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 Stewardship 1

God Is Doing a New Thing!
Isaiah 43:18-19, Matthew 13:44-45

Pathways:

[Do not remember the former things
 or consider the things of old.

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.**]*

⁴⁴ *"The kingdom of heaven is like **treasure** hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and **buys that field.***

⁴⁵ *"Again, the kingdom of heaven is **like a merchant in search of fine pearls**; ⁴⁶ on finding **one pearl of great value**, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*

God is doing a great NEW thing at FPC Matawan!

We are becoming **ONE** church on November 23rd when LPC members transfer,
 And we are going to have a huge celebration lunch
 on Sunday January 11th,
 celebrating the merger and all that God has done
 in our 2 ½ year history together!

God is doing a NEW thing—

which is exactly what the **prophet Isaiah** is talking about in Isaiah Chapter 43,
 when God says *I am about to do a new thing, do you not perceive it?*
 God is doing a new thing—which is **what Jesus is talking about**
 in Matthew 13, when he describes the kingdom of heaven,
 like a treasure in a field or a priceless pearl.

So what does it *mean—in our new church*,
To *participate* in the new thing God is doing here?

Well, it's important to note how surprising these new things were to the people who first heard Isaiah 43 and the parables in Matthew.

Isaiah 43 is part of 'Second Isaiah',
which was written during the Babylonian Exile,
some say about mid-way through those 70 years of suffering.
Isaiah 43 was written to give them hope in the future,
Even though there were 900 miles from Jerusalem,
And they had seen their homeland and temple decimated.

Stan Mast, Center for Excellence in Preaching, April 17, 2019.

What's surprising is that God would send these words about a future with hope---right in the middle of so much pain.

It's also strange because in Isaiah 43 verses 16-17,
just before the verses we heard today,
God reminds the people of his great saving work in the Exodus
and freedom from slavery in Egypt!

Isaiah 43:16 says:

Thus says the Lord,
who ***makes a way*** in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down; they cannot rise;
they are extinguished, ***quenched*** like a wick

That's the story of the Exodus from Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea.

This is ***THE saving act*** of God that creates the people of Israel,
for after this they wander through the wilderness for 40 years,
solidifying their identity as God's people.
After the Exodus, God continually reminds the people of this salvation—
he tells them ***to NOT forget***.
In fact, because they do forget their covenant with God, they are exiled.

***So why is God telling them here,
to NOT remember the former things of old?***

What's going on?

***Well, what if the prophet is sharing God words of HYPERBOLE,
Kind of the way Jesus told parables, that were full of hyperbole?
These kind of exaggerated stories are powerful—
because they get us to focus on something new and surprising.***

***What if it's not that we are supposed to forget
the saving acts of God in the past,
But rather that we should FOCUS
on the saving acts of God in the FUTURE—the new thing that God is doing?***

In Isaiah 43, God is basically promising another Exodus,
I will make a way in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.

***God does not deliver the people because they earn it,
Or because they are good,
But because GOD is good.
As we say—all the time!***

Why does God do this new thing?
Listen to what follows today's verses:

*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**.*

***All of God's newness has a purpose—
it's not only for the good of the people,
It is also so the people can PRAISE God! So they can have JOY!***

Similarly, the parables in Matthew 11 are about a NEW thing God is doing—bringing in the kingdom of heaven through Jesus.

And that kingdom is special.

It's like a **treasure hidden in a field** that someone discovers and then in **JOY sells everything to go and get it.**

It's like a **merchant**, who finds a priceless pearl.

These are just two of **40 parables** that Jesus tells in the Gospels.

Professor Amy-Jill Levine says that Jesus' parables are

the 'GENIUS' of his teaching.

Amy Jill-Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, HarperOne: NY, 2014, Pg. 4

Why?

Because Jesus' first century audience would have been familiar with this kind of unique storytelling, found in many different traditions.

They are found in the Old Testament,

like in the famous story that the prophet Nathan tells King David, about his affair with Bathsheba.

Rabbis at the time of Jesus used parables,

but Jesus took it to a **whole NEW level**—using **hyperbole**,

strange and interesting details,

leading to layer after layer of meaning.

Unfortunately, parables are usually interpreted as **simple allegories, metaphors, or moral lessons.**

And that kind of interpretation can **ignore the POWER** of these stories.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses parables to explain the kingdom of God, or what he calls the **kingdom of heaven.**

And 'the kingdom' is a term for the **activity of God in the world**—but a realm that we participate in.

Each parable Jesus told is designed to

help us see the world in a NEW way.

Consider these two parables about the treasure and the pearl.

