

RISING ABOVE THE ASHES



Scripture:

Psalm 96:1-9

¹O sing to the LORD a new song sing to the LORD, all the earth. ²Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. ³Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. ⁴For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. ⁵For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. ⁶Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. ⁷Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. ⁸Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts. ⁹Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-6 *The Message*

¹I, Paul, together here with Silas and Timothy, send greetings to the church at Thessalonica, Christians assembled by God the Father and by the Master, Jesus Christ. God's amazing grace be with you! God's robust peace!
²⁻⁵Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you're in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following our Master, Jesus Christ, before God our Father. It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn't just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions.
⁵⁻⁶You paid careful attention to the way we lived among you, and determined to live that way yourselves. In imitating us, you imitated the Master. Although great trouble accompanied the Word, you were able to take great joy from the Holy Spirit!—taking the trouble with the joy, the joy with the trouble.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



Take the trouble with the joy and the joy with the trouble. That is the attitude many people had yesterday up on Fountaingrove. I was part of a team dispatched to go from home to home offering people support as they arrived back to their homes to see the piles of ashes. Brad Bowles was especially joyful when he opened up his mother's fireproof filing cabinet and found their important papers and a computer harddrive intact. Number one goal accomplished! Another neighbor near them actually laughed as he showed me how his \$100,000 BMW

had melted in the fire while parked in what used to be his garage.

Of course, it wasn't all joy though. One woman sobbed as she told me they had lived in the home seventeen years and worked so very hard to build it. But another neighbor said this tragedy was bonding neighbor to neighbor in ways that had never happened before.

The image that stuck in my mind when I left the charred hills was a scene of five people in the middle of an empty cul-de-sac hugging one another. That is

an example of taking the joy with the trouble that Paul was talking about.

BEING CHRIST-LIKE

In today's scripture, Paul was teaching the church in Thessalonica how to imitate Christ. He says, "It is clear to us that God not only loves you very much but he has put his hand on you for something special." Then he explains how they are role models for others and had to be Christ-like in all they do. He tells them to remember to be patient in hope and put steel in their convictions of faith in Jesus.

This Church of the Roses is loved very much and God put her hand on us to be something special during the firestorms. We became a true sanctuary, a refuge like an oasis in a fire desert. And yesterday we were the host church for a grand Boy Scout pancake breakfast that continued to role-model Christ-like ways of caring for others by feeding first responders and raising funds to help those in need as a result of the fire. Today's concert at 2:00 p. m. will be another opportunity to role-model helping the fire victims from our church and Cantiamo.

I am so thankful to so many here who helped us be Christ-like for our community during the past two weeks. Like Paul who was proud of the people of the new church community in Thessalonica, I am proud of you all for doing your best to be positive and helpful towards others. We have a long list of people who are offering their homes to those who are seeking places to live! Many of you came in to help cook meals for our sheltered folks and offered your assistance in many other ways! God is proud of you for being Christ-like role models in the midst of the fire chaos.

THE NEXT STAGE

And now it is the second stage of recovery that we must prepare for. I expect in the next few months there will be many more coming to our door for food and other needs as the full effect of this disaster takes its toll. So we must ask the Holy Spirit to put steel in our convictions and be faithful servants for the survival of our community. We must help Santa Rosa rise up from the ashes by showing our faith and love of God in all our actions.

This reminds me of the phoenix that is an ancient symbol of rising out of ashes. I also thought of Maya Angelou's famous poem called, *Still I Rise*. And third, I thought of a song Johnny Cash sang that is always healing and soothing to the soul.

THE PHOENIX

First, the Phoenix image.



The citizens of Santa Rosa can look to the symbol and story of a phoenix because we trust in God's promises of eternal life that makes all things new. In Revelation 21 it says, "He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

The phoenix is an ancient symbol of immortality. The phoenix bursts into flames at the end of its life only to rise up from the ashes brand new.

The phoenix is a mythological bird, something like an eagle. It symbolized hope and a continuity of life after death.

**According to the legend,
this bird lived for five-hundred years
and built a nest of twigs and spices.
At the end of five-hundred years, the sun's
hot rays would set the nest alight.
But instead of trying to smother the
flames, the phoenix would fan the flames
with its wings, burning itself up in the fire.
Then, with a renewed and refreshed body
it would rise from the ashes.**

In Christian art, the resurrected phoenix became a popular symbol of Christ's bodily resurrection from the grave. The phoenix can be a symbol for rising above the ashes as we recover from the fires. And it is also a Christian message of hope. Jesus gave up his life. From the grave he was raised to life again on the third day. His new life rose from the ashes of death. Jesus defeated the last and greatest enemy of all –

death. He reassured us that when we pass from this life to the joy and bliss of eternal life, we will be with him in heaven. Instead of death, there is new life, a life with a new, glorious, refreshed body, like the phoenix as it rose from the ashes.

