

"A GOOD WORD FOR RESILIENCE"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York
Fourth Sunday In Lent

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INTRODUCTION

On the Christmas letter of a friend of many years was penned a note, part of which read,

"...and how about a sermon sometime in praise of the resilient fiber of the human spirit...able to endure and spring back again after each horrid solar plexus blow we endure practically every day?"

The suggestion struck a responsive note with me back there in late December as an important word for our day - hence this sermon, "A Good Word for Resilience".

AS PERSONS

First-off, this is an important word for us as persons. One of the clear observations of my years in the ministry is that people do possess a remarkable resiliency. Buffeted by storms of various kinds, temporarily battered and crushed, persons do have a way of coming back again to a usefulness and a hopefulness that they would never have guessed in the midst of the storm.

The dictionary defines resilience as "the power to return to the original form or position after being bent, compressed or stretched". Not always "to the original form" as far as people are concerned...sometimes a finer form, sometimes a lesser form - but, at least, there is this amazing ability to come back again after "being bent...compressed...or stretched".

I find a parable in these late Winter storms that have been hitting us in recent days. What a dim and dreary outlook it is - at least for adults who must get up and get out - to peer out in the morning's light and realize that it is snowing or sleeting or dripping icy rain. But dig out - and slide out - and get out - we do. And gradually gain perspective that we are not isolated, or immobilized - at least not permanently so.

Strange how the weather can affect us. I had another sermon idea ready for a Thursday morning launch, but after being out and around in the wind and the wet snow, I found myself taking up this theme of resilience.

My retired step-father, living in White Plains, made an interesting observation not too long ago. In his spare time he produces one of the most beautiful gardens in his neighborhood. He mentioned back in January that on one of the worst days of Winter a rose catalogue arrived in the mail. He said that his first reaction was to put it aside as untimely and inappropriate. Then he began to reflect on its message. Looking out the window on his ice-shrouded rose bushes, he realized that they were not as frozen and forlorn as they appeared. And that indeed it is right to remember and to plan for another day when the roses would bloom in all of their beauty once again.

Remember those lines of Robert Frost:

"The rain to the wind said, 'You push and I'll pelt!'
They so smote the garden bed, that the flowers actually knelt
And lay lodged, though not dead.
I know how the flowers felt."

Of course he did - and you do - and I do. But the really significant line is, "And lay lodged - though not dead!"

And so it is with people. In our journey through life we invariably encounter rough weather. We experience sickness and heartbreak and grief. We agonize through our children's growing pains. We feel the hurting of people that we know. We run into hard problems in our work. We despair at the gloomy news casts with which we are pelted. Yes - there are those days in our lives when it seems as though the hard rain and the adverse winds of life have conspired against us by saying, "You push and I'll pelt."

But thank God for the recurring realization that "no night is forever" and that no storm is without its clearing. At least it need not be. All of us can think of exceptions among our acquaintances...storm swept souls who are blown into some cove of self-pity and for some reason never seem to get out of it. But that is the exception, I am convinced.

And this morning, I salute the resilient people that I have known. Sick people, perhaps faced with an uncertain future, but cheerfully engaged in a gallant struggle. Grieving people, stung by death of one dearly cherished, but facing the future with courage and hope. Working people, phased out of one job, but training themselves for another. Single people, deprived of or uncoupled from a marriage, but avoiding self-pity, and building useful lives. Stop to think about it...how many resilient people we are privileged to know.

FOR THE CHRISTIAN

Especially for the Christian, resilience should be no stranger to our souls. For if the Faith has grasped us at all, we must have moments when we glimpse that we are not alone, that we are empowered by One who is not finally defeated. This does not mean that we are exempt from suffering, or that we have the explanation of all suffering, but it does mean that we have good reason to be resilient - because in Jesus Christ we have glimpsed enough of God to know that we never drift beyond the circle of His sufficient love and care. And this I believe.

And this explains the passage that we read from Paul's letter to the people of Corinth. How can you get any more resilient than these words.

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed....so we do not lose heart."

Some of you have heard or read those words written by a person whose prayers were not answered at all in the way that he had hoped, but they were answered in a different way that resulted in a beautiful resilience of the spirit. I have read somewhere that these words were found on the body of a Civil War soldier, but whatever their source, they belong to the select group of inspired writing.

"I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
I was made weak, that I might learn to obey.
I asked for health, that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I had hoped for;
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am - among all men - most richly blessed."

My friend who wrote that little "PS" on the bottom of his Christmas letter is right. Let us praise God for that "resilient fiber in the human spirit", and especially as it is given substance by the power of God at work within us, to renew us and to set us on the "high road" once again.

AS A NATION And then I think this is an important word for us to carry with us as a nation.

In times of storm and stress nationally, it is easy and tempting to become cynical and despairing. But in the midst of such days, we need some perspective.

