



It's This New Thing We Are Doing
Revelation 21:1-6
May 19, 2019
Rev. Diane Christopher, Rev. Valerie St. John

Diane:

There is a scene from the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. If you remember, this was a film by Mel Gibson, and was controversial because of its violence.

Jesus, already bloody from torture and wearing a crown of thorns, is carrying his cross along the Via Dolorosa and now collapses under its weight. His mother sees him. Recalling how she comforted him as a little boy she runs to him and says, "I'm here." Jesus holds her face and says, "See, Mother, I make all things new."

The book of Revelation where our scripture passage for today comes from was written for tough times. It is a book that tells us how to keep our faith in difficult times; how to hang on when you don't know where to turn. And when we are struggling, God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Even though we experience loss of any kind, in the midst of it, God is making all things new.

When God says, "See, I am making all things new," the verb tense is neither past (I made all things new) nor future (I will make all things new), but ongoing now (I am making all things new).

All throughout the Bible God states this. In the Old Testament, God says in Isaiah, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it shall spring up; do you not perceive it? I will even make a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." (Isaiah 43:19) In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul said "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

God is making things new...in our lives, in our churches, in our cities, on our earth. It is always ongoing.

This morning, Valerie and I want to share with you some new things God is doing – new things God is doing in this church, and new things God is doing in Valerie's life.

First, the new things in this church. Most of them are very obvious: we are looking for a new custodian. A new choir director will be joining us soon. Her name is Jamie. We have a new music accompanist in Wes. As Gay, the head of the office is retiring, she

starts training in a new person named Laurie this week. And of course, we are in the search process for a new head pastor.

This is a lot of new things. It is exciting and overwhelming at the same time. But God promises in the passage: I will dwell with you in the making of this newness.

And here is something new God is doing here at Valley that is more subtle – a new thing that I believe God will use to transform us, this Body of Christ. For you see, God has given us a new word to own, to move forward: reconciliation.

The word first showed up two weeks after Larry DeLong's death. Valerie, Larry's wife and their two children came back to church. We didn't know if we would see them again. But when we did, one word came to mind: reconciliation. Larry's family represented reconciliation to us...that they had forgiven us and were willing to remain a part of this family of God. And that gave us hope.

The word reconciliation shows up in our new mission statement for the church. Look at the front of your bulletin. It is there every Sunday underneath the picture. "To make Christ known through reconciliation while communicating respect and love to all people."

This new mission statement was recommended to us by the JAG group. Remember them? They were set up by my Rev Medina, and their task was to interview as many groups of people as possible in the church. They asked such questions as: Where were the conflict areas in our church? How do you feel about the church right now? What are your hopes and dreams for this church? What can we improve upon? What needs to change?

Once they were finished, they put together a report called The JAG Report. When the JAG group presented the report to Session, it contained 38 recommendations, including that new mission statement for the church. They felt we were a new people (how can you not change after a suicide), so we needed a new mission statement. The word "reconciliation" grew out of their interviews with you all.

The suggestion for the new mission statement was not greeted with open arms by Session....mainly because of that word: reconciliation. The Session looked at that word and made such comments as: What does that mean? People will come to our church and not get it. I don't understand it. It's too churchy of a word.

They decided to sit with it for a while. It came up again at our next Session meeting. This time, the atmosphere was different. One person quoted a scripture passage: "If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation"(2 Corinthians 5:17-18). We talked about what that meant and what it looked like to have a ministry of reconciliation.

Someone later said but this isn't who we are. And I responded, "No, it is not who we are right now. But it is something we want to be. It is something for us to work toward. A challenge."

With that new (and scary) challenge, this became our new mission statement. Now we are trying to figure out what reconciliation means and how to live it out. It is a new thing, a new word God has given us. And out of it, we become a new people. Behold, I am doing a new thing, God says, at Valley Presbyterian Church.

Valerie:

(Valerie thanks Dunham's and Nelson's for their role in her family's life after Larry's death.)

