We can learn the tools and create a context that builds up our capacity for resilience in our lives, but we don’t know how resilient we are until we go through something that requires it of us.

That’s when we find out what we’re capable of, right? How strong we are. Resilience is one of those things you wouldn’t necessarily wish for—because the truth is that discovering your resilience always comes with a price. No one becomes resilient while happily reclining with a mojito. And yet, the times in which we do experience our resilience—those are times that become stories of a meaningful life, well lived.

If the word resilience brings up feelings in you of strength, and maybe (hopefully) self-love or self-respect, but also it draws your attention to the scars and stretch marks on your heart, then you know what I mean. You’ve gone through something that made you dig deep and find your resilience.

Last Sunday, Susan sang a beautiful song by Peter Mayer called Japanese Bowl. It’s about kintsugi, the Japanese tradition of repairing cracked pottery with lacquer mixed with powdered gold. The song went:

I'm like one of those Japanese bowls
That were made long ago
I have some cracks in me
They have been filled with gold

So now every old scar shows
From every time I broke
And anyone's eyes can see
I'm not what I used to be

But in a collector's mind
All of these jagged lines
Make me more beautiful
And worth a higher price

If you have gone through something that required resilience, maybe there are cracks in your heart have been repaired with gold.

For me, the word resilience also brings up vivid memories of being very tired, bone weary, and of the way the sun keeps rising every day, no matter what is happening in our lives. During times of loss or transition, we are reborn a little bit each time it does. At first it is imperceptible. And maybe we even feel angry or aghast that the sun keeps rising—that time does not stop in deference to the gravity of our situation. (I remember feeling that way when my newborn daughter was in the intensive care unit, and again later when I had terrible postpartum...
depression. The march of days felt relentless. But then one day you wake up, and you know it has happened: Rebirth. Resilience. What felt like only an end has turned out, of course (of course), to also have been a beginning.

Rachel Naomi Remen writes that we need a word for that. Like beginnend. Or endbegin.

How do we help make ourselves more resilient? Readier for whatever comes our way? For the answers, we can turn both to ancient wisdom traditions and to science. Resilience is one of those things that humans have wondered about for just about as long as we’ve been religious. And it’s important to the quality of our lives and to having a functioning society. In fact, as we look back at the scale of change the world has experienced over the last two centuries (the industrial revolution, the information age) and as we look ahead to the massive changes we know are coming in the 21st century, especially from climate change, social scientists are thinking a lot about resilience – about how to become resilient communities made of resilient people.

Some of the oldest stories are resilience stories. The Israelites survived slavery, and wandered forty years in the desert before arriving in the promised land, where they entered into a covenant with God.

Many generations later, when they are exiled from their land, it seems impossible that they will be able to continue in their identity and their religion. Their god, like other gods of that time and region in the world, was tied to place. Their god was the god of Israel. That’s where they made the covenant. And now they were gone from that land. Which seemed to mean they were gone from the presence of God. In psalm 137, the psalmist says,

*By the rivers of Babylon*

*we sat and wept as we remembered Zion*

*Our harps hung from the poplar trees*

*how can we sing our God’s song in a foreign land?*

Then the psalm goes on to say some horrible things about getting even with their captors, because the scriptures are surprisingly uncensored, and that is exactly how the psalmist was feeling at that time. Sad, and really, really mad. It’s real.

But over time, Judaism had to find a way to be resilient in exile. In fact, the name Jew, as an identity, first appears in scriptures that were created during exile. It signals a new identity that transcends any particular location. The people adapted. Judaism became a tradition of rituals, stories, and songs that could be practiced, told, sung anywhere the people went.

In these ancient Hebrew stories, resilience is a long game. It’s the resilience of a people. It is the work of generations.

In Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus is a story of a different kind of spiritual resilience. The death of their beloved teacher, a spirit person, was unimaginable and in the days that followed
it, Jesus’ disciples were in despair. But then, they realize he is still with them, but in a different form. The scriptures are clear that the Jesus who returns is not exactly the same as he was before. The disciples do not recognize him when they see him. They don’t know his voice. Yet they experience his presence in the sound of their names, in the breaking of bread. Their resilience comes from reframing and re-understanding a life, a story, that turned out differently than expected. Instead of giving up, they look for what is still true.

