has called them to be. So God, through the prophet, speaks to the people in language they can understand.

We've all heard the saying, which also comes from Isaiah, that God's ways are not our ways. This usually gets thrown at us when something really horrible happens. But our reading does show the truth of this saying, for God declares that he will not remember the Israelites' sins. It will be as if they have never committed them. And Jesus' forgiving the paralytic's sins through the complete healing of his body and spirit is an outstanding sign of this promise.

The message of these readings—that God forgives us and that God is doing something new in creation—and what could be newer and more astonishing than Jesus' own mission on earth—this message can give us hope and encouragement at a time when some of us are weary from a long winter and when many of us are anxious over the threats of war and terrorism. For God is transforming the world, and no amount of human sin, not even death, will overcome that. May we have the courage to believe.

Amen.