

Gilroy UMC Resiliency

Psalm 130, Liturgist: Heather Brodersen

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“1-2 Help, God—the bottom has fallen out of my life!

Master, hear my cry for help!

Listen hard! Open your ears!

Listen to my cries for mercy.

**3-4 If you, God, kept records on wrongdoings,
who would stand a chance?**

**As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit,
and that’s why you’re worshiped.**

**5-6 I pray to God—my life a prayer—
and wait for what he’ll say and do.**

**My life’s on the line before God, my Lord,
waiting and watching till morning,
waiting and watching till morning.**

**7-8 O Israel, wait and watch for God—
with God’s arrival comes love,
with God’s arrival comes generous redemption.
No doubt about it—he’ll redeem Israel,
buy back Israel from captivity to sin.”**

One night after choir practice in 2012, I wrote this in my journal of favorite stories I keep about our church, the Gilroy United Methodist Church:

“Organist Eunice Coates is the type of personality that corrects everyone in choir practice, including the director. Lately she has decided she no longer needs to attend practice because after all, she "reads music perfectly." There is no longer any need for her to rehearse. (I think the truth is that it is likely becoming too much for her at this advanced age to make the drive so often to Gilroy from Morgan Hill where she lives).

But when she is occasionally here, she questions every move the director makes. "Why do we need to repeat that line?" she will ask. "I sang it right the first time!"

So, a couple of weeks ago, Eunice was not there, but Barbara Gailey was acting as if she were the teacher of the group that night. She had enjoyed a long and illustrious career

as a teacher in the Gilroy School District. Our new director is Victoria Arribere, a college student with no choir leading experience, who has the job of getting the best out of our persnickety group of experts. Barbara was giving her a hard time about something tonight, when all of a sudden Barbara stopped, looked at herself, got a pensive expression, and said, "Huh. Oh my, I'm being Eunice tonight!"

Without even a split-second pause, Barbara's husband Hugh Gailey said, "Well, you're definitely not going home with me tonight!!"

Everyone just dissolved into laughter, including our dear persevering young choir director.

Victoria had started out so shy and shaky, afraid to say anything, with no self-confidence, and hardly speaking above a whisper. But she said she was motivated, was studying music in school, and that she needed the money for college.

However, recently, I realized how much she has grown this past year. One night Barbara was talking and talking during rehearsal and showed no signs of quieting down. Shy Victoria had gently asked for quiet, but Barbara kept carrying on in her great storytelling style.

Finally, Victoria looked at her and said, "We are rehearsing; if you need to talk, you can take it outside. But we are working here." Barbara was stunned.

I held my breath.

Then Barbara burst out laughing. "Oh, that's so great!" she said. "Victoria stood up to me! Isn't that just marvelous?!"

And that's how we make each other better people here at this church! We are real with each other. We don't wear a façade; what you see (and hear) is what you get. To really know someone and still love them – that is real love! Our church has survived 167 years by understanding each other, by accepting each other, by learning from each other--remembering our roots, remembering our elders, making each other better people, making a difference with real love.

This week's scriptures from the Lectionary also include the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, as well as the prophecy given to Ezekiel in the Valley of the Dry Bones:

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. 6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life.” This week's scripture has a theme of leaving old ways behind, of resurrection and renewal, of leaving the OLD person behind and becoming a NEW person.

I love Pat Freitas' text sent to me during this frightening time:

“Neighbor patched fence yesterday, Pastor and wife visited via front lawn/open window, Debbie came to trade oranges for milk and produce from brown bag goodies, Mary brought gloves to protect me from shopping cart germs...
When I put it that way, isolation has not been a problem.
Now we're doing the right things. It is so uplifting to know we can and are helping each other, even if what we have is oranges.”

This is not the first time our church has lived through a major crisis. They say if you don't know your history, you are doomed to repeat it. Like many of you, I enjoy genealogical research and finding my family's roots online. My family stories include pioneers and survivors, such as my Irish ancestors 10 generations before me (the McClures) who came to America in 1740 to escape the “Great Frost” that caused a huge famine in Ireland (nearly 40% of the population there died). If you know your history, you know where you come from, you know what your family has survived, you know the struggles of your ancestors who enabled you to be alive here in this time and place. If you know the strengths of your history, maybe you are blessed to repeat it!!

The Gilroy United Methodist Church is a significant part of the City of Gilroy's history, since the original Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was the first church of any denomination ever organized in “Pleasant Valley,” as Gilroy was called before it became a city.

