

Christ Church + Washington Parish
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
Proper 4, Year A, II Corinthians 4:5-12
June 3rd, 2018¹²

As many of you know, my husband and I travelled to Sequoia National Park and King's Canyon in early May to celebrate my husband's upcoming 40th birthday. We chose this location because the sequoia trees there are older than Michael is, by a lot, and we thought it would give some depth to our adventure to learn a little about aging from trees who live thousands of years.

Hiking through Sequoia National Park, it's easy to understand what made this place stand out to John Muir. The sequoia trees there, and there are tons of them can grow more than 250 feet tall - the average tree you encounter in the forest is 40-70 feet tall, but it's girth is what makes it really stand out. Their trunks can be up to 35 feet across - that means (map out size in the space). Long after they stop growing taller, they continue to grow wider - which is unfortunately a common aging issue as well :)

What makes the sequoia trees live so long is that they are incredibly resistant to the threats that normally harm trees. Their thick bark protects them from beetles and fungus and from being consumed in fires. Yet every one of these mature trees has deep fire scars on it. Wide and deep are the burn marks along the base 20 feet of the tree. Sometimes you look at them and it's unbelievable that they are still alive with that size and depth of wound. Sometimes all but a small part of the trunk has been killed by the fire, but the part that is alive, keeps it growing.

¹ *Disclaimer: I do not read my sermons so actual wording of sermon may be different when preached. Lots of grace would be appreciated for grammatical errors as I both write for the ear and spend time on delivery rather than doing a thorough editing.*

² *This sermon uses several illustrations found in a sermon on the same text by the Rev. Dr. Thomas Lane Butts, entitled "The University of Adversity" <http://day1.org/916-the-university-of-adversity>*

It is the passage from Paul that reminds me of these trees this morning. "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." These trees are resilient. Death and life are at work in them at the same time - the life of the tree incorporating the death of the fire into its life. Paul knew a lot about resilience. He catalogs his difficulties in his second letter to the Christians in Corinth. Overworked, scourged, imprisoned repeatedly, threatened with death, five times he suffered 39 lashes, 3 times beaten with rods, once stone, 3 times shipwrecked, and 24 hours adrift at sea. Paul knew something about having a resilient faith.

Resilience in faith is essential to living as a Christian over the long haul.

It even makes my top five of spiritual capacities that Christians must grow in to mature in their faith. And I don't use "must" frequently. (Sidenote: the other four are joy, compassion, curiosity, and connection), but today is about resilience. If you don't grow in resilience, your faith isn't going to sustain you through the ups and downs of life. If you don't grow in resilience, your faith isn't going to sustain you through the mundane, flat periods of life. If you don't grow in resilience, you are likely to stop practicing your faith, either as a conscious decision or just you ignore it for so long that its a nostalgic element of your life with no real presence in your day to day. Resilience keeps you in the life of faith long enough to grow in wisdom and grace and depth of experience. **The longer I practice the faith the less I know, but the more deeply I know it to be true.**

But back to sequoia trees. Sequoia trees need lots of water and resources, and yet they grow fairly close together - which you wouldn't expect - you'd expect more competition for resources. And their root systems don't go very deep, they tend to spread out in with some thick roots, but many skinny long tentacle-type roots, yet the wind rarely blows these trees over. This is because the root systems of all the trees connect them, entangle together so that they not only share resources, but the entangled roots actually hold each other up when the strong winds come.

That's one way we become resilient Christians. We allow our root systems to connect with one another, cross over, feed each other, see each other. One congregant told me once that she got huge encouragement in her own resilience in faith just from coming to church on Sunday and seeing another congregant who she knew was struggling with cancer also there. When we share our stories, open ourselves to one another, we learn that we are so much stronger than we think we are capable of. Many have told me the reason that they attend church at all is that the one hour in worship centers them for the rest of their week. It gives them perspective on the challenges of their daily life and a groundedness to face them. It makes them more resilient.

But back to sequoias. Giant sequoias are scarred by fires, but they also need fires. In fact, in the 20th century the park service was actively stopping fires that started and then wondered why there were so few new sequoia trees growings. It turns out that the sequoia tree's cones that fall to the earth, needs the heat of a forest fire to open them and release the seeds into the earth.

We become resilient Christians through experiencing fires. Now you don't need to go looking to start fires in your life but accept that they come and happen and are natural. Struggling times are not destined to consume us, they are necessary to open us to new life. There would be no resurrection without the pain of the cross. Getting to the new life side of things takes a mix of time, God's grace, and grounding your perspective. The first two you have little control over. Time moves at its own pace, and God's grace is unmanageable in more ways than one. The last one, grounding your perspective, is where a life centered in faith comes in. Perspective grounded in the stories of Scripture reminds us not to let our mistakes paralyze us (just think of Peter who denied Jesus three times had given up the following Jesus thing). Perspective grounded in the stories of Scripture reminds us that lots of crappy things can happen, but there can still be good in our life (like Joseph who is sold into slavery by his brothers, but ends up becoming advisor to Pharaoh). Perspective grounded in faith reminds us that things change - how it is now is not how it will forever be - in fact, the whole story of the Bible and beyond tells us that. We build our resilience for when tough things happen by being familiar with the little stories and the grand story of our faith.³

But back to sequoias. Giant sequoias have very specific climate requirements - they grow naturally only in a narrow 260 mile strip of mixed conifer forest on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains, primarily between 5,000 and 7,000 feet in elevation. Now you can plant a sequoia tree in your backyard in certain climates, but you are going to do have to do a whole lot to keep it alive and growing. Sabbath is the climate that our faith is set to grow in.

³ Psychologist Martin Seligman found that three things can stunt recovery from setbacks: personalization, pervasiveness, and permanence - from Option B by Sheryl Sandberg, p. 16

Setting aside a day for rest, reflection, and re-connection to God. It has been the climate that has sustained faith and formed resilient people of faith for centuries. It wasn't designed to keep you from brunch or be another task for you to do. It was designed to serve humankind to become as God intended. People rooted to one another and to God resilient against the challenges and turbulations of life and they grow towards the heavens. Now you can grow in faith without observing Sabbath, a weekly time of rest, reflection, and re-connect, but it's going to take a whole lot more work. Be intentional this summer about Sabbath, take time weekly for rest, reflection, and reconnection to God and one another. Some of your Sabbath time may happen on your back porch, some between these sanctuary walls, some at the beach, but be intentional, every week, about carving the sabbath time out. Book it in your calendar as such. And see what grows as you age this summer.