“A Day of New Beginnings”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

From Revelations 21
Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth… And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God’s peoples, and God will be with them… God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

“See, I am making all things new,” as Rachel just read so beautifully for us. “See, I am making all things new.”

Well, that makes it sound rather straightforward, doesn’t it, this business of “seeing” the new thing. I don’t know about you, but often these days I find that it’s not easy at all. Recently someone asked me a question for which I had no answer, so I replied as best I could: “Let me go gaze into my crystal ball and I’ll get back to you on that.” We laughed, both knowing that it wasn’t far from the truth.

See! What are we seeing? As we’ve been saying, we’re seeing that healthy organizations are learning how to be flexible, nimble and adaptive. Businesses, restaurants, schools, churches. Adaptive. Staying on our toes.

Over these last couple weeks, we’ve been closely tracking the fight to save the giant sequoias up in Northern Cal. These beloved trees, somewhere between 2,000-2,700 years old. The General Sherman tree. The Four Guardsmen, as they’re called. God bless those dedicated firefighters trying everything they know to save lives, homes, and the national treasure that is our precious sequoias. I read that after they’d done everything they would “normally” do to fight a wildfire—raking away vegetation, lighting low-intensity fires to limit spread, hosing everything down, running sprinklers on structures 24/7 to keep them damp—after all that, the trees were still threatened. So the firefighters improvised. They used a technique “normally” used on buildings or as protective personal gear if they themselves are overrun by a fire. They used this protective foil to wrap the base of the trees to guard against the flames.

The thing is, this is no “normal” wildfire. The high temperatures and the drought have created nearly unthinkable challenges. And so we adapt, we improvise, we figure out how to do the best we can.

In our own context, we, too, have adapted, using technology in new ways to protect and nurture the life of the church as we’re faced with our own set of challenges. We’ve been nimble and flexible and adaptive. It’s harder than it looks. Our crew of members and staff, the Worship Team and the Tech Team, have worked tirelessly to make it all seem easy. I tease them sometimes that by doing it so well and making it look easy, folks assume that we can do anything. God willing, we’ll all continue to do our best, and live into this moment with all the skill and determination and creativity we can muster.

Really, though, if you step back for a moment, all this resilience and flexibility is in the church’s DNA. From the beginning. Think of Jesus, a carpenter in Nazareth with a message to share and the power to heal. What did he create? He told fishermen to leave their nets to be part of this new thing that surely they could not yet “see.” And then he sent them out two-by-two with the meagerest of instructions—don’t take any money, or an extra shirt or extra pair of sandals. Just go—and heal the sick and raise the dead! Oh, sure, Jesus! No problem. Yet away they went, making possible the “new thing” that God was doing.

Or think of the Apostle Paul. Paul who faced challenges like jail and prison. Paul, too, who felt called by God to share the message of healing and hope. How did he get the message out? No FB, no Twitter, no Instagram. Paul figured out how to make the most of the network of roads the Romans had built to get out the message in old-fashioned letters to the newly-forming communities of Christians. And the rest is history, as they say. Our history. Our DNA.

We could talk about Martin Luther who seized on the new invention of the printing press to get the Scriptures, the Word of God, out into the hands of the people. Or think of our own John Wesley. Anglican priest. Part of a moribund institutional structure. John, possessed of a conviction he felt compared to share widely. Completely disregarding established parish boundaries, he went to where people were, to where people were starving for the Word of Life. He went out to the mines and fields to where people were and they came in droves to hear him preach. And many found new life, hope restored.

Church, we have the gifts of innovation and flexibility and adaptability in the essence of who we are. But the really important thing is, the one non-negotiable, is not found in the “how” we do all that we do to rise above whatever challenges and obstacles seem to be blocking our way. It’s in the “why.” The “why” we are determined, the “why” we are resolute in our insistence on pressing ahead.
As United Methodists in this day and age, the “why” is stated in our mission. “The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we know in our hearts the love and promise of God that makes new life possible. We know the nurturing care that lifts us from pain and sorrow. We know just how precious is the life of each and every child of God, each integral to the one great fellowship of love, that is God’s gift to the whole wide world. We know how precious is each sequoia tree and every part of God’s wondrous, beautiful, fragile, imperiled creation. “The heavens are telling the glory of God, the wonder of God’s work displays the firmament. In all the lands resounds the word, never unperceived, ever understood.”

So, yes! “We’ve a story to tell to the nations,” as the old hymn goes. We’ve a story to tell. “A story of truth and mercy, a story of peace and light.” And we will do our best to learn and adapt the technologies of our time to help us share it.

Why? Because we know in our own soul the love and promise of our God—for each child of God and for the whole creation.

So, disciples, let us awake each day, the day the Lord as made, and rise in hope and expectation, open for the leading of God’s ever-creating Spirit, celebrating glimpses of the future as they are revealed to us, that through us, lives and this world might be transformed into the glory of God.

For “Christ is alive, and goes before us to show and share what love can do.
This is a day of new beginnings; our God is making all things new.”

Thanks be to God. AMEN