



"A Traumatic Time"
Scripture – Isaiah 40:21-31
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 7, 2021

Are you stronger and more resilient than you thought? More than 460,000 people in the U.S., and more than two million worldwide, have died from COVID-19. We have been sheltering in place and keeping a physical distance from our family and friends for nearly a year. Businesses have collapsed and millions have lost their jobs. Before this deadly coronavirus began sweeping around the planet, did you know you could survive a global mass trauma?

We have heard a fair amount regarding an increase in depression and anxiety. I suspect most of us have experienced more difficulty sleeping. Anyone besides me have COVID dreams? – Dreams that are more intense and stranger than usual? Some mornings I have woken up thinking, "Well, that was weird."

Obtaining accurate suicide numbers is difficult, but it appears that the number of people unable to cope and ending their lives has risen. Polls indicate a significant jump in the number of young people who are struggling emotionally.

COVID-19 has touched off mass trauma. A writer for the BBC explains that trauma is not simply "a word for something extremely stressful...(rather trauma) is about the effect of events on our minds. What separates trauma from something stressful is how we relate to the events on a deep level of *belief*."¹

Each day we live with the stress that an invisible deadly virus can strike us or our loved ones. Living with this constant stress can alter the way we think about ourselves and the way we think about our world. For instance, many of us may view the world as a much riskier place and our physical health as more fragile, than we did before this pandemic struck.

I would argue that we are experiencing a twofold mass trauma. One is the experience of a global pandemic. The other is the awareness that there are millions of fellow Americans who have such an intractable belief in conspiracy theories, that it led to the deadly attack on the U.S. Capital. Personally, I am struggling with a less promising view of our country.

The thought of catching a deadly disease and the thought that a civil war could erupt are frightening and unsettling. Some people might imagine that their belief in God should render them immune from such gloomy thoughts, however, disheartenment is no stranger to people of faith.

Today's passage from Isaiah reveals an especially bleak and traumatic time for the Hebrew people. They have been defeated in battle, their Temple in Jerusalem destroyed, and they have been forced into exile in Babylon. What seems obvious to many of the Israelites is that the gods of the Babylonians have triumphed over Yahweh, the God of Israel. Psalm 137 informs us that as the Hebrews sit by the rivers of Babylon and weep, their captors torment them.

Have you ever felt that God has become deaf? If so, you have a good understanding of their experience. All seems lost. All dreams erased.

When life is pleasant and purposeful, and our relationships are rich, it is natural to speak of blessings. At such times it's apparent that God is with us and the future is packed with possibilities. However, when the hardships are severe and the daily routine arduous and the future bleak, it's easy for our faith to become as thin as a razor's edge. Questions mount and doubt mushrooms.

That was the situation of the Hebrew people who had been forcibly removed from their homes and compelled to live as captives in a foreign land. One scholar points out that many of those living in exile "may have been located in what were essentially labor camps."² It is hardly a surprise that the people believed that God had not only lost track of them but no longer cared about them.

Their mass trauma upended their view of the world. Had they been mistaken all along? Had they tricked themselves into believing that there was a Creator who cared? People were perishing. Even their young people were weary and collapsing in exhaustion. Why would God allow such misery?

Perhaps you can identify with the feeling of being beaten and battered by the trials of life. Maybe you know what it feels like to have your dreams torched. Perhaps you know what it is like to be traumatized and realize that what you believed no longer seems viable.

The Hebrew people were in a desperate situation. Isaiah realized that they were in shock and their faith was dwindling. Inspired by God to buoy the spirit of the people, the prophet Isaiah asks them: "Why do you say, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my cause is disregarded by my God?'"

I suspect many of the people may have screamed, "Because life is hell!"

If we have no hope in a brighter day, if we do not believe that God is nudging the world toward the divine dream of a world of justice and peace, then why muster strength? Why not go to bed and pull the covers over our head? Why not give in to the darkness of the present if we cannot imagine the light of a new day?

