

# Rooted and rising: Spiritual resilience

Sermon for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25A), October 29, 2017  
Delivered by the Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas at St. Mark's Cathedral, Seattle, WA

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

Psalm 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

Rooted and rising: Spiritual resilience

What a blessing to be back at St. Mark's Cathedral! Thank you, Steve, for inviting me to preach. I bring greetings from Massachusetts, where I serve both the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts and the United Church of Christ as Missioner for Creation Care. In this ecumenical role I travel from place to place, church to church, preaching the Gospel and speaking about our call as Christians to love and protect the Earth that God entrusted to our care. It is a joy to return to Seattle, where my father was born, and to see again your magnificent forests, lakes, seas, and mountains.

My husband Robert Jonas is with me, and we've spent the past week in the Pacific Northwest, speaking and leading retreats about spiritual resilience. I am drawn to the topic of spiritual resilience because it seems that most of us could use some resilience right about now. Many people tell me that they're feeling bone-tired. Partly it's the demands of family life and work life, the hectic effort to keep so many balls in the air. And partly we're tired because of the stress of knowing that as a nation we're facing so many difficult issues all at the same time. Day by day, as we read the headlines or hear about the latest developments, many of us are gripped by outrage and alarm. We are living in turbulent times when upheaval seems to be the new normal and we brace ourselves for the next scary bit of bad news.

As Missioner for Creation Care, what most concerns me is the fact that the web of life is unraveling before our eyes. Great populations of creatures – even entire species – are rapidly disappearing from Earth. You may have noticed the report in Friday's Seattle Times that Orcas may be extinct by the end of the century because of dwindling numbers of salmon, human

pollutants, and underwater noise. Scientists tell us that a mass extinction event is now underway – what they’re calling a “biological annihilation.” In addition to species extinction, we also face a changing climate. Because of the relentless burning of fossil fuels, month after month our planet is breaking records for heat. Last year was the hottest year on record, crushing the record set the year before, which in turn crushed the record set the year before that. Sea ice is melting. Land ice is melting. Tundra is thawing. The deep oceans are heating up and growing more acidic. Hurricanes – like those that ravaged Puerto Rico and the southeastern U.S. – are growing more intense. Soon after that succession of hurricanes, catastrophic wildfires began roaring up the California coast, accelerated by high winds, extreme heat, and bone-dry landscapes. Climate change didn’t cause these monster storms and fires, but it certainly made them worse. These so-called “natural” disasters are not entirely natural – they are driven by dirty energy like coal, gas, and oil, which dump carbon and other heat-trapping gasses into the atmosphere and disrupt the climate.

In a precarious time, when many of us, for good reason, are stressed or tired or scared, we need once again to sink our roots deep into the love of God, to remember how loved we are, how cherished we are in God’s sight, how nourished we are by a love that will give us strength for the journey ahead and will never let us go. So thank God for St. Mark’s Cathedral! Thank God for every congregation where people draw together to pray, to listen to the wisdom of Scripture, to draw close to Jesus, and to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

Today’s readings give us a beautiful image for spiritual resilience. In Psalm 1 we read that those who trust in God are “like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither” (Psalm 1:3). Imagine being such a tree! Your roots go deep into the love of God, which runs like a river beside you. No matter what is happening in the world around you, even if what’s going on feels dangerous or chaotic, even in times of storm or drought, your roots reach deep into the ground and you stand beside a divine river that is endlessly flowing. As another psalm puts it, “the river of God is full of water” (Psalm 65:9). Like trees planted beside a stream of living water (John 7:37-38), we are “rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:17). We know that God is with us. We feel God’s power and we feel God’s strength. Drawing from those deep roots we rise up like trees, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither. We drink deep of abundance, absorb it into every cell of our bodies, and then share that abundance with the world – freely, generously, without holding back, because there is plenty more where that came from!

The same image of spiritual resilience and aliveness plays out in a passage from the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 17:7-8):

7 Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,  
whose trust is the Lord.  
8 They shall be like a tree planted by water,

sending out its roots by the stream.  
It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

Trees beside the water of Loon Lake, British Columbia

I find this image so compelling that when my husband and I traveled to Seattle to lead a series of events on spiritual resilience, we named the whole thing “Rooted and Rising.” I’m not a botanist, but I’m learning that trees are more intelligent than we thought. Books like *The Hidden Life of Trees* tell us that the root systems of trees and fungi communicate with each other, and that trees develop social networks and share resources. There is a whole lot of underground life going on beneath our feet! And so it is with us: when we sink our own roots deep into the love of God, we, too, discover that everyone and everything is connected. On the surface, we may see only our differences, what divides us from each other, but from below, on the level of roots, we discover what Martin Luther King, Jr., called the Beloved Community: here, where God’s love is always being poured into our hearts, we realize that everyone, and the whole Creation, is loved and that we belong together. Beneath all our differences of race, class, gender, and political party, we belong to one living, sacred whole.

Every time we tap into the deep-down truth of our essential belovedness, we discover fresh energy for life. And so – up we rise, like a mighty tree, offering our gifts to each other and to the world: our fruits and leaves; our time, talent, and treasure; a kind word, a healing gesture.

When it comes to tackling climate change, there is so much that we as individuals can do. Maybe we can plant a tree. Save a tree. Recycle more. Drive less. Eat local, eat organic, eat less meat and move to a plant-based diet. Maybe we can support local farms and land trusts. We can fly less – and, if we must fly, buy carbon offsets. Maybe we can afford solar panels and move toward a carbon-neutral home. If we have investments, we can divest from fossil fuels, and if we’re college graduates, we can urge our alma mater to divest.

Individual changes make a difference, but because of the scope and speed of the climate crisis, we need more than individual action – we need systemic change. To do that, we may have to confront the powers that be, especially in a time when multinational corporations and members of our own government seem intent on desecrating every last inch of God’s Creation, pillaging every last natural resource, destroying every last habitat, and abandoning every last regulation, rule, and treaty that preserve clean air and water and maintain the stability of our global climate.

I can’t help thinking of the African-American spiritual that became an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, a protest song and a union song, “We Shall Not Be Moved.” Even now, I can hear Pete Seeger singing, “We shall not, we shall not be moved; we shall not, we shall not be moved,

just like a tree that's planted by the water, we shall not be moved." He goes on: "Young and old together, we shall not be moved... women and men together, we shall not be moved... city and country together, we shall not be moved... black and white together, we shall not be moved... just like a tree that's planted by the water, we shall not be moved."

Rooted in love and rising up in action, Christians and other people of faith will not be moved. We intend to bear witness to our God-given faith that life and not death will have the last word. We intend to become the people that God meant us to be: people who are good stewards of God's Creation, people who are a blessing to Earth and all its communities. So some of us carry out peaceful, disciplined actions of civil disobedience to stop construction of new fossil fuel infrastructure and keep fossil fuels in the ground, where they belong; some of us join Citizens Climate Lobby and push for a carbon tax; those of us who are white and privileged listen to the voices of racial minorities, indigenous peoples, and the poor, knowing that they are God's beloved and that they are the ones hit first and hardest by climate change. Together we intend to build a world in which everyone can thrive. There is so much that we can do – so many ways to bear fruit!

On this day of stewardship ingathering I give thanks for the ways that this community continues to root itself in the love of God and neighbor and to offer its gifts to a hungry, thirsty world. You are "like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither" (Psalm 1:3). I trust that everything you do in Jesus' name will prosper.