

**The Way x07. Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> February\_2019. Geoff Thorington-Hassell.**

**Watch for the new thing**    *Isaiah 43: 18-21*

I gave a version of this talk in the watchnight Service on 31<sup>st</sup> December and called it “Hope rather than remembrance.” I have been asked to bring it again, but I have reframed it as “Watch for the new thing.” The talk inspired Bolaji to put this photomontage together on the website to help badge our theme for the year “The Way.”



**Then, as now, I am using this talk to try to look at the year ahead through the eyes of faith and expectation; of possibility, potential, change, improvement.**

To be surprised by grace. To be taken aback by God’s undeserved blessing. To look beyond what we see and not simply extrapolate and project, as the same old, same old, and to be prepared to be surprised by joy. The unexpected. The Bible encourages us to *walk by faith, not by sight* – and *who hopes for what they see?* So, **watch for the new thing that God is doing.** Do not get hung up on the old stories of past deliverance that define our history. God has, and is, doing a new thing.

**What do you hope for?** What new thing do you watch out for? Biblical hope is different from wishing for something or making a resolution that might never make it past January. What is it you hope for? Is it something tangible and real?

Measurable? Concrete? We watched three clips back in December and I am going to play them again today. The first is [drone footage](#) from Russian TV over flying a Syrian city. What would hope look like to the Syrians? What new thing would be needed to rebuild their cities? To re-open schools. To repair and staff hospitals. To get the buses working again. Food enough to eat.

The second clip was posted on the Guardian website earlier in 2018. They, like the readers of Isaiah's prophecy, were people in exile who were refugees from a homeland they had lost. These refugees were filmed on the [Croatian/Slovenia](#) border. Hope for them, the new thing to watch for, is a safe place to lay their heads. Not having to move on. An opportunity to start again. To receive a place of welcome. A safe place of hospitality. A new home.

The last clip we looked at was this clip shot in the Negev desert at ground level rather than from the bird's eye view of a drone. The water in the [Negev](#) was a surprise, capture by an Israeli cameraman in 2014. Normally the river bed is dry sand and broken boulder fields with empty waterfalls. Yet suddenly the water came pouring though.

**There are plenty of dry places on earth**, not just as a feature of global warming. Although global warming has also led to some places having been very wet indeed with terrible floods. The dry places I mean are those situations that never seem to change. They always remain the same. Stuck in the same ruts, the same difficulties. Where it is hard to flourish, hard to see things grow and improve. Harsh places where kindness, mercy, generosity seem to be missing most (if not all) the time. Grinding places where it is hard to make a living, make ends meet. A question of

survival rather than living. Or folk trapped in the circumstances they find themselves and not sure and unable to see how positive change may come. **Why I like this Negev video clip is suddenly all that changes and for a few minutes I would like to reflect on God who makes a way, where there is no way. Where hope is more important than remembrance. “To watch for the new thing.”**

**We will do that by looking at this passage from Isaiah.** These were dark and difficult times, and for many people in the trouble of these circumstances they had given up hope. Isaiah is writing to people in exile. People who were powerless and unable to change much of their situation but also were not blameless for the pickle they were in. They had forgotten the basics as far as God was concerned but God had not forgotten about them. Nonetheless, they were locked into a set of expectations as to how things should and could change and this was providing a real barrier for them being able to see and grasp the way forward that God was planning for them. There is both a comfort and a danger in looking back to the past as a pointer for what the future could be. Back to the glory days, to the way deliverance had happened in the past that will help us make sense of the present and the way we can shape what the future will be. It is of value to know the past, but not to live in it. So, from the reading we have read God had assured the people that he still had a plan and a purpose, even though they had messed up, but what was coming was not what they were expecting.

Sometimes we think we know what God is likely to do because in similar circumstances he worked in a particular way and we expect God to work in that way again. This can limit and deceive us because we find it hard to discern and understand what God is actually doing because it isn't what we expected.

In the previous verses Isaiah reminded them that when they were oppressed and slaves in Egypt God made a way through water by removing the water for them to

walk on dry land and then escape into the wilderness. The wilderness was the testing place, a place of formation and shaping to become the people of God. It was to prepare them for the realities of the promised land. To build a just, faithful and obedient people where God would be their God and they would be his people. To be a light to the nations both as a witness and as a worshipping community as to what God was like and what it meant to follow in his ways.

