

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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May 22, 2016  
*Trinity Sunday*  
Romans 5:1-5

### **Holy Resilience**

If you've been to the Museum of the Rockies in recent months and seen the exhibit of the National Geographic's 50 Greatest Photos, you'll recognize the images I'm about to describe. For those who haven't, I'll do my best to help you imagine.

The first photo that greets visitors to the exhibit is in a class of its own—that haunting portrait of an Afghan girl, her green eyes revealing some of the horrors she has seen at a young age, eyes which penetrate across cultural divides to remind us that we are connected to the world she lives in, a world of violence and war and fearfulness—and beauty. The photo was taken in 1984 in a refugee camp on the border with Pakistan. You may recall that at that time, the war was between the Soviet Union and Afghan fighters.

At the far end of the gallery is the tallest photo, an enormous redwood tree pictured from the ground to the top of the tree, 300 feet tall. You could lay it on a football field and it would reach from goalpost to goalpost, but instead it stands erect in a forest in California. The picture is actually a composite of 84 separate images. This tree is estimated to be 1500 years old. For 1500 years it has been living and growing, in height and circumference. It has survived wind, drought, floods, fires, and humans. It has sheltered thousands upon thousands of birds and small mammals. There are little salamanders which live high in its boughs, in an ecosystem made possible by soil which forms on the broadest limbs high in the canopy, where ferns and berry bushes grow and even redwood trees sprout. And just imagine the insects! The tree teems with life.

But the surprise in this photo is that amid all the greenery and the rich brown shades of the trunk and its branches, there are flecks of red and yellow. There are 6 people visible in this amazing photo, six people posing at stations up the height of the tree who are wearing the brightly colored jackets and hard hats of foresters. One is on the ground, the next is climbing, the next is standing in a fork of the trunk, and so on up the tree, to the uppermost brave soul who is nearly at the tree's summit.

The Afghan girl is a reminder of the harshness and reality of suffering; the tree with its human climbers is a picture of resilience. At the bottom of this great tree of life is suffering; which (today's scripture reminds us) breeds endurance; which grows character; which yields hope—the hope which does not disappoint us because God's love rains down into our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us.

Indeed, resilience is born of hope, which is God's gift to sustain life through the most difficult of circumstances. Resilience, and hope, are holy, because they come from beyond our own resources, yet dwell within. They come from God, and live in us.

Now, we know that suffering doesn't always yield growth, holy resilience. Seventeen years later, the National Geographic photographer who snapped the photo of the Afghan girl returned to Afghanistan to try to locate her. She was not easy to find. For starters, he didn't even know her name. But eventually he did find her, and he was able to thank her and tell her that her face was known all around the world. She was married, with children, and living back in the region from which she had escaped years before. With her husband's permission, she was persuaded to lift her burka and be photographed once again. The resulting picture shows a woman who appears many years older than

her years. The apprehension and fear apparent in her 12-year-old eyes had turned to anger. Suffering, it seems, had hardened her. She had endured, but without much hope or joy.

(<http://photography.nationalgeographic.com/photography/photographers/afghan-girl-cover.html>)

Yet we all know people, and I hope to be one myself, whose suffering has been the soil of their wisdom, their patience, their strength, and yes, even their hope. Such persons do not let their suffering go to waste. They utilize it. They become greater human beings who know from experience that life is not always becoming bigger and better, that there are dips and curves and downturns in life, but there is always the possibility of resilience, always reason to hope in God's grace and goodness. They aspire to be redwoods, who endure and adapt and are the ground of life and hope for others.

Resilience means the ability to bounce back, to overcome and even transcend those things which stretch and stress us, the adversity which shows up in every life. When Paul wrote to the Romans about the ladder from suffering to hope, he spoke from his own life experience. He described his years as a Christian in his letter to the Corinthian church: he spent time in prison, he was flogged, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, endangered by bandits and treacherous seas, and spent many days and nights without sleep, food, or sufficient shelter. On top of all that, he worried about the threats, both internal and external, to peace and unity in the churches he founded. (2 Cor 11:23-28) Yet he came through it all with hope and joy. He was a redwood, one who grew taller and stronger through suffering. And he credited the love of God, given by the Holy Spirit, thanks to the peace made by Christ's death and resurrection. The trinity of love, he tells us, is the source of healing and hope.

Psychotherapist and former priest Patrick Fleming counsels survivors of sexual, physical, emotional, and verbal abuse and other life traumas. Key to moving from victim, to survivor, to thriver is tapping into personal spiritual resources, the soul which cannot be touched by outer abuse. Fleming writes,

"This is the progression possible for all of us: moving from victims who feel overwhelmed and at the mercy of their trauma and of life itself, to those who know they possess the inner strength to survive and get through what life has thrown at them, and finally to thrivers who discover their soul capacity to thrive and flourish despite, and even because of, their traumas and life stresses."

("Springing Back," *Weavings*, vol xxvii, no. 2, p. 21)

Growing like a redwood; climbing that tall, tall tree of life; suffering producing endurance which produces character which produces hope which does not disappoint us. Spiritual writer Richard Rohr makes it clear that suffering is not redemptive in itself, but our response to suffering can be redemptive, even transformative—when we tap into our inner resources of soul, faith, and Spirit. (Fleming, p. 21)

Oh, yes, that's the wisdom I want in my living, and that's the wisdom for which I yearn:

- for the confused adolescent who doesn't know what to do with the pain and loneliness in his heart;
- for the angry young adult who blames the world for shutting her out;
- for the middle-aged person whose disappointment with life is leading him to think about ending it all;
- and for the elderly person whose grief just won't go away.

That's the wisdom of **faith**, a felt connection to our maker, our savior, our redeemer and friend. Faith is the rope we cling to as we climb to the top of life's tree, in trust and in hope.

Back to the Afghan girl. Her face, all these years later, reminds us of the refugees and displaced persons of today's world. Including those who are internally displaced, Syrians are #1 in today's world, and Afghans #2. Though the problems seem frightening and overwhelming, we cannot turn a blind eye. And it is immoral for anyone to suggest that religious differences, or cultural differences, or racial differences, or any other differences justify excluding fellow human beings from refuge and safety. We must give this situation our attention, and our commitment to finding solutions. Our common humanity stares directly at us in the green eyes of that Afghan girl, who has lived under threat of violence all the years of her life. She is approximately 44 years old now. She deserves peace.

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, asserts Paul. When we seek peace with one another, we are showing our faith in the power of God's love to work through us. We are manifesting the hope that lives in us, hope which does not disappoint us because it is hope given by God.

My friends, we are called to be redwoods, who grow despite adversity, who thrive on the gifts of love and faith and hope God pours into us through the Holy Spirit, and who give shelter and life to others who may or may not know that God is the ultimate giver of life. We are called to live like Jesus, whose suffering is the ground of all our hope because it made his resurrection possible. We are called to resilience, holy resilience which comes from God and flows through us to others, restoring us to God's intended justice and peace.

Let us say what we believe, in the words of the Brief Statement of Faith of our church, printed on the cover of the bulletin, and then sing our prayer.

In life and in death we belong to God.

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,  
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,  
whom alone we worship and serve.