

A Mature Woman's Guide to Resilience

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

August 15, 2021

Text: Genesis 18:1-15

Resilience. That's a word and a concept we're hearing a lot during these post-Covid days. Being the great lover of words that I am, I decided to check out what my 1971 Webster's dictionary had to say on the subject. It has a short definition with two potential meanings of the word *resilience*:

- 1) *The capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress; and*
- 2) *An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune.*

Hmmm. Something about this definition just didn't sit right with me so I did what we all do these days when perplexed by something like this. I googled it. Google did its job and found Miriam Webster's current, as of the moment, definition of *resilience*:

- a) *Capable of withstanding shock without permanent deformation or rupture; and*
- b) *Tending to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.*

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilient>

Hmmm. Not so different. Oh sure, the 2021 definition uses letters instead of numbers to differentiate the meanings. And, the first definition is much more succinctly worded. But, according to my 1971 college dictionary and my 2021 online dictionary, resilience means the same thing now as it did 50 years ago.

Frankly, I just don't see how that's possible after all we've been through, all we've had to be resilient about. Perhaps that's why the phrase "adjust easily" just hits me the wrong way. There is nothing easy about the resilience we have needed to survive the past year and a half. Just think about all that's happened in your life since 1971 and, yes, I am aware there are those of you here and watching this from home who weren't even born in 1971. You'll just have to trust the rest of us with our memories. So, relying on Google once again, here are just a few highlights:

- 1) In 1971, the US Supreme Court ordered that busing of students was necessary to achieve racial integration. Also, the microprocessor

which made modern day computers possible was invented, and Greenpeace was founded.

- 2) In 1972 a little thing called the Watergate Burglary happened and in 1973 the Vietnam War finally ended.
- 3) In 1974 the House Judiciary Committee impeached Richard Nixon and he resigned the Presidency making Gerald Ford the 38th President. Also, in 1974 Beverly Johnson became the first Black model on the cover of *Vogue* or any American magazine.
- 4) In 1976 Apple Computer was founded by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak and in 1977 Elvis Presley died. Oh, and the movie *Star Wars* was released for the first time.
- 5) In 1978 California passed Proposition 13 in the state legislature resulting in a 60% cut to property taxes resulting in budget slashing throughout the state and municipalities. This was the first such tax measure which then domino-ed its way across the country state by state leaving state and municipal governments chronically under-funded.
- 6) In 1979 President Jimmy Carter negotiated a peace treaty with Israeli President Menachim Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Unfortunately, the treaty was never fully enacted.

https://livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthethe70s/worldevents_01.html

In 1980 ... oh, who am I kidding. If I try to list even a fraction of the momentous things that have happened since 1971, this sermon will be way too long for any of us. Besides, I think you get my point. A LOT of stuff has happened in the last 50 years of national significance and that doesn't even touch on all the personal milestones and major life events we have all endured. Births, deaths, marriages, divorces, graduations, vacations, etc. etc. etc. Dear ones, whether you've been alive for all of these past 50 years or not, we all know it's been one heck of a ride. If we weren't pretty resilient, we wouldn't even be here. Yet, there is no doubt we are hearing reference to the need for resilience more and more these days, certainly more than I can ever recall hearing it as the Vietnam War ended or the Berlin Wall came down. Why is that do you think?

Author and lecturer Diana Butler Bass wrote about exactly this topic of resilience in a weekly post on her blog, *The Cottage* this past week. Entitled “Get up and Go On – Together,” Bass articulates an inspiring vision explaining why it is that we need “resilient communities to meet the crises of these days.” She begins with an inspiring story from the recently ended Tokyo Olympics that I hadn’t heard before. Perhaps those of you who watched the Olympics did, but I didn’t. It’s a story about track and field athlete Sifan Hassan of the Netherlands. She fell in the qualifying heat for the 1500 meter race. Usually if you fall, you’re out. Most athletes would just sadly limp off the field. Hassan didn’t. She got back up and passed 11 other runners to finish the race, qualifying for the final in which she won the Bronze Medal. Then she went on to win two Gold Medals in the 5,000 and 10,000 meter races respectively. She is thus the living embodiment of resilience in both senses of the word. She withstood a tremendous shock without giving in to “deformation or rupture” and she recovered from misfortune brilliantly. Holy cow. Inspiring for sure.

But, as Bass notes, as inspiring as Hassan’s story is, we need so much more than individual resilience right now to deal with all the many vital and critical issues confronting us every day. The Delta Variant of Covid is once again pushing the country into ever widening danger zones for illness and death. Yet schools are reopening with heated arguments about whether or not children and teachers should wear masks. And, let’s not forget the recent United Nations Climate Report with its rosy news that the planet is now in “Code Red” for humanity. As if we didn’t know that after this summer’s brutal and strange weather. But wait, there’s more! American soldiers are finally coming home from Afghanistan with the country collapsing back to the brutal control of the Taliban, wiping out every positive reason for the US 20 year presence there in a matter of days. And, of course, every day there are ever more revelations of the extraordinary efforts the former president made in relentless attempts to overturn the 2020 election. Yikes!!! That’s a lot to deal with! That requires a lot of resilience! And, as Bass articulates in her blog post, individual resiliency while important, just won’t cut it if we’re going to deal with this level of catastrophe. What she suggests is that we need is to find ways “to build resilience into our communities, our towns, our cities and our citizenship.”

