

## A Sermon on Resilience When Facing Tragedy

John 19:1-37

In an article appearing in the latest issue of Atlantic magazine, Jeffrey Goldberg recalls that, several years ago, President Obama expressed his admiration for Israelis' "resilience" in the face of constant terrorism. Not a political statement: It is an observational statement. And Goldberg goes on to say "It is clear that he (Obama) would like to see resilience replace panic in American society."

Resilience: the capacity to continue living life in the face of trauma and tragedy. I personally believe that the African American community and institutions are bearing, or carrying within, the virtue of resilience on behalf of this nation. In the face of systematical discrimination and violence, African American communities and institutions have continued to live and support meaningful life.

Our church here, St. Peter's, carries this virtue of resilience on behalf of the wider church. We have been through some stuff but have continued to live and support meaningful life in Church Hill for over 100 years.

While resilience is a virtue, we can also build our capacity for resilience by recognizing the factors that contribute to it. It is in search of these factors that contribute to resilience that we draw near to the cross and to our text for tonight.

As we observe and gather with these family members and disciples, as we stand with them at the foot of the cross in, here are three contributing factors to resilience: faith in God, connection with others, specifically with mutuality and reciprocity, and hope for the future.

First, faith in God. Those standing at the foot of the cross had faith in God, and particularly the God expressed through the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. Mary the Mother of Jesus sings when hearing the promise of her son's life is confirmed by her relative Elizabeth. "My soul proclaim the greatness of the Lord." Mary Magdalene in all four Gospels will be a first witness to the resurrected Christ. The beloved disciples' testimony of Jesus's words and deeds will form the basis of John's Gospel. And Mary of Clopas. She only appears by name here, at the foot of the cross. But there is a theory. Her husband's name was Clopas. The only other

derivation of this name appears in Luke's Gospel when, on the Emmaus Road, a certain Cleopas and his companion disciple encounter the resurrected Christ. Might this unnamed disciple, companion of Cleopas, be Mary, his wife?

Those standing gathered at the foot of the cross are standing there because of their faith. And faith in God makes us resilient. Can I share with you that it is faith, belief in an active and invisible God, which even allows us to be fully present at the cross? The trauma and tragedy of a crucifixion is too much to bear. The killings of young men by state-sanctioned violence is too much to bear. Without faith, death itself is too much to bear.

And yet, here we stand...because of our faith that even out of the midst of trauma and tragedy, God can pull forth life, goodness, and love.

Can I be a witness for us, for a moment? Because I have been there in that moment when people have taken their last breath, I can confirm for us that there is more happening in that moment than can be seen with the naked eye. The Spirit of God is pervasive and tangible in those last moments. And our faith is the activity of an invisible God in the face of death and destruction makes us more resilient.

The second factor present in those at the foot of the cross is connection. They are all connected through the Christ at the cross. Some of them are blood relatives and some of them are not. But here, that is less important than their faith in and connection through Jesus, the Christ.

But as I said earlier, God in Christ wants us to embrace our connection more deeply through mutuality and reciprocity. Let me show you what I mean, from the text. Jesus, in verse 26, looks down from the cross and sees his mother and the beloved disciple standing there, and he says "Woman, here is your son" to his mother and to the disciple "Here is your mother".

Those of us who went to the Seven Sisters heard a great sermon today at noon on this text. One thing the preachers pointed out was that Mary, in losing her son, was about to become a widow. And in ancient society, widows were marginalized and left out. They became destitute and down and out. But look at this. Jesus did not look at his mother as a lost cause, did not see a destitute woman. He saw the value in her: the dignity and importance of a woman who knows how to be a

mother. Jesus did not simply look to the beloved disciple and say, "Take care of my poor mother." Jesus, from the cross sets up a mutual and reciprocal relationship. Both the mother and disciple brought something of value to their relationship. Jesus sets up their relationship as an equitable one.

Jesus invites us as disciples to do the same. Jesus sees the value of the mothers and brothers of the neighborhood, sees what they offer and bring to the table. And says to us as disciples, Your relationships with those around you, those to whom you see yourself ministering, is not a one-way street; It is a reciprocal relationship. As Desmond Tutu said, "We can only be free together." We need each other, and when we are connected together through Christin mutuality and reciprocity, we are far more resilient as a community. Come what may, we can care for one another as the beloved disciple cared for Mary, and Mary cared for the beloved disciple.

Faith, connection, and our third and final factor in building resilience which we experience standing at the cross is hope for the future. Because we have faith in an active yet invisible God, because we are connected in Christ, we have hope for the future. And hope makes us more resilient.

Our text tonight ends in death, but we know the Resurrection of Jesus is fast approaching. Isn't God remarkable, how in just three days, even just in a moment, God can flip a switch, and flip the script, and turn shame into redemption and turn death into life. We serve a God with that capacity, don't we, to take each act intended for destruction and bring from them life that cannot be destroyed.

So, keep the faith. Stay connected in relationships of mutuality and reciprocity, and hold on to hope. Be resilient. And I'll see you on Easter Morning, when once again and for all time, God will reach into the depths of the cross and bring forth life that has no end.