

(2nd Sunday after Pentecost- Baccalaureate Sunday)

Isaiah 43:1-3, 19

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you... Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? Do not fear for I am with you.”

I know this may be hard for you to believe, but forty years ago, on May 28, I walked across a stage, received my high school diploma, turned my tassel with the Class of 1978, and walked out the gym doors into an exciting, new, and yet unknown world filled with all kinds of possibilities and dreams.

Looking back on where life has taken me these past 40 years, well, where I envisioned myself going as I left the high school gym that night and where I am today living in McFarland, Wisconsin serving as a Presbyterian minister, working as a teacher, and being a parent was not in my wildest dreams.

Back then, my dreams of life after high school involved buying a pick-up truck, learning to dance like John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever, and making it past a semester in college. I still held out some hope that the girl of my dreams, Sara, would go out on a date with me, and I hoped to someday sing in a country music band.

Funny thing about life, it changes your best plans at times without consulting you. I never got that truck. Staci and Sam inform me I can't dance. Sara never did give me the time of day. But you know, one dream did come true. I sang for two summers with the Hard Times Country Band – (once dressed in a toga). All be it, it was just one song each summer, but it was a dream come true, though I am not sure the people in the audience would have agreed. To them, it might have been a nightmare!

Graduation is always a wonderful time to look back at your school years, remember and reflect on them. So I want to invite you to think back to your first day of school, your first friendships, your new classrooms, the transitions to new school buildings or even new school districts, special teachers you had, achievements you achieved in the classroom, and accomplishments you felt proud of on the stage or on the playing field. These are things worth remembering. Oh, and then there are those classroom shenanigans that drove your teachers a bit crazy like say, a student climbing out of the classroom window in Ms. Damon-Wynne's room. Someday in your distant future, you'll

also look back at your high school fashion and hair styles and think, "Did I really wear that?"

But for all the good memories, there are things you are so very ready to forget, like clicks or reputations; nicknames, disappointments in classes or on the sports field or not getting the part you wanted; fights and breakups with friends; bullies and being picked on; teachers and parents hounding you to do your homework or to put your cellphone away and of course, being a treated like a kid.

The Danish Philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard said: **"Life is best viewed backwards, but always lived forward."**

I think Kierkegaard is right. Our past is our past, and while it is worth looking back on, it does not need to hold you in bondage or define your future.

These past 12 years of school, while a part of your life story, for the good, the bad and the ugly of it, are just a small part of what we, your parents and teachers hope and pray will be a long, fruitful, healthy and beautiful unknown life that is still before you.

I appreciate the scripture that was shared with us. The words of the prophet Isaiah were written to the people of Israel who are looking backwards, remembering a past life to the point that they cannot see the new future before them. The Prophet Isaiah says to them: **"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"**

And a "new thing" is what lays before you when you receive your diploma and walk out the gym door.

It's hard to image what your future in five years, let alone forty years, might look like. The people Isaiah was writing to also were unsure of their future. How could they perceive the unknown and imagined, except to trust that God was with them?

In his book, **"Walking the Bible,"** Bruce Feiler says of the Hebrew people who were, like you, leaving their past life behind and being called into a new, yet unknown future: **"They were 'going forth' from a world they knew to a world that didn't yet exist based solely on the word of a god they'd never actually seen. Perhaps no one since Abraham could understand the depth of faith that required."**

And faith is what is required of you as you too "go forth" into life beyond high school, trusting a word of God, or if not of God, of at least the adults and teachers in your life. Be not afraid, I am with you! But who of you doesn't have some hesitation, if not flat out fear, of the future before you?

I am not sure if any of you have had the opportunity to walk a labyrinth? This type of labyrinth should not to be confused with the movie by that same name. A labyrinth is an ancient walking path used for meditation and prayer. I would love for the school district to set one up for use by students and staff.

The idea behind a labyrinth is to enter and exit the same way. The path you follow winds around with many different twists and turns, some easily anticipated, some unexpected, finally leading to the very center. There at the center, those who walk the labyrinth are invited to pause, reflect and rest, before starting their journey back out, following the exact same path, but hopefully, with new insights and understanding about life.

Blogger, Tony Jones, who goes by the name ***Soul Shaper***, says the labyrinth is also a metaphor for life, writing: **"In life as in the labyrinth, we don't know where the path will take us. We don't foresee the twists and turns that the future holds, but we know that the path will eventually arrive at the center, God."**

By this time next Sunday, June 10, you will officially be high school graduates. High School will begin to be, for the good and the pain of it, a memory, gaining distance with each passing day. Yet for each of you, know that God is about to do in and through you, a new thing. The question is will you have the awareness to perceive it?

Next Sunday, when you cross the stage, receive your diploma, turn your tassel, and step out of the "A" gym, no longer a high school student, the story of you will continue.

The adventures that await you, for good or bad, and yes, there will be those difficult, trying times, filled with pain and sorrow, as well as fun, joy, and love, are all a part of the holy story of you still being written as your life unfolds into the one sacred story of us all which is God.

In closing, let me share with you these words from author Fredrick Buechner, **"Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell, your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis - all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."**

Amen.