

Christian Resilience (Part 2)

Sunday 14th June 2020

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

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Readings: Psalm 116, Genesis 18: 1- 15 & 21: 1-7, Matthew 9: 35-38, Romans 5: 1-8

If resilience is about being strong through change and challenge then the accounts in the Old Testament of Abram, who became Abraham, are a fine example of the human reality of resilience under pressure. We continue this week our mini-series on resilience.

A quick refresher: resilience is defined as the ability and process of adapting positively in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or other significant sources of stress. As Christians we have available to us a significant resource when it comes to developing and exercising resilience. Two weeks ago, in the light of Pentecost, we reflected on some of the tools of resilience available to us including optimism, managing fear, our moral compass, drawing on our faith, social support and the importance of the role models we have. We recognised that we have all the world provides, plus the specific gifts given to us by Jesus, through the agency of the Holy Spirit and the Christian community. Today we will consider a further four tools to help our walk in the light of the Scriptures.

This morning's text takes us to Genesis 18 and the appearance of the Lord to Abraham as we continue to explore the theme of resilience. The Lord appearing to Abraham is an example of not only the *Incarnate* but also the *pre-existent Christ*, more to consider for those of you still pondering last week's sermon on the Holy Trinity. God as man walking on earth. In this case, Jesus appearing before Jesus was born. An unsubtle reminder that God is God and not bound by human limitations.

We have a stark contrast in the narrative of Genesis 18 between the attitude of Abraham to his guests and that of his wife Sarai. We are reminded that the attitude with which we approach things says a lot about us. There is an old adage that is, oh, so true ... *attitude determines altitude*. In an airplane it's attitude, that is the orientation of the plane to the horizon (pointing up or down), determines its altitude (how high or low it will go). For us it is very much the same. The attitude we take into life, day by day, will determine to a large degree our success in life ... or otherwise. Our attitude reflects what is going on in our heads and our hearts. The Scriptures have a lot to say about this too. In Romans 12:2 we are told **“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”** The healthy mind sees and understands life increasingly, as it were, through Jesus' eyes, with His heart, His attitude and critically, with His understanding and logic. We increasingly have, or should have, as the apostle Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 2:16, **“... have the mind of Christ.”** One of the things that builds our resilience in life is the combination of experience and training. The application of mental faculty to faith and action is vitally important and builds on action and experience. The outcome should be an increased confidence in the Lord and therefore a generally peaceful and positive attitude, a practical result of knowing God is in control, and decisions for action or patience.

Let's come back to Abram and his wife Sarai who, following God's call, had left their hometown of Ur in the Chaldees at God's instruction. Then, in Genesis 12:2-3 we have what is known as the Abrahamic Covenant. In this covenant God promised Abraham, **“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”** Quite astounding given that, at that point of time, Abram was 75 and without children as his wife was barren. Abram's experience and faith in God held firm. While in his head

this might have been a wrestling match his experience of God had taught him to wait on God and see what happens. Abram understood that God is always faithful to his word. Throughout his life Abram/Abraham would become known as a man of faith – able to think through and act based on his knowledge and understanding of God’s person and character. Our memory is a powerful tool. We can use it to bring back experience and learning to reflect on. When Abram reflected on his interactions with God he was encouraged. Contrast then Sarai. Her experience of God was second hand, through Abram. In the worldly logic of her eyes God’s promise had not come through for her. She remained without children of her own. When the Lord appeared to Abram and told him they would have children within the year Sarai scoffed. Her worldly experience, training and logic could not conceive that such a thing could happen. We might mention it was now fourteen years since Abram’s call and Abram was 99, Sarai was 90. One might concede that, in purely human eyes, the promise seemed an unlikely one. What helps in such situations is memory. What had God done in the past and had He proved faithful? Our resilience improves as we can look at our situation with the hindsight-wisdom of experience and past history. Revisionism that tries to rewrite the past is rarely wise. We need to learn from the past and look to God for the future. After all, throughout the Scriptures we are reminded that, **“in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”** (Romans 8:28) Abram had both this hope and the positive attitude that went with it. But Sarai had yet to learn it as she had yet to experience more of God.

We might see a modern contrast with this in the actions of two women held captive during the Second World War on the Indonesian Island of Sumatra. Let’s just say the Japanese internment camps were horrendous and one could understand the women imprisoned there giving up hope. Two women, Norah Chambers from London and Margaret Dryburgh, a Presbyterian missionary, took another approach. They thought through and analysed the resources they had. They were both very fond of singing so they gathered every scrap of paper they could and reconstructed as many songs as they remember. Within the camp they raised a choir, even improvising instruments as they could. Their brains were exercised. They focussed on a time and place beyond their immediate situation and deprivation. Song and worship generated a great surge of hope and optimism and no doubt faith which increased the survival rate and quality of life significantly. God gives us tools to use and the resources and ability to do so, even in the harshest of situations. How we face life makes such a difference. So too, as we see here, does the flexibility to adapt to new situations. Abram and Sarai had adapted well to their move from Ur but adaptation and flexibility have to be continuous norm, not a fixed event. In faith we are on a journey and the only destination is heaven, the rest are pitstops! When we get stuck in a situation, a way of thinking, an expectation of normal, life can become particularly difficult. As we get older, wanting a fixed stability, a lack of change, is an increasing desire but it is not, realistically, what happens in this world. Our ability to flex with change, while being firm in faith, is important. Abram embraced change, Sarai, as hope faded, feel back to “normal” expectations. The women in Sumatra excelled in the worse of situations and encouraged hundreds around them.

Another factor that helps our resilience is growing our mind and our heart. God says He will replace the stone heart with a heart of flesh. It’s a great metaphor. It works for the mind as well. Some people have minds like concrete- thoroughly mixed up and permanently set. God is forever doing a new thing in the world and we need to be able to see and perceive it. As we see in Jesus’, God has a passion of those without, for

justice, of compassion, of righteousness. To be able to serve God and respond to the opportunities He puts before us we need hearts and minds soft to the Spirit's guidance, receptive to the Word of God, willing to trust what our eyes cannot see. Where Abram walked in faith, Sarai was unable to see at all. What's worse, lack of faith, lack of the ability to perceive led to direct sin. When the Lord asked her why she laughed Sarai lied and said that she hadn't.

Fortunately, as we read in Genesis 21, God's Word and plan brings its own reward. God's economy accounts for all of our strengths and weaknesses. Sarai did of course have her child, Isaac. Sarai's words speak for themselves. **"Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."** Who indeed but God. God brought great joy to Sarah. Something that no doubt grew and grew as the pregnancy progressed. One can imagine that her repentance and gratitude to God were very, very real.

In the words of Romans 5: **"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."**

God builds resilience in us as we respond in faith to Him. This resilience takes all the things of the world and understands them as Jesus would understand them and provides a platform from which we can approach life in hope, in faith, in action and in attitude. To have the mind of Christ, to be a resilient Christian, is to have a hope for a greater, brighter, positive future based, not so much on the ability of the world (maybe in spite of the world) but in the person and character of God and His heart to do good for those who love and serve Him. Towards this end our faith, our social support structures, our roles models, training, mental fitness and adaption, even our physical fitness which we haven't covered in this study but is important, all need to align. When they do, we have an approach to any situation in life or in the world that builds on the leaning, purposes and future that God has promised. Then we don't scoff because we cannot see the end from the beginning but rather, we wait with faith, we do what is in our power to do and we look to God to see what He is going to do. And if we understand this, then we can read Hebrews 11 with a degree of understanding. That's your homework!

Amen