

Look Up and See

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Sermon Series:
Following Jesus
Around

Isaiah 43:18-19, and
Revelation 21:1-5

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*But change is
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church....*

I want to start this morning with a bit of confession – revealing one of my great weaknesses and frequent failings. I love to shop. I clip coupons, I read fliers, I subscribe to fashion magazines and an ideal day off for me would be wandering around all the stores at Potomac Mills. Now, I know that this is probably going to get me drummed out of the “man corps,” but I’m okay with that. I have a strong enough self-esteem that I can withstand all the ridicule I will receive for admitting that a fun night out is roaming the aisles of the new Whole Foods in Fair Lakes.

Now, we all know that there is not a direct correlation between one’s gender and one’s desire to shop, but there MAY be a pretty strong connection between the x-chromosome and that so-called “shopping gene.” But I think men and women alike have a bit of a fascination with “new” things. Even if we don’t necessarily like to shop for them, we often like to get them as gifts. How many of us have either bought or received something new in the past three months? Now, my guess is that, in MOST of those cases, we would not have been quite as excited about that same item if it had been used or previously owned, I guess, is the new term. We LIKE the new but, you know, the new often comes with a cost.

Sometimes that cost comes in dollars. Buy a NEW car and it immediately depreciates; give me \$30,000 today, I’ll give you back \$25,000 tomorrow—what a deal! In the world of technology, there are the “first adopters” (many of whom are MEN, I would add) that have to have the fastest computer, coolest new phone, biggest TV—and we PAY for it. But sometimes the cost comes in reliability. How many new car models have first-year problems? How many of us think Windows VISTA has all the bugs worked out?

But sometimes the NEW carries a different cost, and that is the cost of change.

I spent this past week in Richmond meeting with pastors who are in “redevelopment” congregations—congregations that are struggling to turn things around. And the story I heard repeated over and over was “they just don’t want to change.” And I empathized with those pastors because change is always hard, even when it’s for a good cause.

But change is an essential part of being a church—of being a Christian—of being a disciple of Jesus. Change is essential, because God is always doing a NEW THING – and if God is doing something new, then we better be to. For the next few weeks, in worship and in our WOW groups, we’re going to be looking at several stories of what new things God is doing. And, today, we’re

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kicking off this series with this BIG theme from Revelation.

Let's look at several key points in today's reading from the Bible. In Revelation 21:5 it says, "See, I am making all things new." And I want us to look for a minute at that very first word, "see." It is such a simple word, and we often just glance right over it. But it ties in with our text from Isaiah where God says to the Hebrew people who are exiled, "I am about to do a new thing, do you not perceive it?" And the rhetorical answer is—Well, no! Frankly God, we don't see it. I know this will sound like an utterly absurd concept here, but I'm going to suggest to you that we only see what God is doing when we look for what God is doing.

How many of us have experienced the phenomenon of buying a new car and then all of a sudden we're driving down the road and it seems like you see that same car everywhere. Were those cars there before? Of course! But now your eyes are pre-conditioned to pick up on them. Perhaps you've heard the adage, "You only see what you want to see." There is SOME truth to that, because we tend to SEE what we are preconditioned to look for. When the Hebrew people were in exile in a foreign land, the LAST thing they expected was for God to be doing something new. After all, they had been stuck in that same spot for generations. Why would they think anything was going to change after all those years?

But God calls us to expect something new to be happening and to keep our eyes open to see. One of the reasons we put this booklet together is to give you a picture of some of the new things that have been going on around here. The physical change has been obvious, but this book highlights many of the new things that may have been overshadowed by our recent construction. You know, sometimes we don't see things because we're not looking. Other times, we don't see things because they are easily overshadowed by some greater force. The scope of our physical construction could very easily overshadow the important foundational changes that have been taking place here at VPC. If you haven't picked one up to read yet, take one today and see what new things God is doing.

"Look, see, open your eyes!" These are the first steps to understanding what God is doing. Our text says that God is making all things new. Now, I will tell you that I have read this passage at almost every funeral that I have led. And it's very appropriate for that context as a vision and hope of God's kingdom. But this passage was not written for funerals. This passage, like the one from Isaiah, was written to give God's people a sense of hope. Revelation, you need to understand, is not a text about the end of the world. Revelation is a text written to believers who were being persecuted, jailed, tortured and murdered because of their faith. It was written to remind them that

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evil may be powerful and real, but it will not prevail.

This passage does not say that God *will* make all things new. It tells us that God *is* making all things new and the difference is enormous. We do ourselves and our faith a grave disservice if we think that Christianity is all about getting to heaven. That's a part of it, but there's more to it—much more. Have any of you ever heard the remark, “Christians are so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly good.” God is making things new—right here, right now, in this world.

And the beautiful thing is that God wants you and me to have an important role in that work. The mission of this church is to send people to love and serve the world. And God is constantly at work to open new doors, new windows, new challenges for us to love and serve, but we need to look up and see them. Many of you this past week saw the movie *Amazing Grace*, about the life of William Wilberforce. Wilberforce had a conversion experience and felt led by God to work vigorously to abolish the slave trade. One hundred and fifty years ago, this country was filled with dedicated Christians who believed it was okay to own slaves. After all, in the New Testament Paul instructed slaves to be obedient to their masters. But, of course, we've long since learned to apply a different interpretation to those words. As far as I know, none of us own slaves today. And none of

us think it's right. But in 2007, there are more people in servitude and slavery in the world than ever before. In China, tens of thousands of women work 98 hours a week to make clothing and handbags that we buy in our stores. At least 125 million children around the world are employed in hazardous working conditions. According to the State Department, as many as 50,000 people are brought to the U.S. annually, against their wishes, for human trafficking. We know that slavery is wrong, but we need to face the reality of the whole picture. I hope and pray that God's people will step up today as Wilberforce did in the 18th century. If God is going to do something new, we must do a new thing.

God does a new thing by changing our minds, our attitudes, our perceptions of reality. Remember years ago when evangelical churches were decrying AIDS as God's plague on the perversion of homosexuality? Back then, I cringed at that statement for lots of reasons. Thank God, literally, that many of those churches have changed their perspective. Last year alone, Willow Creek Community Church, one of the strongest evangelical churches in America, invested over one million dollars in sub-Saharan Africa in ministry to those with AIDS. In one village, they are feeding 2,000 people on a daily basis because the breadwinners in those homes have AIDS. Why are they doing it? Because God is doing a new thing in their hearts. God has placed a burden for the world in the lives of

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those believers and in many of our lives as well. We are slowly learning that being a disciple means that we TAKE God's love into the world.

“Look, I am making all things new.” God's desire is for TOTAL renewal—not just of our lives—but of the world. And for whatever reason, God has entrusted that renewal to his disciples. And it's when WE catch a vision of what God desires that our hearts and lives are moved to respond.

Does God desire to renew our lives? Yes! BUT—that personal renewal is done so that we can be a source of HOPE for others. As we go through the six weeks of Lent, many of us will be asking God to renew our lives—our hearts, minds and souls. Let's make sure, as our lives are renewed, that we remember to then dedicate our lives to the renewal of the world. God is making all things new! But the scope of that renewal is up to you and me.

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