Our predecessors were remarkably resilient people. I came across something Thomas Jefferson once wrote. He said, "It is part of the American character to consider nothing as desperate." And he earned the right to say that, considering the rugged circumstances of his personal life with the early deaths of his wife and of all their children, save one - as well as the fragile hold on life of a new nation that he did so much to nurture.

Maybe it would be a good idea for someone to put together a collage of scenes from our national history that demonstrate the resilience of our predecessors - and we might study them when we are waiting for that subway that seems to take forever to come - or shivering on a street corner trying to get a cab - or contending with the slow moving line or the latest shortage or frustration. Scenes like that first Thanksgiving of the Pilgrims, when the survivors of that first rugged Winter gathered to thank God - like the bleak days of the Revolutionary War when George Washington knelt in the snow at Valley Forge and prayed with the ragged soldiers - like the sorrowful days of the Civil War when a nation was torn asunder, and later when Lincoln called his countryman to "bind up the nation's wounds" - like the days of the Great Depression that some can remember as affecting us as children and youth, when we were very poor in things, but very rich in love and friendship and simple pleasures and not-so tarnished values.

I believe the common denominator in all of those scenes of such a collage is faith. There are people of great faith in each of those scenes. And not surprisingly so. Because real resilience is ultimately a derivative of faith. Said Lincoln,

"Again and again...I have been driven to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go".

And we remember his words on another occasion, too, when he prayed "not so much that God would be on our side, as that we might be found on His side." Therein is the road - the path - to resilience. To be on God's side.

CONCLUSION So how can a Christian be permanently fog-bound in these days? It may never be back to normal, or back to nostalgia, but it will be on to something worth having...maybe with greater integrity and some sturdier values and greater love and appreciation for one another, and for the God of all

of all mankind who has revealed Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Each of us has his favorite verses in the Bible. If I were to choose my five or six favorite verses or phrases, I would certainly include in that number Paul's simple declaration, "We know that in everything, God works for good with those who love Him". What a promise to stand on. "In everything" - not necessarily good in itself, but "in everything....God works for good with those who love Him". It's a tremendous assertion, and it is that confidence that finally is the reason for this resilience that my friend was celebrating when he penned that "PS" on his Christmas letter,

"A good word for that resilient fiber of the human spirit,
able to endure and to spring back again after each horrid
solar plexus blow we endure practically each day..."

PRAYERS We would acknowledge, Our Father, that "storm-swept", we often do
feel down and low...."afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down"
as Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians.

Lead each of us in our pilgrimage of faith to that peak where we can
sing with Paul, "afflicted, yes, but not crushed....perplexed, yes, but not
driven to despair; persecuted, yes, but not forsaken; struck down, yes, but
not destroyed."

Move in our hearts thi hour, dear God. May the bread and wine open our
eyes to the presence of Christ among us. Bind us more closely to each other
and to Him and lift up our hearts and minds to Thee, Lord, that we may go out
renewed in body and soul - fed, nourished, made new.

We ask it in the name of Christ, whose eternal resilience is the guiding
light of the life of each of us. In His name, we pray. Amen

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bombarded. Yes - there are those days in our lives when it seems as though the hard rain and the adverse winds of life have conspired against us by saying, "You push and I'll pelt".

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substance by the power of God at work within us, to renew us!

AS A NATION

And then I think this is also an important word for us to hear as a nation right now.

This is a time of storm and of stress nationally, too - and in the mist of the darkness caused by the loss of some of our accustomed comforts and conveniences and credibility, it is very easy to become cynical and despairing. But in the midst of a dark Winter, we need some perspective.

I am not talking about a Pollyanna optimism that blithely assumes that everything will somehow get back to where it was. It may never get back to where it was. The factors that have led us into our present difficulties are many and complicated. Cleverness over integrity, not just in Washington, but in New York City, too and out in West Pondunk. Profits over principles. The instant over the eternal. Exploitation over conservation. Noise over quiet. Speed over leisure. And maybe, even - man over God. And suddenly the shadows lengthen, and that kind of day seems to be ebbing.

There is another factor in our national hurting, simply that the "third world" people who have helped sustain our way of life for many years are now stirring and asserting themselves in different ways. Some of their deeds and decisions may seem somewhat adolescent to us, but of all nations on the face of the earth, this land of ours that came through its own revolution and declaration of independence should understand the aspirations of third world peoples and so labor in the spirit of reason and not of revenge.

But regardless of the reasons for our troubles, we need to stand back sometimes and get our perspective and realize again that "no night is forever". This is not the first time in our history that we have gone through rough waters and stormy weather. Our predecessors were remarkably resilient people. I came across something Thomas Jefferson once wrote. He said, "It is part of the American character to consider nothing as desperate". And he earned the right to say that, considering the rugged circumstances of his personal life with the early deaths of his wife and of all their children, save one - as well as the fragile hold on life of a new nation that he did so much to nurture.

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PRAYER We acknowledge, our Father, that storm-swept, we often do feel "afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down".

Lead us in our journey of faith to that peak where we can say with Paul, "afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed".

We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, whose eternal resilience is the guiding light of the Christian's life. Amen