It first met on June 4, 1853, with 13 members present—just imagine, this was before the Civil War! Our church was here before Abraham Lincoln was president! The first building cost \$1000. A committee was formed to raise funds for buying furniture (cost: \$37.50) and a carriage for the pastor. That year, church member John R. Bane became the first school teacher in Gilroy to be employed in the public school system. In 1862, they constructed a stable for the pastor's carriage (cost: \$32). During the Civil War, there were two Methodist Churches in Gilroy. After the War, the two churches joined together as one, physically moving one building and attaching it to the other in a huge remodeling job.

This is not the first time our church has survived the type of health threat we are challenged with today. During the Smallpox Epidemic of 1868, the Gilroy Presbyterian and Methodist churches joined together and helped each other through the devastation.

When the 1918 Influenza Pandemic swept through Gilroy, it was so severe that just like now, regular church services had to be discontinued. One third of the world's population became infected, and 50 million people died.

When Japanese-Americans in Gilroy had no place to go, our large Methodist Church building at that time was turned into a hospital and filled with Japanese patients. The furnace in the church had to be kept going night and day, and a man named Dr. Okawa from San Francisco had to split his time treating flu patients, going back and forth between Watsonville and Gilroy. Sometimes the doctor was so exhausted, he collapsed and just slept all night in the pastor's study.

One of the most challenging times in our history came when our church burned to the ground on Nov. 13, 1938. The furnace exploded and fire quickly spread through the building.

Although everything in the church building was a complete loss, volunteer firefighters like Russell Heck kept the fire from spreading to nearby homes. Tragically, 36-year-old Russell--father of Marjory, 8, and Kenneth, 4--was overcome with smoke inhalation and died less than two hours after being taken to Wheeler Hospital.

Members stood by helplessly watching the walls of their church crumple to the ground. But as they watched, there were no thoughts of calling it quits but rather a spirit of

resurrection sprang forth that “We shall build again,” as the records from that time show. Church members themselves spent weeks digging out the ruin of the old buildings as soon as the embers cooled. Creative church members sold rusty nails taken from the demolished building that were placed inside little pamphlets showing a drawing of the future church on the front.

The pamphlet with the nail read: “For eight and sixty years, without reward, I’ve faithfully served in the House of the Lord; Please give for me a Quarter—OR MORE, and I will thankfully rest within your door.”

The new church building that we have today was dedicated on June 11, 1939, a little less than seven months from the time of the fire, a testament to the GUMC record of wonderful cooperation in working together, backed by a united, hardworking and courageous congregation.

“We did the only thing we could,” wrote Helen Glandon, a longtime member of the church. “We sang, ‘Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow’ as best we could with hearts overflowing.”

Helen Glandon sounds like she could be one of our present-day church members! The legacy of these fine people in our history lives on in so many ways today in the very walls of the church, in the very heart of the church, in the very spirit of the community!

Like the resurrection described in the scriptures for today, in the past, God raised our church from the ashes. It will take time and perseverance, but we will worship together again in this building when this current trial and tribulation passes. In the meantime, we are learning to connect in new ways, and one way we can stay together is through live streaming like this!

As the Psalm today reminds us, “I pray to God—my life a prayer—
and wait for what he’ll say and do.

My life’s on the line before God, my Lord,
waiting and watching till morning,
waiting and watching till morning.

7-8 O Israel, wait and watch for God—

with God's arrival comes love,
with God's arrival comes generous redemption.
No doubt about it—he'll redeem Israel..."

No doubt about it, He'll redeem us, and WE are the church; this is only the building.

Our church has been through the Civil War, the Japanese-American Internment (when our church members met the trains as they returned from internment and helped Japanese-Americans find jobs and places to live). Racism doesn't stop us; fire doesn't stop us; pandemics don't stop us!

God redeems, God rebuilds, God restores. And in this coming Easter time, we are reminded that He resurrects. Things may take a different form, but there is always hope for resurrection! We won't always be in the crisis mode we are feeling now; we won't always suffer fear and isolation. We'll sit together at the same table and eat Hal Leister's delicious bread pudding, and we'll drink Cheryl McElroy's out-of-this-world punch made with rainbow sherbet and heart-shaped ice, and we'll hug and laugh together in person again.

Today, we carry on the spirit of our pioneering forebears who kept the church going for 167 years before us!

As our church member Lorie Castro so eloquently put it this week: "As we forge ahead into the uncertainty of uncharted and unprecedented pages of history, let's continue to write our story in a way our grandchildren, great grandchildren, and descendants one hundred years from now can be proud of."

Amen!