This time round, as God's people, he would take them out of the scorn and disgrace, the disaster and the failure of defeat and exile to be redeemed and restored. This time, however, God would make a way through the desert, the wilderness. A wilderness where there was no water- except this time God would put the water back in. Not just in flash floods, or oasis, or water from the rock and the arguments over food and water that marked and disfigured the Hebrews passage through a different set of deserts from Egypt. This time round in the wilderness there will be streams. Rivers of flowing water that would allow the people returning from exile in Babylon to flourish in the wilderness. The way back to being restored and redeemed was the willingness to trust God on the road into the dry difficult, marginal places, the hard places and relying on God that precisely it is in those unpromising lands would be the promise of life.

**Now there are various ways that this passage can be read but I would suggest that one way of reading this is through an eschatological lens, looking to times that were being spoken about beyond the immediate** return from Babylon. Not least, because as far as we know, when the Jews did go back it was staggered over many years. It was piecemeal and on occasions they had military escorts. Although God provided for them in that way, as far as we know, no miraculous streams appeared in the desert as they dribbled back to Jerusalem. Yet the picture of water is not just about a God who creates clouds, rains, rivers and streams- the physical

means of life- but the spiritual too. **The promise is of the Spirit, the Spirit that gives life.** The Spirit that brings new life and commitment, fruit and blessing. It points to the Messiah and of the age of the Spirit. Where Jesus calls out on the last day of the feast to come and drink from the living water, he himself supplies. (*John 7:37*)

**Alongside this promise of water in the desert are those on the margins.** In the language of the poem, the doleful creatures of the night who get caught up as well in the blessings of God in the wilderness, in the wild places of earth as they are transformed.

**Ostriches had a bad reputation.** They were depicted as cruel mothers (*Lam 4:30*) and as highlighted in *Job 39:13-18*, who appears to have been a bit of a naturalist, *“the ostrich leaves her eggs on the ground for the soil to warm them. She is unaware that a foot may crush them, or a wild animal break them. She acts as if the eggs were not hers and is unconcerned and her efforts are wasted.”*

In fact, the eggs may well have not been hers. The male had several partners (*other people’s children*) and the eggs were all deposited in the same nest. There is a major hen, who he is loosely shackled up with, and the others are one-night stands. They all leave the eggs in the nest together and have no further role in rearing the young. The major hen makes sure her eggs are in the centre while leaving the other eggs on the rim open to vulture attack. In the Bible ostriches represent desolation, ruins, destruction, depopulation, a loss of hope that no one will ever live there again (*Is 13:20,21*). Yet now that changes. They remain in their normal environment but are blessed by God despite the fact that they are unclean. The Hebrew word for ostrich means “greediness.” The Asian ostrich of the Bible lands, however, became extinct since 1966 and is why in this image it is depicted as a skeleton. Now I am not sure who it was who pointed out in the watchnight service “Daddy ostriches are still alive.” They are quite right, but that is the African ostrich, not its cousin the Asian

ostrich which joins a host of other lost species in this age of mass extinction.



Jackal in Hebrew means “howler.” The golden jackal is more often an opportunist. A “jack the lad” or “jack the jackal.” Often hunting in pairs, they are not solitary animals. Sometimes they move in extended family



groups of eight. Or dozens of jackals together at major food sources - especially at rubbish dumps. They scavenge and clean up – including the bodies on battle fields (*Psalm 63:9-10 NIV*). They communicate with howls, barks, growls, whines, cackles, yelps. Jackals are unloved.

