

## Sermon

### “God Makes All Things New”

May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Based on Revelation 21:1-6 and Acts 11:1-18

#### SCRIPTURE:

##### Revelation 21:1-6

<sup>1</sup> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup> he 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.” <sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup> Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. [NRSV]

##### Acts 11:1-18

<sup>1</sup> Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup> saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” <sup>4</sup> Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, <sup>5</sup> “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. <sup>6</sup> As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup> I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ <sup>8</sup> But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ <sup>9</sup> But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ <sup>10</sup> This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. <sup>11</sup> At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup> The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered

the man's house. <sup>13</sup> He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; <sup>14</sup> he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' <sup>15</sup> And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>17</sup> If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" <sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." [NRSV]

**OPENING PRAYER:** Once again, startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us; silence in us any voice but your own, and be with us now as we continue to turn our attention, our minds, and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord; and let all God's people say...Amen.

### **Reflections About Journeys and Transitions**

Today's sermon is a result of a whole bunch of time spent reflecting on how lots of peoples' journeys seem to be in a state of transition. For example, as I talked about last week, the lives of students and teachers and other school administrators and employees have been in a state of transition lately—with the end of another school year having come and gone; with the beginning of another summer now upon us; and with all the activities that come with teachers and others tidying up the things related to the most recent school year while maybe already giving a slight nod to the next one coming in just a couple months.

I've also been reflecting on how some of this and more has created a variety of transitions in my own daughter's life—with her now having only two more years of high school left; with her becoming 16 years old and getting her driver's license and the responsibilities (and consequences) that come from operating a moving vehicle; and with her reaching an age where she prefers to work and earn a little bit of money rather than play sports or have too much free time on her hands.

Speaking of transition, I've spent an even longer amount of time reflecting on the state of things here at First Presbyterian—with me having recently passed the 8-month mark in my ministry with you all—ministry that is by its nature and description, “transitional,” because of the particular circumstances of being between one installed pastor and another; with the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC) having reach a new stage in their journey together—having completed the Church Assessment Tool (CAT scan), the receiving of a detailed demographic study, and the completion of three separate Listening Sessions, meaning they are now about to embark on the preparation of this congregation's Ministry Information Form (MIF), which will become *the tool* by which pastoral candidates discover this church and the job opening for the next Pastor/Head of Staff; and with Dan Walden, our Director of Youth and Children's Ministries, having now reached his “lasts” of things before his retirement in the coming days, which means a new transition for him and his family, as well as an additional transition for us as a congregation.

And, my hope and prayer for Dan and his family, and for us as a family of faith, and for my daughter and all other students and teachers and so many more who are in any type of transition, is that the journey we find ourselves on may come without fear, worry, or anxiety—at least not to the extent that any such feelings become debilitating. Because I'm confident that's not what God has in mind for any one of us, on any of our journeys. Because journeys can be challenging enough without any of the baggage that comes from things like fear and worry.

### **The Journey of Life**

Here's what I'm getting at ... when we are young, we are basically taught that in order for us to get from point A to point B, you take a straight line. It's the shortest and quickest path. It's simple and easy ... and it's *completely fictitious*. Because in the journey of life, it doesn't take us long to figure out that hardly anything follows a straight line. As you can see on the sermon illustration graphic in your bulletin (found at the end of this sermon text), we may think that our journey follows “The Straight Line” picture at the top left, but we all know from

experience that very early on in life we are faced with bumps in the road—things that occur, most often out of our control, that change our path and our trajectory. Hearts get broken. Families split. Tragedies occur. Interests change. School starts to seem more filled with drama rather than schoolwork. Jobs can be a lot like that, too, so we make changes, maybe do something different for a career and work someplace else. Even more, our identities are formed and re-formed as we grow and mature and change. And, things can no longer be explained with a simple straight line.

As a result, it may make more sense for some of us to think about how our journey has followed or follows “The Changing Goal Posts” picture at the bottom left—just when you think you’ve got life figured out ... boom! ... something happens and the path changes. Or, maybe “The Ups and Downs” picture at the top right better captures how life feels for you. After all, we all know that on our journey through life, we constantly face highs and lows—a mixture of good times and bad times, of mountaintops and valleys—when just as we feel on top of the world, sooner or later we will come back down to reality.

But, I submit to you all this morning that each and every one of our journeys is best captured in “The Messy Squiggles” picture at the bottom right. That illustration best summarizes what our paths in life really look like—a constant series of twists and turns and ups and downs, *and transitions*, that crisscross each other and follow no particular pattern or set of reasons. No matter what we are told, or what we try and tell our children, this is life in all its joy and wonder. We are all so different but yet we are also so very much the same—none of us ever figures it out, but we all make it from point A to point B each in our own way and in our own time ... and along the way, God continues to make things new for us.

