



JAMES ISLAND

Presbyterian Church

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While in seminary all first-year students were required to take a class called *Imagination and Resilience*. It was one of those classes that we all complained about and questioned why we needed such a class. In our first-year seminary student minds, this was a waste of time. We thought we should be deep in the language of Hebrew, reading Exodus, and learning about pastoral care...don't worry...we got all that education too. However, as I continue to be in conversation with many of my seminary classmates, we joke about how often we refer to that *Imagination and Resilience* class.

In a recent blog post one of my seminary professors, Dr. Ryan Bonfiglio, wrote about the word resilience seen below:

Popular opinion has it that resilience is the result of mental toughness, tenacity, grit, discipline, strength, and/or thick skin. There's some truth to this, but each of these answers assumes that resilience is primarily about enduring through a difficult situation or bearing up under hardship.

Resilience, however, has a slightly different connotation. The Latin root resiliere means "leaping back" and refers to the ability of a substance to recoil or bounce back into its original shape after being deformed under pressure or tensile force. A resilient thing is not undentable, uncrushable, or unstretchable—it is persistently bounce-back-able.

Applied to humans, being resilient doesn't mean that we never crumble under pressure or aren't ever crushed under the weight of criticism or disappointment. Being resilient means that after having been painfully deformed—emotionally, spiritually, or vocationally—we have the capacity to bounce back to our God-intended form and purpose.

Understood in this way, what is the engine that drives resilience? Scripture points to joy.¹

Following the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, the Jewish community was exiled from their home and was forced to move into foreign countries. After being in exile for 50-100 years, rulers changed, and Jerusalem was reopened for the Jews to return home. Upon returning, there was much work to be done. Not only was the infrastructure deformed but the whole community yearned to be back to their original shape. To help them bounce back, rediscover their identity, and move forward after years apart, the community did not create a list of team-building exercises, fun traditions "they always have done," or send out pledge cards. They did not even invite people to join a committee! While these are all vital and life-changing to the church and those involved, they are never the starting point in scripture. Instead, the Israelites simply came together and read scripture. The book of Nehemiah, which gives details of this return, emphasizes repeatedly in chapter 8 that "all people" came together to read

¹ Bonfiglio, Ryan, "Bouncing Back" The Ministry Collaboration, Dec. 7, 2021, <https://mministry.org/bouncing-back/>

and listen to scripture. Upon hearing and learning together Neh. 8:9-10 says that “the people wept” and together they were reminded “the **joy** of the Lord is your strength.”

Over the last five years, the deconstruction JIPC experienced may not exactly compare to the experience of the Jewish community in the 6th century. However, as a community, we have felt deformation. As we reconstruct, instead of trying to get everything back to the way we always did it, what if we tried to focus our energy by doing less and going deeper? What if in 2025 we, *all the people*, looked at scripture for guidance and committed to one thing – **reading scripture together.**

I believe that if we commit to doing less and go deeper with scripture that not only will we bounce back and find strength by God’s joy but without it we risk forgetting our identities all together. Although, I must warn you. If we dare take this risk, get ready to be surprised by God who has already sent Jesus ahead of us: preparing a place for you, me, and “all the people” of JIPC.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barrett". The script is cursive and elegant, with a large initial 'B'.

Barrett A. Payne
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