

Not One and Done

The NCAA basketball tournament known as March Madness is concluding tomorrow. The excitement begins with Selection Sunday where college basketball teams around the country and their fans wait and hope they will be among the 68 teams chosen to participate. The tournament begins with a vengeance and the number of teams is reduced dramatically after each game, because only the winner advances—each team knows that a loss means their season is over, thus the expression one and done is used when describing those who do not survive the first round. On selection Sunday the teams are matched according to their season records, etc. and placed in four brackets—so the perceived better teams first begin playing those who almost didn't make the field at all. This is an elimination tournament in the truest sense because only one loss ends a team's season—which has led to the phrase which I used as a base for this sermon—one and done. When we are speaking of how God works we encounter an entirely different process. Because, thankfully that is not how God operates so the description which applies to God's actions on our behalf is Not one and done. During this season of Lent in preparation for considering how very different God's actions toward humanity are we are called examine in amazement to realize just how differently God's sets up the selection process by which God's field is chosen; to consider how expansive and inclusive is the field into which we are invited. The story of humanity's relationship with God found in our scriptures illustrates that profoundly, again and again. God's approach has never been one which eliminates but instead it is a record of how God pursues and reaches out—in the most amazing ways—always seeking to offer chances for us to participate in God's own vision of what this world should be. The readings from Isaiah and Philippians both highlight this aspect of God's nature; the consistent and unfailing pursuit in love of God's people. Our passage from Isaiah begins with the phrase that informs those hearing the words just who is speaking. The Israelites living in exile who hear these words: Thus says the Lord—know who speaks because these words identify the source of the promise for the future the passage contains is the same Lord who has previously delivered them. These words come from the one who is all powerful and capable of delivering on what is spoken because this Lord comes from the one who created them as a people, who protected and provided for them as they became that people. The text opens with a description of what Yahweh has done for Israel in the past. These introductory verses are constructed as a pair of participial statements which identify God by what God has already done for them, what God has done in the past; this means God can and will do these things again. The force of the participles is that not only has god MADE a way in the sea in the past as they fled from Egypt, but that the creator's work is continuous, always seeking to provide for their need. They are told to pay attention to this because NOW God MAKES a way. God's actions are moving from the past into the present and future. In fact, God will accomplish the same act of deliverance for the people but the way will be a reversal of the past. In the past, at the time of the Exodus, God had met the needs of his people by turning the sea into dry land. Now God will deliver those in exile back to the Promised Land, a trip which will be an impossible nine hundred mile trek through inhospitable terrain; terrain that is not just a wilderness but a waterless desert. Yet God promises to meet their needs again, but this time it will be accomplished by turning dry land into rivers: "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." This way for the journey through the wilderness presents a powerful

image where even wild animals will honor the one who made it in order to give those on the journey water to drink. Ostriches and jackals which inhabit these places will be amazed at what God has provided and so pose no danger to “the people I have formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.” After this strong recollection of what God has done for them in the past it seems strange that the people in the midst of this passage are told “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.” The most common injunction is for us to remember what God has done. So these words which are in the form of a command startle us. It may be surprising but it does serve as an effective rhetorical device to get the people’s attention for the purpose of the message is not to have the people wax nostalgic about those “good old days.” It is not on the past as the past that the people need to concentrate but on what God is NOW doing. In some ways the past is about to repeat itself, but you have to look around to see that. The message for God’s people is to understand their past as how God was present with them then. Thus the message is to alert the people; to transform their understanding from a frozen picture into a new vision of the present and the future. Verse 19 proclaims: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” The people are called to not lose heart but to look with anticipation for the signs of God’s approaching redemption, for the new thing which is coming for them. In other words if you focus too much on the past you may well miss the future being born. In other words, God’s deliverance is not a one-off deal. It is not an accident. The redemptive events of the past, the Lord’s promises should not become merely sentimental reminiscences. This is not to nullify what has been done, but the focus should be toward hope; toward the new emancipation that the Lord of emancipation is about to enact. “Do you see it?” asks the Lord, as if inviting the hearer to join their imagination with God’s. The following verses help the hearer imagine the promised new thing. The wilderness is transformed, becoming safe and lush. The water of life—literally—is abundant and available to all. Thirsts are quenched and formerly dry mouths of the Lord’s people are now free to praise the Lord. This is a text to read during Lent when we come face to face with the mess we humans have made of our relationships and of this world, when we recognize how profoundly broken and how incapable of fixing ourselves we are. For it is in this place of helplessness and disorientation that hope emerges. This vision of what can and will be doesn’t arise out of nowhere. It is not a fantasy of our imagination. Instead, it is rooted in the memory of what God has done for Israel in the past, of God’s faithfulness to their ancestors; of the demonstration of God’s power, goodness and steadfast love. The exodus is central to understanding that God meets us in the darkest of places not just to rescue us once, but to adopt us. The new redemptive work of God is not confined to a historical moment in time, but is a cosmic event; it is an act of creation itself of God preparing the world to be a place for human beings to live, flourish, and even walk and talk with God. This passage is not just about preparing the exiles to return to the Promised Land, but it is about the rekindling of Israel’s relationship with God, the praise of God by God’s own people. It is not about nostalgia but about living into the relationship which God desires for us. God wants not just a history with God’s people, but also a future with us. To dwell only on what Yahweh has done can get in the way of the new thing God wants to do with us. The season Lent reminds us that the God who was faithful to Israel in the Exodus as well as in her exile remains faithful to us in our time and place. To dwell only on what Yahweh has done is possible to cloud what Yahweh can and will do. That is the message when God says: Look, do you not see it!! Our God is the God of

the new thing, the unexpected thing. We must expect the new work of God and be alert for its signs lest we fail to recognize where God is at work within us and our world. In Paul's letter to the Philippians he expressed his desire to more fully know Christ; he saw that as the ultimate goal for his life saying "not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Lent is a time for us to remember what God in Christ has done, the redemptive work of Jesus. Lent calls upon to remember it, but not as a past event, but as an ongoing work in progress through Christ's presence still with us. A redeeming, restoring work for creation which brings God's reign to us and transforms us as we seek that relationship God desires with us. The God who has done such great things in our past is also doing amazing things now and will continue to do so in the future. In our own estrangement from God and each other, God sent Jesus the Christ into our world. He is the Living Water providing nourishment even in our wildernesses. Jesus is the Christ who promises never to leave or forsake us, even when we fail to look to see the new thing God desires for us and our world. Lent is a time to open our eyes to the possibilities of God's presence and activity in our world, and more importantly in our own lives. Because ever since the first covenant made with Noah, with the one made with Abraham and various renewals in Hebrew Scripture, and in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, our God has made it plain that in God's view this relationship with humanity is definitely not one and done. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.