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“Illusions and Dreams”

Isaiah 43:19-21

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We had a wonderful Men’s Retreat last weekend thanks to the beauty of Eagle Eyrie, Ben Brannan’s organizing, Ken Lyons’ cooking, those attending, and Chris Vogado as speaker and Carter Brothers as song leader. Chris, a musician who preaches, and Carter, a musician who lawyers, gave us a musical weekend.

Chris is a professional jazz musician turned pastor who now serves Salem Presbyterian Church. When I heard that his topic was going to be on the history of Rock and Roll and how it might inform our understanding of the church, I had a thought that showed I had not caught up in life. You see, when I was a young person I heard

- older people saying that Rock and Roll is the music of young people and
- younger people saying that people over 30 should not be trusted.

So, despite the fact that Rock and Roll has always been a part of my life and I am enrolled in Medicare Part A, I still could not see what stares back at me in the mirror every morning. My out-of-date thought was that the topic might not appeal to the older guys on the retreat. But, when one of the older guys on the retreat, Ken Sizemore, (older, not old), a guy who looks every bit the part of the distinguished financial planner that he is, showed his picture from the 1960s with his long, unruly hair looking like he was about to attend Woodstock, the overdue paradigm shift happened in my brain. You would have had to be born in the 1930s for Rock Music not to be playing somewhere in the background for all of your adult years.



I must say that Rock music adds to the illusion. It is a genre of music that perpetually presents itself as young. Watch Mick Jagger in a recent concert, tongue out, prancing around the stage and then remind yourself that he is now 81 years old.

However, as young and rebellious as it presents itself, Rock has become the music of the establishment. Corporations and marketers figured out long ago that if they embraced the spirit of rebellion they could keep consumers consuming because what is new and fresh today will go out of style tomorrow. I recently read a study that said that early in the 20th century the average number of garments an affluent woman would purchase was seven outfits a year. Now the average is 270.

The Rolling Stones figured this the establishment powers of marketing, licensing, and sound investing. Having mentioned Mick Jagger's age, should I mention that his net worth is half a billion? Or that the young master of staying fresh, Taylor Swift, is worth three times that?

Chris didn't talk about that on the retreat- how rebellion and establishment are business partners in making money. He did talk about rebellion and establishment- how Rock music itself has gone through what every other musical genre has gone through- Classical, Romantic, Gospel, Country, Jazz... whatever. Music evolves in the *tension between convergence and divergence*, between getting settled in a norm and then breaking from the norm.

Here's one fun example from the history of the birth of Rock that Chris talked about. Think back to when Big Band was the norm. In Glenn Miller's band many musicians sported the same haircuts, wore the same suits, and moved in unison. No one stood out because the music is the point. Now jump an Ed Sullivan show where four musicians have the same haircuts, wear same suits, and move in unison. Only standing in front of them is Elvis Presley, dancing and singing some kind of different, because now he is the point.

And so rock music went with its ebb and flow—music finding a sweet spot getting settled, and then something fresh happening that moves the music in a new way.

That evolution often can be marked by moments-

- Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show,
- Jerry Lee Lewis playing his piano as if he was dancing with his girlfriend,
- Woodstock,
- Pete Townsend smashing his guitar,
- Michael Jackson's moonwalk while tipping his hat

and those who see and hear it collectively responding, "Wow, that's new."

Convergence and Divergence. Music lives and evolves within it. So it is with history, business, government, and the church. So, it is with our personal lives and relationships.

So it is with Scripture. The Old Testament prophets had this ability to recognize God's timing in sudden, paradigm-shifting moments when, for worse or for better, the old suddenly gives way to something new. And the moment is marked.



The prophet Isaiah¹ speaks of God announcing one of those paradigm-shifting moments. Listen for God's fresh word for an old world.

Isaiah 43:19-21

¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
²⁰ The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

- Sarah has had such toxic relationships, including one marriage that ended in a horrible divorce, that she has despaired of finding a life partner and has given up on men.
- Alejandro's experience of congregation was so shame-based that he has given up on the church altogether.
- Yolanda believed that God would answer her prayers, and now has given up on God because her prayers could not save her son.
- Neal has given up on the one he believed in, himself, because his big dreams and hard work had only led to bankruptcy.

All four were disillusioned. And all four should be. But maybe what they should not do is give up and despair—

- Sarah giving up on relationships,
- Alejandro giving up on the church,
- Yolanda giving up on God,
- and Neal giving up on himself.

