

[PRAYER] I thank you for joining our special holy conferencing, a church conference that will review an offer to lease our bell tower to Verizon Communications. According to the plans presented by Verizon, our bell tower will look the same as it has for more than a hundred years when they're done, but there will be a new thing inside of that tower. Something new will be happening in our community, and for our community, and no one will notice it - that is, except for Verizon cell phone customers!

Many people don't notice us, either. People have been walking, and riding, and driving by this church since 1872. They've been going past our education building since 1960. And yet, when I am speaking with people down at Tom's Place, or around Meriden, and I tell them, "I'm the Pastor of South Meriden Trinity United Methodist Church," more often than I'd like to admit, people will say, "Where's that?" The idea of driving past our church, and many churches, and having that be a place that sticks with you, is just not a part of most people's lives, today.

There are many reasons why people ignore churches today. Many adults today were never raised in a church. Many more might have grown up going to church, but dropped going to church as soon as they became adults. And yes, there are more false gods in our culture than you can shake a stick at. For many people, work is their god. Family is their god. Their car is their god. Movie and TV stars are their gods. And, yes, smart phones, tablets, computers, or whatever screen spits out distractions, every moment of every day, are their gods.

So, when it comes to getting people's attention about our church, even though we have an eight-foot banner in front of our church, even though we put out an email newsletter to 400 people every week, even though we're getting ready to advertise our church through sponsoring a little league baseball team, even though we show up to more events in more places than ever before in our community, it's hard to get people's attention on us.

Churches are no longer the center of our culture in most of America. Yes, there are places called churches where people go to consume a worship service, like they go to a movie, or some other event, but once people leave that place, life goes on the way that it would, with or without that place called church. Churches talk about the people being the church, but the world does not see people being the church in our community all that often, and not for all that many people. For them, church is...nothing. Or, at best, a special dinner, or a fair, or a cleanup drive.

That's kind of a bummer to hear, isn't it? We're here because we love God, we're here because we love our church, and we're here because we love the people in God's world who need God's church. But does the world see anything new coming from us that would change their minds about what church is, or what church could be? Does the world see a new invitation, a new reason, to join us as people of faith?

We have a good church. And, with the help of this new Verizon contract, we will be a more financially stable church. But, like that new array of cell phone equipment in our bell tower, if no one notices the difference in our new things, if our new things as a

church really don't touch lives for Jesus, and change God's world for Jesus, and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of God's world, then we really aren't a Christian church.

We're not the first people in the world to hear this. If we read today's passage from the prophet Isaiah, who wrote to the people of Israel twenty-five hundred years ago, we can see that God has had to remind people constantly through the ages about the new things that God is ready to do in us, for us, and through us, for the sake of God's world. And the people of God need to be reminded, again, and again, of God's willingness to do things in us, for us, and through us, for the sake of God's world, because, as we see in Isaiah's words, we just don't see the new things that God has done, and is still ready to do.

Today's reading from Isaiah 43 opens up with a reminder of just who God had been for the people of Israel. A thousand years before Isaiah, God had freed Israel from slavery in Egypt. God had made a way for Israel through mighty waters, and destroyed their enemies. In the time of Isaiah, the people of Israel had forgotten that God was so powerful, for their sake. They had forgotten the God who loved Israel, and they began to love the false gods of the world's culture, more than they worshiped their God. And again, they were in slavery, when Babylon destroyed their corrupt nation, and destroyed their temple in Jerusalem, and put Israel back into slavery, back into chains.

And yet, through Isaiah, God was calling to the people of Israel, and telling them, “Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?” Even though the people of Israel were sure that God was done with them, even though they were sure that God was old news, and not powerful at all, God was not done with them! Even as they heard these words, God assured them, through Isaiah, that God's new thing was already happening! God's new thing was right there, right before their eyes, and they weren't seeing it! Like people going past our church, like people walking right past daffodils sprouting up, and thinking that spring hasn't come, God was doing something new again, for God's people.

And what God was doing for Israel, Isaiah tells us, is preparing the people of Israel for a new desert walk. God said through the prophet Isaiah, “I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness.” What God had done for Israel to make them a people of God, once they had fled from the false gods of Egypt, God was going to do again. God would make things flourish where the people of Israel had seen only desert. God would give them, and God's world, abundance, flowing water, where they thought that there was only emptiness, and death. God would call them back to discipleship, discipleship that would make the world, and their lives, fruitful, joyful, and abundant.

My blessed church, my siblings in Christ, what is the new thing that God is preparing for us? See, it sprouts up; do you not see it? I invited people to pick up a United Methodist lapel pin over the past several weeks. I've put out over forty pins, so far. They're gone now, mostly. See, it sprouts up. Do you not see it? When we were afraid that we wouldn't sell enough tickets for a recent dinner, some walked down the street

from their home, and told their neighbors about it. See, it sprouts up; do you not see it? We invited three new people into United Methodist Church membership a few weeks ago, and we have new people worshipping with us every week. See, it sprouts up; do you not see it? Our Wednesday night faith group is a strong and consistent tool of Christian discipleship now. See, it sprouts up; do you not see it?

What we are seeing are signs of more than spring, or an anticipation of a joyful Easter celebration. What we are seeing are signs of a new thing that God is doing here. That new thing is Christian discipleship, the impossible possibilities that come from truly obeying and following the living God ,who called Israel out of slavery in Egypt, through the desert for forty years, and into a land of promise and hope for their children, and their children’s children, impossible possibilities that brought their faith back to life when they were in slavery in Babylon, impossible possibilities that sprouted right out of the earth, when a stone rolled away from a grave on the first Easter morning. See. God is doing a new thing. Do you not see it?

Let God’s world see the impossible possibilities that come from Christian discipleship. Don’t keep that pin in your drawer. Wear it. Wear it everywhere, all the time, and tell people what your faith is about. Don’t just invite a neighbor to a dinner; invite them to worship with you. Don’t just offer a comforting word for a stranger in a public place. Pray with them, in the name of Jesus Christ. Don’t just hear about a faith group. Go to one, or start one. Don’t just wish that you could work on a mission project. Sign up for one, and make a difference in God’s world.

See, God is doing a new thing! Look, it springs up! Don’t you see it? It’s you. It’s us. It’s Jesus, in us. Amen.