Isaiah 61 gives us words of hope about the transformation of ashes, too. It says that God grants those who mourn losses “a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.

They’ll rebuild the old ruins raise a new city out of the wreckage. They’ll start over on the ruined cities, take the rubble left behind and make it new. And later it goes on to say, Because you got a double dose of trouble and more than your share of contempt, your inheritance in the land will be doubled and your joy go on forever.”

Beautiful wonderful words of hope!

GOD’S LOVE

The ancient theologian Eusebius believed that despite all the chaos in life’s journey, God’s love will win over death and destruction. He said, God’s love is final and complete, with no one left untouched by it. And the great mystic, Julian of Norwich reminded people in the thirteen-hundreds that no matter what fire or chaos befalls us, “All manner of things will be made well, all will be well.”

MAYA ANGELOU

Another great role model of faith and resilience is Maya Angelou. Her early life was fraught with abuse and abandonment. But she had a strong spirit and was able to tap into her resources of resilience to survive. She wrote eleven books and poetry. But this poem is her most beloved because it gives hope for overcoming evil and strife in all its forms.

STILL I RISE

By Maya Angelou

**You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise.
Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
‘Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.
Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,**

**Just like hopes springing high,
Still I’ll rise.
Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.
Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don’t you take it awful hard
‘Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines
Diggin’ in my own back yard.
You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise.
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise
I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.**

**Even though we may know intellectually
that we will survive these days and “this
too shall pass,” we might still be angry at
God for allowing the fire to fall in the first
place and it is okay to be upset.
It is important to grieve the losses.
It’s like having to go through the
pain of cleaning out a wound
before the healing can start.**

To help with the healing there will be an interfaith community healing service next Sunday, October 29th at 7:00 p.m. at the Center for Spiritual Living. Emily Stockert and I are on the development team. There will be lots of music and prayers and short talks to promote the healing of our community.

The Leadership Santa Rosa group met last Thursday. There is much planning for the future recovery.

JOHNNY CASH

Johnny Cash was very astute at choosing songs that promoted recovery from tragedies. He himself

was a very resilient guy with a deep faith and a humble personality. I admired Johnny Cash's ability to reach out to the downtrodden and traumatized whether they were in prison or homeless. This song reassures us that no matter what trials and tribulations we go through in life, heaven is waiting to cure all the chaos and destruction. It's called "Down There by the Train."

I chose this because I believe many people are feeling down. And it is our job to help them understand that God is with them and loves them no matter their faith or their doubts about the future. It is your job to let them know they are loved even if their homes are gone. My favorite verse is the one that says, "If you've lost all your hope, if you've lost all your faith, I know you can be cared for and I know you can be safe...."

A video was played for the congregation.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yU4y5NZcM-Q>

THERE WILL BE A NEW NORMAL

It's important to realize that the citizens of Santa Rosa won't ever be back to where we started when the fire-storm began. When that realization is acknowledged, some people may become suicidal because they don't know how to adjust to the changes. Many of us still feel traumatized from the upheaval even if we still have our homes.

So it is our job to remember that our faith is based on the promises of God and our faith tells us that we can trust; there will be a new normal.

God has created us to be resilient people who are put here on earth to help one another tap into our God-given resources that help us survive the tribulations in life. Resources like community building and faith in the good of creation. (It was amazing to see the green grass poking up out of the ashes yesterday and the birds flying and chirping and the deer running around the charred landscape on Fountaingrove Parkway. It was most encouraging to see all the volunteers!)

Like the phoenix, we will rise up from the ashes and be refreshed with an opportunity for a new kind of life. Maybe a simpler more loving life where we deeply appreciate and believe it is a good day when there is no smoke and no fire in the air.

Amen

Benediction:

Look for chances to show God's love to everyone around us who are our greater Santa Rosa family.

Ask how they are doing as you stand in line at the store.

Listen to their firestorm stories and find ways to help them be at peace with the new Santa Rosa. Reassure them with Julian of Norwich's words: All will be well.

And trust that with God's help, over time, we will rise up even stronger than before.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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