We could read it to mean that the ***treasure in the field and the greatest pearl is the kingdom, and WE are seeking that treasure and pearl.***

And in order to get the kingdom,
we need to ***give up everything*** to get it.
That makes sense.

Or, ***Jesus is the one seeking and we are the treasure and the pearl,***
and he had to give up everything, even his own life, to get us.
That makes sense too.

Either way the parables are about the great ***cost of discipleship.***
And there ***IS a high cost*** to discipleship, right?

But what if these little stories are even ***deeper?***
And what if they are powerful as we think about ***STEWARDSHIP?***

For instance—is the kingdom something we GET?
What does it mean to say that the ***kingdom is like a treasure?***
What do we do with the treasure in our lives?
What is the ***treasure of the kingdom in YOUR life? Think about that!***

And—***what if the kingdom of heaven is more than something we GET?***
What if the kingdom is also about ***transformation, and a changed life?***
Notice that the ones seeking find ***JOY!***
What if that is an important part of the story that Jesus is telling?

In fact, the ***merchant's life is changed—***
but when he finds the one pearl of great value,
he stops searching!
He has a NEW life! He's a new person!
How does that speak to US today?

The people in these two parables are ALL IN---
So, ***are we “all in” when it comes to God, and God's kingdom?***
Each week we pray in the Lord's Prayer:
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven....
What are we doing to help that kingdom come on earth?

What are our priorities?

What is worth giving our ***time, talent, and treasure***?

One of the most amazing things about being a pastor is

hearing how God calls each one of you to be a part of the kingdom--

And the JOY it brings!

I see people serving, standing up, listening, caring, loving.

The kingdom of God is literally right here----

As you live out your faith—

Maybe you are buying groceries for a shut-in,

Or delivering home communion.

Maybe you are visiting the homebound, or bringing a gift to a new baby,
calling someone who is lonely, eating with someone who is struggling.

Maybe you are teaching kids here, or singing God's praise, or ringing bells.

Maybe you are fixing up needs in our building, so we can keep hosting groups,
or maybe you help at the food pantry.

These are all ways to participate in the kingdom of God.

Today we are having ***an Opportunity Fair—***

to see how we can ALL participate in the kingdom here at FPC!

There are countless opportunities to give of your ***time and talent***.

***But there's more—we are also called to participate in the kingdom
By giving our TREASURE.***

How are WE committed to doing that?

What treasure are ***YOU giving?***

And what does generosity do to your ***heart?***

Isn't it true that we find the ***JOY*** Jesus describes, ***when we give?***

And isn't generosity something that ***brings HOPE in our future,***
despite the hard times we might be facing right now?

We have been so blessed by God in this merging church,

With greater giving, and legacy funds from LPC—

Funds that will last a long time through careful investment.

It's an amazing blessing!

But you know what's even MORE amazing?

The opportunity ***WE have to give to God,***
And ***participate*** in what God is doing in this place!
We can participate in the kingdom---through ***giving!***

Generosity is life-changing.

It's like ***finding treasure*** in a field and selling everything for it.

It's like seeking fine pearls and ***finding the priceless one.***

Giving brings JOY.

And giving brings HOPE.

God is giving us new and abundant resources

And the opportunity to give----

And do the work of the kingdom, right here.

And just think of how timely that is.

In a time when people are struggling to make ends meet,
we will be able to help in new and powerful ways.

In a time when people are hungry, we will be able to feed them in new ways.

In a time when people are lost and hopeless,
we can bring hope, through this church and beyond.

I read this week that true generosity is SURPRISING.

I believe that!

It surprises people when you leave a generous tip,
or pay for the car behind you in the drive through.

And that surprise, ***brings JOY.***

Just like the parables told by Jesus.

And that generosity is ***CONTAGIOUS.***

One generous act leads to another and another. Don't we want that here?

There are only two ways to see what God has given us.

One is through the lens of ***SCARCITY.***

This is the way of the world.

This is the way of seeing limited resources.

It causes us to hold onto what we have, and not share—
because if we do, there might not be enough.

But there is a better way to look at what God has given.

It's through the lens of **ABUNDANCE**.

This is the way of Jesus, of the prophets like Isaiah.

This is the way of our loving and gracious God.

Because God's math is different.

It's like **LOVE**.

The more you give away, the more there is.

So what is the CURE for the scarcity mindset?

It's generosity.

Giving frees us from the chains of seeing everything in scarcity.

Giving frees us to live wholeheartedly.

***Friends, we have been given a great opportunity
to be a part of the kingdom of God!***

Through—giving.

And that act of giving—brings **joy, and hope**.

May God give us the courage to give, and give generously.

And for that opportunity, all God's people can say together, Amen.