

MAKING ALL THINGS NEW



Scripture:

2 Corinthians 5:16-19

16. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.
17. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!
18. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;
19. that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Psalm 122:1-2, 6-9

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

1. I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'
2. Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.
6. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May they prosper who love you.
7. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.'
8. For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, 'Peace be within you.'
9. For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.



MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

Will you be a Minister of the Word and Sacrament in obedience to Jesus Christ? Will you, in your own life, seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, work for the reconciliation of the world? Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?

These and several other questions from the Presbyterian Book of Order were addressed to me by the Moderator of Presbytery as I knelt during my ordination service in my home church in San Diego exactly fifty years ago today. I felt very happy and very humble at that moment when I answered the constitutional questions with a firm, "I will." I still feel that way. Hands were laid on my head and shoulders from every direction, from my pastor, my seminary Professor of World Mission, my campus pastor, my Sunday School teachers, my Director of

Christian Education, my Scout Master and clergy members of Presbytery. There was a prayer, more hymns by the Point Loma Community Church choir, which included my father, and following tradition, as the service came to a close, I gave my first benediction.

Alice asked me this morning, "Do you remember the benediction?" I said, "No, but it was probably the one I'll give today." I can't remember.

Several required events preceded my ordination: graduation from four years of college and three years of seminary, passing the National Ordination Examinations which took eight hours over two days (and included the birth of our first son at 2:00 a.m. the night before my first exam). Somehow, by the grace of God, I stayed awake and passed it.

A CALL

Oh, one other thing you need before you get ordained: I received a call for a job after twenty years in school. I was ordained a minister and then commissioned as a Presbyterian Mission Co-worker, invited by the National Church of Christ in Thailand to serve the church there. Travelling to Bangkok, I studied the Thai language for a year and a half, and then served as chaplain and co-pastor with a Thai and a Chinese pastor in a mission school of twelve hundred students and a church of three hundred members, both Thai and Chinese.

TEARFUL GOODBYES

Fortunately for me, my wife, Alice, is a college graduate which was a requirement for all mission co-workers in 1960. Two months after my ordination service, Alice and I and our eleven month old son, Bob, sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge bound for Hong Kong and Bangkok, a trip that involved four weeks at sea and tearful good-byes to our parents as our ship left San Francisco in those days before cell-phones or affordable long distance phones. We had telegrams and we had letters.

With Bob at eleven months old, I was always impressed by my parents and Alice's parents that they could say goodbye for two or three years.

A JOURNEY OF FAITH

Fifty years of ministry has taken us on a journey of faith from Thailand to Oregon, to Michigan, to central California, to San Francisco, to Berkeley, and now to Santa Rosa.

The preacher at my ordination was Dr. Willis LaMott, Professor of World Mission at San Francisco Theological Seminary. You may not recognize Dr. LaMott's name; however you may recognize the name of his granddaughter, Anne LaMott. Fifty years later, Professor LaMott's words have come true in my life. He said,

**"As experience follows experience,
you will see a pattern begin to emerge from
the pieces of your life.
Then as you look back,
you will praise the heart that planned, you
will praise the hand that guided,
and you will give glory to God."**

After all these years, I know that the heart that planned my ministry was God's heart. The hand that guided my ministry was God's hand, and I give glory to God for all the hearts and hands of God's people around the world that have touched my life, including you. I give glory to God's church in which I was baptized and educated and confirmed and married and ordained.

AN UNEXPECTED BLESSING

An unexpected blessing in my life was the opportunity to participate in the ordination services of both of our sons to ministry in the Presbyterian Church.

I am thankful to God for calling me to serve Christians in different cultures in Asia, churches in California, Councils of Churches in Oregon and Michigan, and political refugees from Southeast Asia and the Middle East which I helped resettle in California and Nevada. In all this service, Alice has shared this ministry. We both feel a deep kinship with many people who make up God's global church.

So now Alice and I enter with you into a new year, a new decade in the life of the Church of the Roses.

OUR CHALLENGE

In his Christmas oratorio written in 1944, W. H. Auden helps to describe our current situation and our challenge.

"Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree putting the decorations into their cardboard boxes, some have gotten broken, and carrying them up to the attic. There are enough leftovers to do – warmed up – for the rest of the week. Not that we have much appetite having drunk a lot, stayed up so late, and attempted quite unsuccessfully to love all our relatives, and in general grossly over-estimating our powers.

"We do rejoice remembering the stable where, for once in our lives, everything became a 'you' and nothing an 'it.'

"In the meantime, there are bills to be paid, machines to be kept in repair, irregular verbs to learn, the time being to redeem from insignificance."