And in Buddhism, we have a tradition with resilience at its very heart. Buddhism’s founder, Siddharta Gautama, known as the Buddha, lived 2500 years ago. He was a prince whose parents lavished every luxury upon him. And although they trained him as a warrior, they did their best to protect him from fear and suffering. But one week, on a rare outing from his palace, Siddharta saw a person who was gravely ill. The next day, he observed a man who was of extremely old age, and could barely get around. And the day after that, he saw for the very first time, the body of a person who had died. At the age of 29, he was confronted for the first time with the reality that if we are blessed to live long enough everyone—even princes and the people they love— will experience suffering, physical decline, and death. Siddharta left his palace and devoted himself to spiritual practice, in search of the best way to live in light of these truths. Buddhism teaches that life inherently involves suffering. That’s important, because if we do not expect things to be easy for us all the time, if we expect that we will have to struggle and work hard, then we will be more resilient when those things happen. We won’t be quick to give up. Buddhism also teaches that change is constant. And that the way of liberation is through releasing our attachments. Doing so makes us more resilient in the face of change.

Here’s a dramatic modern-day example.

In the book Kitchen Table Wisdom, Rachel Naomi Remen tells the story of a man she knew who had become separated from his friends on a ski trip and gotten lost. He wound up spending three days alone in subzero temperatures. Amazingly, he survived, to the incredible relief of his fiancé, family, and friends. But the cold had done some damage to his body. His feet in particular, were badly frostbitten. He was first cared for at the local hospital out in the ski country where this took place. When the doctors there could not do anything more to save his feet, which were becoming progressively gangrenous, they transferred him to the hospital in New York. That’s where Rachel Naomi Remen worked as a physician. Everyone hoped the big hospital’s world-renowned vascular surgical team would be able to prevent the young man from having to undergo an amputation.

With that advanced surgical team’s help, the young man’s left foot started to improve, but his right foot got worse... and then worse yet. It soon became clear that amputation was the only option for the right foot. But the young man refused. He did not want to lose his foot. Who can blame him? The man got sicker and sicker, as the poisonous infection traveled from his foot throughout his body. His loved ones begged him to take the surgeons’ advice, but he refused. He wanted to keep his foot.
The surgeons kept gathering to review his condition with him, showing him the lab results and explaining that his life was at stake. In the third or fourth meeting like this, Remen writes, the young man’s fiancé, “overwhelmed by the possibility of her beloved’s death, was driven beyond her endurance.” Sobbing, she removed the engagement ring from her hand and put it on his swollen, discolored right pinky toe. “I hate this foot,” she cried. “If you want this foot so much why don’t you marry it? You’re going to have to choose, you can’t have us both.”

He closed his eyes, and the doctors left. But the next day, the young man scheduled his surgery. More than a year later, two weeks before his wedding, Remen visited with him. She asked him what had changed his mind in that last medical conference in his room. The young man explained that his fiancé’s words and actions had shocked him into realizing that he had indeed been “married” to his foot. He had been more attached to keeping his foot than he was committed to his life. Even though it was his life he had clung to and had lived for while he was out there alone in the snow. Once he realized that, he was able to (again) make the decision to live.

Remen writes, “In relationship to life, just as in human relationships, attachment closes down options, commitment opens them up... Attachment is a reflex, an automatic response which often may not reflect our deepest good. Commitment is a conscious choice, to align ourselves with our most genuine values and our sense of purpose.”

What are you committed to? Our attachments can be very important to us. Feet are literally attached to us and we treasure them even as we take them for granted. But what is even more important than your most treasured attachments?

When we can identify those things, we not only make ourselves more resilient, we also become more fearless. Less likely to get caught up in anxiety about what might happen, and more fearlessly present to our lives as they actually are.