It was Larry's death that drew us all closer together: Diane and I have always been clergy sisters, but the day Larry died we were thrown into an inseparable category: even though our love for him was quite different, we shared a terrible loss, single and alone, sharing a great loss. We grieved differently ~ I hammered through my house having floors jack hammered up and windows replaced NOT to mention painting the outside of my house orange! Diane's grief was more inward and civil yet we cried together at the theater, at lunch, while driving in the car, and sitting late at night inside my garage. We've become so close we get mad at each other like sisters. We handle that differently, too; she backs off, I am stepping aside. I just think terrible thoughts about her for a day or two and then forget it. You went through this too ~ perhaps you've formed stronger relationships during these past few years and you certainly learned more about how others grieve.

It's really hard to leave here...I've been a part of this church for 10 years now and it's the only life I've known since spending 22 years on active duty as a chaplain.

I'm leaving and going to a former Air Force Villages Continuing Care Retirement Center in San Antonio, TX (they advertise come early, stay late)~ one where folk arrive as young as there 50's and stay late ~into their 100's. One of my single woman friend's former husband's was a general and she was 54 when they arrived. She's lived there 14 years now.

My decision to leave was not made lightly or all in one day. I kept calling up Diane and telling her it was time, again, to think about whether I should move away or stay. After our many exhausting to the point of uncontrollable laughter at times, lunches over all the pros and cons of staying or leaving, typically ended in no decision....just talked about for over a year. Finally, I took Diane with me to this place in Texas and the door really was opened to my leaving. So I took the plunge, knowing that I could always pull out of there if I wanted to.

Meanwhile, Seth's counselor who knew that I had hovered over him for the last few years, was noticing that Seth was struggling over where to go to college. I think she decided we were actually 'pinging' off of each other, so she recommended a few trial times that I go to Texas and he stay here to see if we could each think independently. That went well: the first time I took a trip down there I had everything covered: Diane taking care of the cat, Jim or John spending the night with Seth if needed. What no one knew was that Seth would run out of trash bags and text me in Texas as say, "Mom...we're out of trash bags!" He had plenty of money in his checking account and it was Jim who reminded him that trash-bags were for sale at Safeway. During my last trip to Texas he made all sorts of decisions on his own including going to Grand Canyon University in Phoenix. GCU really is the best place for him now: Sports Management Degree combined with Business. If I hadn't taken a few trips to Texas we would never have been able to make clear-headed decisions. He would have either gone with me there or I would have stayed here.

One nice thing about being in Texas is Sadie is at Job Corps and hour and a half away finishing her high school degree and learning how to become a Certified Nursing Assistant. I see her on weekends when she doesn't have other plans.

Despite all this help from my best friends the day Larry died so did my faith as I knew it. I've prayed to God: Help me! You know what I believe in my younger days, you know who I was in seminary, and you led me through 21+ years of teaching and preaching to soldiers and sailors. But now, all my thought about you, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are like

a smashed up puzzle that I can't seem to put back together again! The pieces of the puzzle don't fit together and its like they're warped or even missing! The policeman God of my youth comes back and I wonder, "Is this why my house doesn't sell ~

I've been going through this for almost 3 years now and I realize, obviously, I still have faith or I wouldn't be struggling...and I wonder how long I must go through this crisis of the soul when I'm ready to move on. I'm really tired of this! What if I die and I haven't put this puzzle back together yet? The one thing I learned as a chaplain in Desert Storm was whether I lived or died, I still belonged to God. I can be sure of one thing - I still believe.

Diane:

You can see how new things can be a process....it is a process in our church. It is a process in Valerie's life. New things are not always easy. New things sometimes take a long time. So, don't give up. Admit if you are tired, but don't give up.

In our scripture passage, God takes the old earth and transforms it into something new and different and beautiful. As God takes each of our lives, as God takes this church, in this new thing, we are all being transformed into something different and beautiful. And as our passage says, God will dwell with us in the new thing.

Amen and amen.