

Spiritual Resilience

Genesis 12:1-4a
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17
Psalm 121

When I was seven years old, at Christmastime, my dad had the brilliant idea to purchase a living Christmas tree. It was a beautiful Douglas fir, and it came with its roots intact. By February, my mom was tired of the thing sitting in our living room and had my dad transplant it out in the yard. A couple days after he'd planted it, my mom gave me and my brother the bad news. The tree had died. My dad's genius plan had failed. Upon returning from work, I walked out with my dad to lament the tree's demise, but he was not so easily put off. He told me the tree was not actually dead. It looked very sad and droopy to be sure, but he told me the tree merely had transplant shock. This was the first time I'd heard that plants require an adjustment period when they are moved. Their roots take time to adjust after the stress and changes associated with that kind of change. He was right. In a couple weeks it had started to look less dead. It took the tree ages to look healthy, but by the time I moved out that tree was easily 30' tall.

Humans are not much better than trees in handling the initial stages of stress, change, and growth. In fact, we may be worse. We are biologically and psychologically wired to resist change. The human brain prioritizes stability and certainty because it is designed to keep us safe and instability and uncertainty are dangerous. We cannot help but resist the unknown. Which is problematic for us when it comes to faith. Faith, by definition, requires us to step into the unknown. According to Jesus, the Spirit of God blows and beckons us to follow in unpredictable places and ways. Which is why our life with God requires spiritual resilience. Spiritual resilience is the capacity to bounce back from transplant shock, to become more firmly rooted in God, and grow beyond our previous capacity.

When God called Abram, the invitation was inconceivable. He was called from his "land", his economic security and the rights of his inheritance. He was called from his "kindred",

which was his extended clan and social safety network. He was called from “his father’s house”, his center of belonging, love, and identity. He was offered no roadmap, no destination, and no timeline. But God was to be his security, his blessing, and his inheritance. His faith carried him through, and his resilience allowed him to flourish even through tremendous change. Consequently, his faith has become an offered blessing for all the families of the earth.

While Abram was physically uprooted, Nicodemus’ transplant shock was intellectual. Jesus told him he had to be born again. His framework wasn’t sufficient; it needed re-rooting. The beautiful thing about Nicodemus’ story is that he sensed something needed to change, he was open to growth, willing to develop. He came at night so he could ask his questions out of public view, and he didn’t understand the answers Jesus gave, but he was willing to step into faith by asking risky questions and putting himself at risk. Previously his religion had taught him that God’s love was exclusive, but he let himself learn from Jesus who showed him the inclusivity of a God who does not seek to condemn, but to save the world. Nicodemus’ spiritual resilience allowed him to listen to Jesus reframe his worldview. His faith allowed him to stretch his roots deeper, and the further he stretched, the more expansive he found God’s love sustaining for him and for the whole world.

Abram was physically relocated and Nicodemus was ideologically reframed, but the church in Rome had their very identity uprooted. The church in America has a lot to learn from Paul’s teaching to the Romans. Let’s start with a little history. Jesus lived and died as a Jewish man in a mostly Jewish cultural and religious landscape, and by his own admission, he was sent to the Jewish people. But his message extended beyond the Jews. Outsiders flocked to him and after his resurrection the gospel message spread like wildfire throughout the Roman world. Within twenty years, the church in Rome was flourishing. -- And then, because of political upheaval, the emperor expelled all the Jews from Rome. While they were away, the gentiles took over the leadership and development of Christianity in the city. These were people who did not grow up knowing or following the

Jewish Law. The Christianity they lived and taught was based on Jesus' teaching, not Moses' instructions, nor the mandates of the Sanhedrin. Culturally and religiously, gentile Christianity looked little like Jewish Christianity. So, roughly ten years later, when the Jews were permitted to return, the followers of Jesus faced a crisis in the city.

Imagine, if you will, the first gathering after the Jewish believers returned from exile. This mass of people who loved Jesus and were devoted to his teachings all desire to celebrate together. The Jews expect the gathering will happen on Saturday, the Sabbath. But the Christians have been meeting on the day of the Lord's resurrection, Sunday. So, when is church happening? We can't get that sorted out, but maybe we can at least agree to a true celebration. No festivity is complete without a potluck, am I right? And you Southerners know that it's no potluck without beans. And beans are always cooked with bacon. But the Jews show up at the table and their stomachs turn because the law prevents them from eating pork! Nothing about this fellowship is possible. How do two groups of people whose identity is bound to their religious practice express their faith together when their baseline for righteousness and morality is so opposed?

The followers of Jesus in Rome faced a serious identity crisis. If they had any hope of faithfulness going forward, they would have to allow God to reframe their self-understanding. The Jews looked to Abraham, Abram who left everything to follow God, as their model of faith. But Abraham was justified by God before the Law was ever given. The Jews would have to give up their insistence on the law-keeping of others as the basis for righteousness. On the other hand, the Roman gentiles' identity as imperialistically superior and culturally dominant would have to be uprooted. All followers of Jesus would need to honor Abraham as their father in the faith. The gentiles had the upper hand socially. They held all the power, and they were inclined to use it to maintain the structures and religious practices they had become comfortable with. Together, these two groups of disparate Jesus' followers would both have to recognize that their faith was dead apart from the living God who animates it. And God, like Jesus told Nicodemus, is the spirit who

blows in ways we cannot control or predict. Spiritual resilience for the Jews and the gentiles in Rome would require allowing their identities to be thoroughly uprooted and replanted.

To allow one's thinking and prioritizing to be so transformed, like in all these stories, is to experience a type of death. To feel security and assurance fading, to step into the unknown, is to experience a passing away. But Paul tells us that God is the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist". When we let go, when we step out in faith, we let parts of ourselves die trusting that God is the God of resurrection, we are trusting what we cannot see because we know the one in whom we believe.

The Psalmist categorizes this type of faith as knowing the Lord will keep us safe, preserving us from evil, even when the loss we may currently be experiencing feels like the definition of evil. Abram and his family surely felt, at least at times, like whatever was calling him from them was evil. Nicodemus questioned, even when he saw the miracles with his own eyes, if such contradictory teaching to his lifetime of dedication to the Law was evil.

There's no doubt that the gentiles and Jews in Rome occasionally thought the others were evil. (I mean, removing ham biscuits from the church potluck...?!) But the Psalmist reminds us so that we can now remind ourselves that the Lord watches over us, protects, and guides us to keep us secure, regardless of how insecure our circumstances may feel.

Transplanted trees go through stress and shock as their roots readjust to new grounding. We too may occasionally feel and even look like we have transplant shock. It is part of the life of faith. But we are resurrection people, resilient people, empowered by the same powerful spirit that moves us into the unimageable.

May we be a people of resilient faith, whose lives are resurrected through every loss, who participate in Abraham's legacy of faith and bless others to eternal life.