Each of them needs to hear in some way the beautiful and poetic words that Isaiah offers to disillusioned exiles. The shattered illusion the exiles used to live under was that Judah would always be protected by Judah's God. They trusted in the promises of the kings and the assurances of false prophets that the nation would never fall.

¹ Scholars would say II Isaiah since the author of our passage surely was not the author of Isaiah 1-39.



And yet Judah did fall. The basic reason has often been said in Sunday School classes and sermons here many times. The surviving nation of Israel, which was called Judah, became overly weak because the establishment had become overly corrupted within. The unimaginable happened and the richest and most powerful of Judah were exiled to Babylon while the impoverished remained in the land as shepherds, farmers and servants.

You can find in scripture many of the expressions of the exiles' disillusionment. They ask how they can sing the songs of the old order of Judah in the new order of Babylon. They can't. There is no going back. The exiles need to learn a new song.

Good therapists, mentors and spiritual directors know this. They know that the path to better emotional and mental health often begins by stepping out of once comfortable illusions and facing uncomfortable reality- It's hard, but necessary, if growth is going to happen. The healthy path begins there, sees the detours to cynicism and despair, chooses not to take the detours, but instead re-imagines what let them down.

Here are some possibilities.

- Toxic Relationship?
 - Detour: giving up on finding a partner in life or ever trusting a friend again.
 - Path forward: Reimagine what a partnership or friendship can be without the illusion of finding a sole-mate or being what someone else wants you to be in order to make the relationship work.
- Bad church experience?
 - Detour: giving up on finding a faith community that joins together to explore what it means to live accountable to God and making a witness to God's love in the world.
 - Path forward; giving up on the illusion of finding a perfect congregation, accept that some faith communities can be toxic and destructive, and be in a faith community that honors questions, that promotes dignity and mutual care, and makes a witness to God's justice, compassion and mercy through its ministry in the world.
- Let down by God (For clarity's sake, I'm speaking specifically to Christians)?
 - Detour: Abandon God who abandoned you. Other detours: Quit believing in God and believe instead in the cause that will save you, or yourself because you can be your own god, or in diversions that will keep you occupied until life is done.
 - Path forward: Give up on the illusion that faith is a deal made with God, accept that certainty is out of reach and that God will always remain a mystery, and then trust in the goodness and love that is not proven but is revealed in Jesus Christ.
- Lost faith in yourself?
 - Detour: Sticking to the illusion that what you do is who you are.
 - Path forward: Surrendering the illusion that you have control of the future and reimagine your worth as a child already loved by God regardless of what you do and whether you succeed or fail. Then, accepting your worth and building the



relationships that will support you come what may, look for the possibilities for your life previously unimagined.

Isaiah helps Exiles embrace their disillusionment so that they can dream again. “[God is doing a new thing](#),” Isaiah says. You will return to the land of Israel, but it *will not* be the Israel of old where too much confidence was in kings and the promises of false prophets. Knowing God is doing a new thing, imagine how to live back home as you have learned how to live in Exile—as a people who survived by clinging to their God, showing mutual caring, and working to promote human dignity even under Babylonian rule. You were disillusioned? Good, because we can now live into a realistic dream.

I hope you can see that there is a difference between an illusion that will eventually fail you because it doesn’t accept change and a dream that can renew you because it will guide you through the convergences and divergences that are necessary to life.

Thank God for the prophets among us who remind us that life, like music, is lived in the tension of settlement and change. Thank God they remind us that neither settlement or change is good for their own sake, but rather the necessary means by which we can reimagine better selves and better ways of living together—ways that are not fixed, but are defined by God whose will for justice, mercy and reconciliation never changes. Thank God that they will not let us play the child’s game of “[Freeze!](#)” in life, thinking that when things are going well that we can freeze that life in place, or when things are not going well that we have to be frozen in despair.

Thank God that they ask us even as we remain within relationships, in communities, and in our own skin that we should always be asking these questions of ourselves:

- Who am I now?
- What do I now believe?
- What, by grace, can I become?

And ask the same kinds of questions of our relationships and communities:

- Who are we now?
- What beliefs are we now living by?
- What, by grace, can we become?

These questions are good guides for prayer that might could be summed up to be this: “[Help me Lord surrender my illusions and dream what can be knowing that whatever the future holds, you are in it.](#)”

