

Sermon
Lent 5C
St. Peter's Essex Fells, NJ

May the Words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and redeemer.

Lent is more than half over. Holy Week and Easter, the climax of the Christian year, are fast approaching. We all know the secular signs of the season because they are everywhere. Yes, I speak of that rather confusing, in Christian terms, trinity of confections – the peep, the chocolate Easter Bunny and the chocolate egg. In the church, the approach of Easter is marked by increased activity – the attempt to get everything done. I have three very unspiritual examples. My desk is littered with folders for each of the services of Holy Week with lists of the special participants and details of these services. Second, the other side of my desk is piled with the draft service bulletins for the 8 different services that we use between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. Finally, at the foot of my desk are 500 new plastic Easter eggs for the Easter Egg hunt that we hold between the services on Easter Sunday. And, yes I am still looking for helpers to hide the over 600 eggs we are going to place around the campus on Holy Saturday. These three “unspiritual” examples mark the intense energy and focus that church places on this most holy season. This kind of activity is not random but rather marks that something special and important is soon to happen. We are all familiar with this sense of activity in anticipation such as when we prepare for a dinner party, a birthday party, a wedding these activities, or if we are studying – perhaps I should say cramming for a test. In the church, we know something wonderfully important, that if Easter, is soon to be celebrated.

Our Lenten Gospels reading are carrying us on Jesus' journey. Last Sunday we heard that Jesus had set his face towards Jerusalem. In today's Gospel, Jesus is at Bethany, the outskirts of Jerusalem. He is almost there. In this journey, we have become players in a liturgical drama. We are on the road to Jerusalem with Jesus, where he will be welcomed as a king, arrested, given a sham trial and is put to death as a common criminal. Some Christian traditions take this sense of drama extraordinarily seriously as if we are not observers, but participants. We are to experience the emotions of the original participants – anxiety as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem where the leaders plot against him, exultation on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, fear at Jesus' arrest and trial, and despair at Jesus' death on cross. You realize that I don't subscribe to this type of Lenten spirituality. We know how the story turns out. We already know that the story does not end on Calvary with despair. We are, even as we make our way to Jerusalem in this our liturgical drama, an Easter people – a redeemed people- a risen people.

We are reminded of this, our true state, prophet in Isaiah's proclamation of hope for redemption and restoration to the people of Israel. The prophet declared the word of the LORD saying:

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

The "new thing" was abundant life described as rivers of life giving water flowing in the desert. Then, Isaiah shifts the language proclaiming, " now it spring forth." It is

already happening. God's "new thing" is called by many names the kingdom of God, the reign of God or God's new creation. As Christians, we believe that the promise made to Israel was fulfilled in Jesus. The promise of life abundant - life marked by peace, justice, freedom of oppression, freedom of deprivation and freedom from fear - is springing forth. It is appearing like the shoots we are seeing in our gardens. It is made manifest in our love of God, our love of God, and our love for our neighbor.

Then, Isaiah's proclamation of God's "new thing" takes a turn. A question, directed at all who hear the word, is asked "do you not perceive it?" Isn't it strange that God bothers to ask us if we recognize God's new thing? Isn't even stranger that the question expects the answer, "yes." What does it matter that we respond? Isn't it God's doing not ours. I do not think that God is simply being polite -although we Episcopalians do tend to see God in that light. Certainly, God isn't asking because the Almighty needs affirmation. Nor do I believe God is obliquely inviting us into the kingdom as one would invite a friend to join an exclusive club, or a team, a fraternity or sorority, or even a church.

God asks if we perceive the "new thing" because he needs us. Yes, God needs us. The kingdom of God is incomplete without our participation. And God needs us- today. This 'new thing,' this kingdom of God, is not about the future. The kingdom of God does not await life's end. The kingdom of God is, is Jesus said, upon us today. God needs us because this new creation is happening now. God needs us - our hands, our

hearts, our minds, our spirits, our voices, our prayers, our witness, our gifts and our talents. God needs us.

Do you not perceive it? Sometimes, it is hard to recognize the reign of God in breaking out into a world in violence, greed, poverty, hatred seems to dominate. But we are here today because we have, in different ways, been blessed to perceive God's "new thing." We have been touched new creation that is springing forth. The ways in which have been by the kingdom touched differ. Some have come to know the kingdom through nurture in their family and church. Others have been touched by the more dramatically or mysteriously in way that drew us into a Christian community. Others have perceived it the kingdom of God in ways, which some people would say, mundane. Perhaps we have caught a glimpse of the kingdom in a kind word, a shared prayer, or a held hand, a helping hand. We are blessed is even if we a glimpse of the kingdom of God. But even those glimpses are the signs that the kingdom of God is springing forth even in our midst. "Do you not perceive it?" God needs you.