The time being to redeem from insignificance: that's the challenge facing us in this new year.

Christmas is a beautiful, but also a very challenging season. One reason is that despite all of our efforts in Advent, we are never fully prepared for the coming of the Lord into our awareness, our thoughts, our feelings, our busy lives. And yet at Christmas, God comes to us as we come to God and we are made new.

As we start a new year in our spiritual journey of faith, it is fair to ask, "What's new with you? What's new with me?"

GOD IS MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

St. Paul writes, "If anyone is living in Christ, he or she is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold the new has come. All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. God is making all things new. That includes each of us personally as well as our life together in this congregation of God's church.

What is your experience of God right now? With any honest self disclosure before God, we must admit, at least to ourselves, just where we are right now in our relationship to God.

Martin Pike, a retired pastor in Kingsville, Texas writes,

"A key to achieving a meaningful faith is to be willing to take a single step in the right direction. Then God will have a way of tugging us on from there."

I agree with Martin Pike. We need to continually renew our faith in God by considering just where we are in our relationship with God now. And if we feel distant, we can take a single, small step in God's direction. With God's guiding heart and spirit, we'll be able to take a second step and a third as our faith continues to grow and expand. Our spiritual lives are constantly changing, and are a series of new beginnings, each small discovery and insight leading to the next.

This does not mean that everything that comes along sounding new is automatically good or true. We have to test our new insights and discoveries. Nor does it imply that everything old is obsolete and worthless. We need to hold fast to what is good and has proven reliable and valuable in our life and in the life of the church.

What's new? God's spirit is at work in our life and continues to enrich our experiences and our life together as a church family.

LOOK BEYOND

Jim and Jean Strathby are United Methodist song writers and performers. Alice and I have heard them sing in several church conferences over the years. One of their songs is entitled *Look Beyond*, and its theme is appropriate to the new year. Though seemingly addressed to young people, I think it encompasses all of us. Here are some of the words:

This is the year that will long be remembered.
This year my song will be sung.
I am determined that when it is over
I will have only begun
To show the world my potential,
To show the world what I've done.
So look beyond what I am not
And you will see just what I am.
I'm a woman.

I'm a child.
I'm a man.

My parents have cared and they've shared
In the anguish of my progress so painfully slow.
They have rejoiced in my smallest achievements
And witnessed my confidence grow.
I have learned to be humble and patient,
But I am not timid or weak.
I have taken command of my future;
I am reaching the goals that I seek.
So look beyond what I am not
And you will see just what I am.
I'm a woman.
I'm a child.
I'm a man.

GOD'S SPIRIT GUIDES US

God gives us the ability to grow in faith, to become the person we have it in us to be. The author and giver of life renews our life over and over again. So every time we take even a small step toward God in prayerful self disclosure, God's spirit guides us to a new level of understanding of what it means to be made new in Christ, to live in Christ.

BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD

We start the new year with the assurance that God loves each one of us. Did you already know that? Have you been acting on that assumption? I believe God accepts us just the way we are. God wants to be in a relationship with us that will give us courage to grow in faith and trust.

Widely known theologian, Paul Tillich tells us the good news in these words:

You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you in the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now. Perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now. Perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek anything, do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted just the way you are now.

What a beautiful description of how God loves us completely and so unconditionally. God's love is unexpected, unconditional and unearned. You and I are the beloved children of God, persons of worth

and potential. We are loved and accepted and forgiven and empowered by the Living God.

A GIFT

That is a faith with which we can start a new year. That is a gift we can receive as we continue our journey of faith together, or as we start a renewed live of faith.

All our Christmas gift giving and gift receiving is part of our attempt to try to tell others that God loves them just the way they are, and that we do too. We know them, and we're giving a gift that says to them: I know you and I love you and you love me – just the way we are. I know a lot about you; you know a lot about me. We still love each other.

Perhaps God is calling us to a new ministry this year for which we have been preparing ourselves even though we didn't realize it. We can put our full trust in God who loves us **no matter what!** Once we open our hearts to God honestly and completely, we will experience the powerful movement of God's spirit in our personal lives and in our life together as a church.

I conclude this sermon in which I have shared some thoughts which have been important to me during fifty years of ministry. I thought to myself, "Okay, now I'm going to retire. That's it." Then I met Rit Anderson.

JESUS' CHALLENGE TO US

In this passage Jesus is saying goodbye to his disciples with these words of challenge for your ministry and for mine. Jesus says, "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. You did not choose me. I chose you, appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that the fruit of your ministry should abide. This I command you: Love one another."



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