Romans 12:9-13
Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

The 145-and-counting year story of Santa Monica First United Methodist Church moves from exceedingly humble and precarious beginnings, through countless challenges and obstacles, to heights of praise and celebration, and on, farther than the eye can see. Through it all, in the lives of countless “ordinary saints” of extraordinary faith and vision, First UMC continues in witness and service to God and the people of Santa Monica.

We started out with eight determined faithful Methodists with a vision of what could be. What should be here, in this beach outpost miles from anywhere. Several of them lived in tents, alongside other workers. They first met in Brady’s Hardware Store. A few years later, our first pastor, Rev. Joseph Crum, and his faithful few persuaded the Santa Monica Land and Water Company to donate two plots of land and pulled together enough money to build a 20x25 foot church at the corner of 6th and Arizona that was dedicated just six weeks later.

They faced challenges right from the get go. There was a drought, a smallpox epidemic, a downturn in the economy. And those who had envisioned Santa Monica as the harbor for the growing city of Los Angeles were sorely disappointed when San Pedro was chosen instead.

It was hard to persevere. In 1892, when Rev. Stevenson wanted to call on parishioners way up in Malibu, it was at two-day trip, because he had to wait until the tide went out and the roads cleared. They faced external challenges and internal conflicts as well. They faced down two World Wars and the Great Depression. They quarreled and disagreed over
appropriate levels of indebtedness in the building of new facilities and taking on community-changing mission initiatives such as Upward Bound House. They lived through a major earthquake and worshipped in Simkins Hall for months as the sanctuary was repaired and restored.

And now, in these challenging times, we draw strength and inspiration from our story. We were built to do hard things. God has called us to be the church no matter what. I don’t know if anyone could have imagined the state we’d find ourselves in in October 2020. Back in the Spring when Jim Smith and I first began planning this service, we had no idea that we wouldn’t be worshipping all together here in our sanctuary.

But we of First UMC—we’ve got good genes! We’ve got a strong and resilient heritage. We’ve a story to tell to our community and to our world. SO—worship we will! Pray we will! Serve we will! Teach we will! Love and care for one another we will! Witness we will! Persevere, we will! And one day, we will sing together again!

Who knows what the next 145 years will bring?! Probably a good thing that we don’t know! But I am confident that we will carry on and change and adapt as needed to whatever might come. We will meet the moment and we will serve our God and love our neighbors.

I am confident that we will continue to “Be the Hope,” through laughter and tears, through highs and lows, good times and bad, rough patches and times of smooth sailing. Today we embrace the future that will be brought forth in the lives of countless generations to come. For it is our God who has declared: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Thanks be to God!

Amen.