Don’t’ Just Survive: Thrive!

Jeremiah 31: 1-6

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The first time it happened was about 6 am in the Philadelphia airport last March. I had been given the go ahead from my medical oncologist to fly to Florida to visit my mother in between chemotherapy treatments, as long as I agreed to stay out of the sun. I got pulled out of the line at the airport going through the security check and as I stepped aside I pulled my older of two tablets out of my bag, asking the TSA agent if this is what she needed to see. She answered affirmatively and then looked up at me, noticing for the first time I was wearing a scarf to cover my chemo-bald head. Without missing a beat, she said: “Are you a survivor?” Having never considered this notion before and being in the middle of chemo and being caught unaware at 6 am, I replied weakly, “I’m working on it.” But she never heard me because she launched into the story of her own experience of breast cancer while she absently dusted my device for something dangerous. Full of life and energy at that hour she declared, “You’ll be fine! You’ll be a survivor like me!” and she waved me off.

That was just the first of many, many times strangers have stopped me in the airport (the gate agent, a man, did the very same thing!), in departments stores, in the grocery store, and on the street. “Are you a survivor?” they all ask. And then they tell their *own* story on the pretense of assuring me and welcoming me into some kind of cancer “club” the likes of which I never knew of or wanted to be a part.

“You are a survivor from the day you are diagnosed,” one pamphlet in the doctor’s office read. Really, I thought? How can you say that, when we all know people who don’t survive their fight with cancer, when daily I read the obituaries in the paper confirming that it isn’t true. Over and over again in the cancer literature there is this claim to survivorship, as if it is or was a badge to wear, an identity to claim, a label to promote how good and whole and wonderful life is again.

Now, before I dig myself into a huge hole here, let me say that for some people, surviving cancer is an identity they are proud to proclaim and I don’t want to minimize that in the least. This disease is not for the faint of heart and it’s combat demands much. But as I was confronted with this question over and over again, from people who did not know me or my story, and didn’t *want* to know me or my story but rather wanted me to affirm *their* membership in the ranks, I began to silently refashion my response, at least internally. While gathering my energy and saying as brightly as I can, “I’m working on it!,” what I started saying in my head and in my heart was, “No, I want to be so much more than that! I want not *just* to survive, but I want to thrive!”

All of us survive things all the time: some of you here have survived cancer and are living full, healthy lives. But others of you have survived equally awful things: some of you have survived traumatic childhoods and unhealthy family systems. Some of you have survived abuse: physical, mental, emotional, sexual. Some of you have survived addictions and those living with addictions. Some of you have survived divorce and some of you have survived discrimination because of your race or your orientation or your gender or your ability. Some of you have survived terrible work conditions and the reality of war and of homelessness. And all of us have survived illness and disappointment and grief and uncertainty. “Are you are survivor?” Every one of us could say, “YES!” But I want to know if you want to do *more* than that; don’t you want to *thrive*?

Our text today is God’s promise to a people who barely survived loosing their land, their identity, their freedom. They had been deported, exiled, and deprived of their sense of self and community. The question of survivorship was real; would they ever again return home, be safe, reconstitute their lives and families? Would they ever regain the love and favor of God?

But here in chapter 31 we have a part of a section of oracles known as the “book of consolation”, looking forward to God’s restoration of Judah and Jerusalem. Here the prophet repeats the words he hears from the Divine, assuring “the people who survived the sword” that they would experience “grace in the wilderness” (a reference to the Exodus, another place where survivorship lead to the more than just being alive but to the Promised Land!). Here are the promises of rebuilding, of dancing, and flourishing vineyards, fruit harvests and a place to worship God. The picture painted here is so much more than survivorship: it’s thriving! It’s life that is full and rich, bursting with the energy and hope of God. If we’d keep reading we’d heard about the ingathering of the disenfranchised, the parental caretaking and nurturing of God for those lost, and weak and weary. We’d hear about redemption of the young and old, “mourning turned to joy” and “gladness for sorrow.” (Jer. 31: 13) This is living, really living. It is more than eking out an existence; it’s more than getting up and going to a job we dislike day after day after day. It’s more than putting up with the way things are; it’s more than empty gestures made toward God.

Rather this is a vision, God’s vision, of a people who have faced the worst, lived to tell about it, and have been redeemed by God to live into the fullness of a new life. It will come with a cost; not all who went away came back. The nation had not always been faithful. But they have lived to tell about it and are promised they would return again. It offers a hope and an expectation that there is more to just “surviving”; God imagines that together, we will thrive!

And so I wonder how we might respond to that question as a congregation, a family of faith? Things are pretty challenging right now; our tower is literally teetering above us. That has made for an enormous amount of work and concern and financial demand; some of us wonder if we can survive this. In fact I was talking with a volunteer from another church during VBS about the situation and she said, “I don’t think our church could survive this; can yours?” Are we survivors?

The question of survivorship reverberates across our country in these tumultuous days. Many a police officer might ask that question as they take to the streets, only some of them aware that that is the question African Americans in this country have been forced to ask themselves for generations. But is surviving enough? Don’t we want to do more, to be more than survivors? Doesn’t everyone deserve the opportunity to thrive?

To thrive is to grow and develop vigorously; it is to flourish! To thrive is to live in God’s abundance and with gratitude for both the opportunities and the challenges that mark our way. To thrive is to live into the vision God promises: the restoration of the disenfranchised, the healing of nations, the bounty of the earth to fill empty stomachs, the joy of singing and dancing to revive weary spirits. The question “are you a survivor?” isn’t the right question. The right question we need to ask ourselves as individuals, as a congregation facing a formidable challenge, and as a nation in racial turmoil is whether or not we want to thrive! Whether or not we can transform whatever we have suffered into an opportunity to live into the fullness of the image of God!

I am nearing the end of my radiation treatments, well aware that I will live with their after effects, both bad and good, for some months into the future. I will have survived my cancer treatment; the question for me now is, can I begin to thrive? Can I begin to reclaim my life? Heal my body? Trust my body? Can I begin to sift through all I have experienced and turn that into some new understanding of myself, the world and the communities of which I am apart? Will I just survive or will I move toward thriving? Toward flourishing and growing in the light and love of God?

And what about you? Can you take all that you have been through, are going through, and begin to find what you need to move from getting by to going somewhere? Can you begin to plant the seeds for new life, new growth, in the soil of the past?

And what about our church? As we struggle with where to find the resources to tear down this tower, to reopen this road, can we somehow envision a way that will not only allow us to survive but also to thrive? Will we discover in our need to rely on the help of each other, both inside and outside our church, a new mission, a new purpose? Will we be open to making alliances with our neighboring churches that cause us all to flourish, to grow into God’s new vision for our community? Can we, even in the thick of it, begin to pray that God will cause us to do more than survive; can we trust enough to ask God to use this as an opportunity to thrive so that we and our neighbors and our community of faith will find life and energy anew?!

“The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.” (Jer. 31:2) This has been true of God’s people over and over again. This morning let us sincerely honor each other as survivors of all kinds of life’s ills. But in doing so, let us also invite and encourage each other to do more, to be more than survivors. Let us ask God to give us the strength, the courage and the faith to thrive!