As a first step in getting such conversations about community resilience jump-started, Bass makes a unique suggestion. She argues that a good place to start such a conversation is in learning or perhaps re-learning our own history. She then reminds her readers of the very close calls our world has had with all out nuclear war, both in the 1960's and again in the 1980's. She notes that the danger in the '80's was actually greater than in the 60's but the magnitude of the danger in the '80's with nuclear weapons proliferating rapidly around the world was the stuff of nightmares even if most of us were blissfully unaware. She reminds us, though, that even if we didn't know how close we were to the edge of annihilation in the 80's, we still knew we could not keep on that course. Something had to change and people organized to make sure it did. She notes, "we pulled back through smarter treaty decisions, through pressure applied in mass marches, through protests, through scientists sounding alarms and artists and musicians showing the threat in film and visual arts and song. We did what we had to do to draw back from the edge." (Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage*, August 10, 2021) Her point here is that "history shows that people can make a difference against an existential threat – and that politicians and world leaders will respond to the possibility of a world-ending crisis." (Ibid.) In other words, Bass is reminding us that we've done it before and we need to do it again, right now. It's just that simple, just that basic.

She's right. Of course, she's right. But the task ahead is so monumental, where do we begin? How do we even begin to approach making a difference to these efforts needed to come together as a community? Well, lucky for us in the church, we have lots and lots of role models from the Scriptures who show us the possibilities they uncovered for themselves. Take Sarah, for example, from this morning's story from the Book of Genesis. We see just a tiny portion of Sarah's story in the few verses we read this morning but trust me when I tell you that Sarah is more resilient than Sifan Hassan on her best day. Sarah endured possibly the world's worst husband who at one point actually gave her to the Pharaoh of Egypt in order to curry favor with him. Her husband Abraham also uprooted the whole family to leave their home with no particular destination in mind. Of course, God told Abraham to do this and he dutifully obeyed but, holy cow, how did Sarah deal with such upheaval not

of her own choosing? And on top of everything else Sarah had been unable to have children, enduring untold grief, sadness and shame as a result because it would be seen as her fault. I'm sure she thought she was lucky Abraham just didn't get rid of her because he could have. But, he didn't. And then, the impossible happened.

The impossible thing began with this story we heard today about a time when three mysterious strangers arrived at Abraham's encampment. As was the custom, Abraham offered them food. As the three strangers were eating, they talked with Abraham and asked about Sarah. Now there is some speculation as to whether or not Abraham had realized he was entertaining some sort of divine beings but at this point, when they asked about Sarah, he knew something was up. One of them said that he knew that when they returned again in year's time, Sarah would have given birth to a son. Now this would have been remarkable on several counts. For one Sarah who was now old – some scholars estimate she would have been in her 80's or 90's – had never been able to have children. And now she was literally beyond the age when that would have been physically possible. So, it is no surprise that Sarah, who had been listening to this entire exchange, burst out laughing when she heard this prediction. The heavenly visitor heard her laugh and chastised Abraham that his wife had dared to laugh. When confronted, Sarah insisted she didn't laugh but everyone knew she had. Of course, she did. What this visitor was suggesting was so impossible, it was literally laughable, so she laughed. It was then that the visitor reminded Abraham and her of one very important thing – “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? And the answer to that, as Sarah found out when her son Isaac was born in just under a year later, was no. There is nothing too wonderful for the Lord.

And, that dear friends, is Sarah's message of resiliency for us this morning, “A Mature Woman's Guide to Resilienc.” Sarah learned that literally nothing – no matter how laughable the situation may seem, no matter how insurmountable the problems may appear – nothing is too wonderful for the Lord to accomplish. There is nothing the Lord cannot do. It is important to note that this is not to be understood as God waiving some sort of magic wand so that all our problems and worries just

disappear. Rather, Sarah's story and all the stories about resilience in the Bible are really about intentionally inviting God in to how we confront the challenges our life presents to us every day. Sometimes those challenges are small, but sometimes they are huge – like the global challenges humanity faces in this moment in history. No matter what we have to deal with in life, God is with us, providing the strength and resilience, wisdom and courage we need to handle whatever looms. Our only task is to remember to include God in those moments, to remind ourselves of God's presence, God's strength and God's wisdom always available to us.

This unfailing presence of God in our lives is why we can say with absolute confidence that resilience as a community and as individuals is not beyond our capability to achieve no matter how overwhelming situations may appear. As long as each of us is willing to do our part – speaking out against injustice, encouraging positive actions like vaccinations and masking, making the commitment to get educated and vote as though our lives depended on it, doing our part to care for the environment as we “reduce, reuse and recycle” – as long as we are willing to do our part and we actively seek for the opportunities to do so., then we can know and believe and trust with all our hearts that there is nothing too wonderful for the Lord. Nothing too wonderful for God. There is nothing we can't do together with the help of God. Dear ones, what more do we need to know? Amen.