However, Isaiah would not allow the Hebrew people to give in to despair. He says, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak."

God inspired Isaiah to lift the spirits of the Hebrew people. His powerful poetic proclamation lit a flame in their souls. It was like seeing a flock of birds flying across the sky, when suddenly and simultaneously, they soar upwards. "Those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles! They will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint."

Isaiah does not attempt to downplay the traumatic situation in which the people find themselves. He knows full well that life can be tough, but he reminds the people that they can survive their current trauma because they are not alone. God is with them and they can discover in God the strength to endure.

Discovering the internal strength to endure the difficulties of life depends on resilience and hope. Resilience requires digging deep within yourself for the will to weather dark times. Someone said, "It is your *reaction* to adversity, not adversity itself that determines how your life's story will develop."³ Nelson Mandela was a living example of resilience. He was imprisoned for 27 years, but he refused to surrender to despair. He said, "Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again."

Resilience also requires remembering. We recall times in the past when life was harsh, but we survived. That knowledge reminds us that we are stronger and more resilient than we sometimes think.

Resilience is not all we need. We also need hope. Hope, that despite the fact that all appears dark today, light will break forth again if we maintain our faith in God.

A few weeks before she was to graduate from college, my friend's only child, died unexpectedly. That is as dark as it gets. My friend doubted she would ever laugh again and for a time, many of us wondered if she would survive her devastating loss. Her faith saved her. She managed to persevere one day at a time and she learned to laugh again. There will always be a scar on her heart, but she was not destroyed. She learned to live again.

Had she not already possessed a strong faith that had been built over many years, I don't know if she would have triumphed over her tragedy. We draw closer to God and build a firm foundation brick by brick as we worship, as we pray, as we absorb the wisdom of Scripture, as we extend compassion to others, as we follow the way of Christ. And it is that solid foundation that helps us to persevere when times are tough.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Yes, I'm personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes. But in spite of that I still have a dream, because you cannot give up in life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose the courage to be, and the quality that helps you go on in spite of all. And so today, I still have a dream."

My friend found in her faith the strength to rise from the ashes. She grew weary and fell exhausted, but she clung tightly to the spirit of Isaiah: "God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless, (and) those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint."

NOTES

1. Ed Prideaux, "How to heal the 'mass trauma' of Covid-19," *BBC.com*, February 3, 2021.
2. Christopher B. Hays, "Fifth Sunday after Epiphany," *Workingpreacher.org*, February 8, 2015.
3. Dieter F. Uchtdorf

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Creator God — who whispered into a formless void and beckoned the dawn — you, alone, are Lord of swirling oceans and outstretched skies; of elegant snowflakes and soaring eagles; of women and men, fashioned for life with you. We marvel at your grace, for we know that creation was born of nothing more than your desire to be with and for the world. "Have you not known?" the prophet asks us. "Have you not heard? The Lord is the

everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” You, O God, do not faint or grow weary. You strengthen the fainthearted and support the weak; you give hope to those in the depths of despair. So, with gratitude and praise, we join our voices with the song of creation to proclaim your glory: Praise to you, O God!

Faithful One — who attends to the concerns of our hearts — there is much in our world, in our communities, and in our very lives that cries out for healing. In these trying times, we lift before you all who are weary and worn. Be present with each body that aches from disease, and in every home that is conflict-rent; in each community reeling from violence, and with every person who suffers the pangs of loss. Draw near to the world you created, and to your people near and far, as we long for the day when this virus is contained. Come to those who wait for you, O God, and renew our strength.

Sustaining God – who summons us to faith, and inspires us to hope — you empower us for service. When we feel powerless in the face of so much suffering, give us strength to offer compassionate care. When we fall exhausted; give us energy to participate in your healing work. And when we succumb to despair, give us the gift of faith. Help us to trust in you, O God, so that we may mount up with wings like eagles, so that we may run and not be weary, so that we might walk and not faint.

This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, and offer the words he taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.