The acupuncturist and movement leader Spenta Kandawalla says, “When I was young, I was taught to fear big forces of nature—tornadoes, thunderstorms, snowstorms, hurricanes. Taught they cause destruction and devastation. Taught to hide under desks, in basements, stay close to home.” She says that her work as a healer has been, quote, about relearning and reconnecting to the wisdom and life in natural forces. That what is most alive leads to opening, creating, change. That in the destruction of something lies a whole new world of possibility—a place where patterns can finally become unhinged and there’s space for something new to take its place. Not that this doesn’t come without loss, grief, devastation, it often does. But to see that there’s also resilience, the beauty of survival, the move to create and thrive despite what surrounds us. To me that’s the essence of our fight for liberation.1

To be resilient one of the things we have to do is accept impermanence. The thing is—and this is really key—we have to carry that lesson all the way through. When something painful or destructive happens, that is often a reminder that what we took for granted was in fact impermanent. It’s a painful way to be reminded of that lesson. But how often, immediately
after experiencing that lesson, do we immediately forget it again? And we think that our pain is going to last forever?

Our reading this morning was about that. Mark Nepo says, “To move in and out of meaning is as natural as moving in and out of light because clouds form and dissipate...” He tells the parable of “a man who built a home on a cliff by sea, only to have a month-long fog roll in. He cursed the place and moved away, but a week after he’d gone, the fog cleared. Being human, we all have fogs roll in around our heart, and often, our lives depend on the quiet courage to wait for them to clear.”

Nothing lasts forever. Not pleasure, and not pain. Everything changes. Impermanence works both ways. It undoes what we are attached to, what we think we are, what we think makes us strong, and it creates room for our next experience of commitment, identity, strength.

Outside this sanctuary, across the city and sloping up the mountainside, there are bare branches, dried grasses, and still, cold rock. Just as, at this very moment of late winter, buds are hidden in the trees, and underground new shoots are preparing to greet the sun, and the sleepy critters await their young, in the barren seasons of our lives new growth and new beauty are already in formation. Reserve a place in your heart for faith in that, and you will look back your life and see jagged lines mended with gold.

There have been studies about what qualities or practices resilient people tend to have. Andrew Zolli, the author of a book called Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back, says these qualities and practices include “social networks, the quality of your intimate relationships, the degree to which you both love and experience love. Your access to ... physical resources. Your physical health, your genes and in particular the interaction between your genes and your life experiences...” Some of these things are things we can actively create for ourselves, others are out of our control. Zolli also says, “if you believe that the world is a meaningful place, if you see yourself as having agency within that world, and if you see successes and failures as being placed in your path to teach you things,” you are more likely to be resilient.

Much of this information comes from studies researchers have done on groups of people who experienced a shared trauma, like a group of first responders to a particular disaster, or survivors of some kind of terrible event. The ones who do not suffer debilitating effects from the trauma are the ones they call “resilient.” But here’s something else I know. Something these studies don’t seem to capture. It’s that resilience is not a one and done kind of thing.

To recover from the debilitating effect of a trauma, or to adapt to live with PTSD, that also requires a kind of resilience. Just as a person who falls and gets up is no less upright than a person who stumbles but does not fall, we can experience resilience anytime throughout our lives.

I’m going to close with some words from adrienne maree brown. They are from her book Emergent Strategy, in which she writes that resilience and healing and wholeness are like fractals. When enough individuals have them, then small groups have them. When enough small groups have them, larger groups do. When larger groups have them, the world is
changed. Like Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, whom I have mentioned before, brown also sees the times we are living in as a “great turning”. A time when we are helping to write a future we cannot yet see. A future in which our descendants are telling this story we are living. We are relying on our faith, our resilience, and our imaginations to get there.

I think the most important role of the church in this century is to help create communities of resilient people with love as their most compelling commitment, and to cast a vision together of what we will pass along as our part of the work of generations. It is multi-generational resilience work, like the work of the Israelites. It’s reframing and re-understanding work, like the work of the disciples. It is letting go of attachments, and gaining clarity about our commitments, like the Buddha.

Here are adrienne maree brown words, that I want to leave you with. She writes:

    i am not afraid
    of what i came here to do
    i am made of stardust
    we are not afraid
    of what we’re called now to do
    we’re all made of god

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