### **The Journey of Faith**

And, the fascinating thing is that the journey of faith can be described in very similar ways. When we are young and our families bring us to things like Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, we are taught stories from the Bible and they are reinforced over the years through repetition. And, we more or less develop a very plain and simple, black and white, understanding of God. It’s “The Straight

Line” linear approach—if you want to know about God, then read the Bible. No need to ask any questions. It’s all there in black and white for us to read and learn (in the Bible). But, that’s not how it works is it? Life and faith are never static, and neither is God’s Word. And, with God’s Holy Spirit on the loose, things are always fluid and changing and dynamic! Things do occur in our lives, most often out of our control, that change our path and our trajectory. Our hearts do get broken. Families do split. Tragedies do occur. Interests do change. School starts to seem more filled with drama rather than schoolwork. Jobs have a lot of drama, too, and sometimes changes are made to careers or places of employment. Identities are formed and re-formed as we grow and mature and change. And, things can no longer be explained with a simple straight line.

As a result, it begins to make more sense that it’s okay to have way more questions than answers about God and life and faith and everything else. So it may make more sense to think about how your faith journey follows “The Changing Goal Posts” picture at the bottom left—just when you think you’ve got faith in God figured out ... boom! ... something happens and the path changes. Or, maybe “The Ups and Downs” picture at the top right better captures how faith feels for you. As in life, our faith also constantly faces highs and lows—a mixture of good times and bad times, of mountaintops and valleys—when our faith is solid as a rock and we feel sure about everything, but sooner or later we find a new serious question to ask God that may not have any obvious answers.

But, again, I submit to you all this morning that each and every one of our faith journeys is also best captured in “The Messy Squiggles” picture at the bottom right. That illustration best summarizes what our paths of faith really look like—a constant series of twists and turns and ups and downs, *and transitions*, that crisscross each other and follow no particular pattern or set of reasons. No matter what we are told, or what we try and tell our children, this is what faith in a living and loving God looks like in all its joy and wonder. None of us ever figures it out, but we all make it from point A to point B each in our own way and in our own time ... and along the way, God continues to make things new for us.

### Peter is Our Example Once Again

Once again, as we've done in similar ways since Easter, let us consider Peter as an example. As a good 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish man, Peter was well versed in all the laws and customs of his faith and culture. He thought he had it all figured out. But, then he met Jesus, and if nothing else, his "straight line" approach to life quickly became "changing goal posts" when Jesus told him he would stop fishing for fish and start fishing for people. Then he quickly learned that life as a Christ-follower was also about "ups and downs," and if three years of following Jesus around Galilee and Judea didn't prove that to him, then the roller coaster ride from Palm Sunday through Pentecost certainly would have. But, Peter was still tempted to think too much in straight lines. He had too much of a plain and simple, black and white, who's in and who's out, understanding of God.

And, in our reading from Acts 11 today, we see what happens to Peter, to his faith, and to his understanding of God. Essentially, Peter is led through a series of visions to go against everything he knew and believed as a Jewish person, and he eats what he once believed to be forbidden food with people he was supposedly forbidden to associate with. And, when his fellow Jewish leaders take him to task for it, Peter replies, "who was I that I could hinder God?" For the Holy Spirit told him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane," and that he should make no distinction between himself and people he was taught were forbidden. And, that day long ago I believe that Peter realized that faith in God was full of "messy squiggles." Because no matter what he had been told, or what he had tried to teach others, he learned that this is what faith in a living and loving God looks like in all its joy and wonder. And, he realized that he didn't have everything figured out after all, and that we all make it from point A to point B each in our own way and in our own time ... and along the way, God continues to make things new for us.

### God Makes All Things New

We serve a living and loving God who *does* make all things new. Every time we seem to arrive at a dead end or a closed door in life, God is there providing us with something new, beckoning us forward to whatever is next. Every time we

feel frustrated or confused and we feel like our faith in God is diminished, God is there inviting us to ask tough questions and broaden our horizons. Every time it seems like our expectations don't follow a straight line, God is there gently nurturing us from one squiggle to another.

We are all so different but yet we are all also so very much the same—none of us ever figures it out, but we all will make it from point A to point B each in our own way and in our own time ... and along the way, God will continue to make things new for us.

Because, thanks be to God, that's what God does. Amen.