**There are plenty of people on the margins who make us fearful and afraid. That are difficult to love- like jackals- and others we despise – like ostriches. But instead of remembrance there is hope. And that hope in 2019 continues as God makes a way through the wilderness through the power of the Spirit. To walk on that way will need God’s Spirit and as the wilderness is transformed it touches, includes and blesses those too that are on the margins.**

Instead of remembrance there is hope and to discern the new thing God is already doing. To be refreshed and renewed by God’s Spirit as God makes a way in the wilderness, whatever the dry and difficult challenges that lie ahead. To watch for the new thing. This means to walk by faith. An example from another desert dweller is found in *Hebrews 11*. The desert nomad Abraham. Although originally a townie he became a tent man. Someone who was personally obedient to what God asked of him. A spontaneous response to God’s call but travelling on the way where he did

not know where God was calling him. There were no road maps in his desert, but he accepted the reality of an inheritance built on trust though despite not even knowing where it was to be. So, Abram left behind the seen world of the town of Ur to the unseen world of the desert. Into an unseen promise where he trusted God who made the promise that it would become a reality even though he could not yet see it. This requires not just faith and hope but trust. Trust is the language of love. Yet it wasn't just Abraham on his own but the emergence of a community that continued to follow by faith. In this case Isaac and Jacob as a growing family, with their attendants, who followed over the generations in believing the same promise (*Heb 6:17*) while dwelling as strangers not as owners. Tenacious tenants in tenuous circumstances. A community that continued to believe in a reality that was not immediately apparent and in seeing a stability that was in other than material things. As in this promise to the exiles in anticipating the rivers and streams that God will provide in the desert although yet unseen. Nonetheless, they are coming.

A desert is, by definition, as dry as a bone where no water is. Faith looks at the horizon that sees beyond the immediate realities and walks in the light of that coming reality into a future whose architect is God. God who not only designs that future but is also building it. It is not a haphazard series of events but is a future designed and built by God. Faith gives substance to our hopes. The title deeds of things hoped for. As Paul writes to the Romans in the imperial city (*Rom 8:24*) *"for it was by hope that we were saved, but if we see what we hope for, that is not really hope. For who hopes for something he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see we wait for it with patience."*

The writer of the Hebrews reminds us (*Heb 11:1*) *"To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see"*. Faith is a sense of conviction both that what is hoped for will happen but also that faith gives reality to

the things hoped for. We can understand this in that we use our eyes to be certain of the things we can see and thus take decisions. It acts as an activity inspired by faith as a sense of conviction. Yet the things we can't see, because they are hidden from our physical sight we can still act out of conviction that they will happen even if we can't yet see it.

Both of these elements of faith are inspired by hope. Faith requires an act of commitment by us, but it is framed by hope. Hope that includes a whole range of realities that lie in the future, beyond our physical sight but that we see through the eyes of faith. Faith provides a platform for that hope, of things that remain as yet unseen that becomes **the "pull of faith"**. It shapes and affects the decisions we make and the direction and road of travel in the "way ahead. "

An illustration of this is the story found in **Acts 8:26-40** in the encounter between **Phillip and the Ethiopian official**. The official was a God-fearing accountant, a eunuch and most likely a Gentile and leaving for home in Africa after a trip to Jerusalem. As a eunuch he would never have been able to be admitted into the community of faith as it had been previously understood. Yet in God's new reality breaking in, he gains a place because God is already preparing his heart. It is a reminder that **this is God's mission not ours. We are invited to join him in the deserts he is already preparing to receive the water of life**. The official needs a guide. That guide was Phillip who was willing to step out in faith to journey on a road past a ruined city where he didn't really know where he was going or why he was there. A road that even by the time Acts was written was no longer in use. A desert road out in the Gaza desert. It is in response to the Ethiopians genuine faith that the Ethiopian is incorporated into God's pilgrim people. By the public profession of that faith and the waters of baptism there in the desert he discovers Jesus, fellowship, commitment and community. **For Phillip it is the discovery that God is moving**

**his people beyond borders. It is not the official's foreignness, nor his blackness, nor his being a gentile, nor his being a eunuch that can prevent his inclusion amongst the people of God found by the waters in the desert.**

It is worth reminding ourselves that the Ethiopian church has lasted much longer in Africa than before the white people came, before Islam came. It has been continuously present longer than Christianity came to these British Isles in going back to the age of the Apostles.

God giving streams in the desert. Rivers in dry places. Giving water to my chosen people. Therefore (Is 43:21) " They are the people I made for myself, and they will sing my praises!"

**God is still in the business of greening deserts and including the excluded.  
Watch for the new things that God is doing.**