

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH**  
**Sunday Worship, June 30, 2024**  
**Rev. Irene Willis Hassan**  
**“What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Weird at Parties”**  
**Scripture: James 1:2-8; 12-15 & Ezekiel 4:9-13**

**James 1:2-8; 12-15**

**2** My brothers and sisters, whenever you face various trials, consider it all joy, **3** because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. **4** And let endurance complete its work, so that you may be complete and whole, lacking in nothing.

**5** If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. **6** But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. **7, 8** For the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

**12** Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord[a] has promised to those who love him. **13** No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. **14** But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; **15** then, when desire has conceived, it engenders sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.

**Ezekiel 4:9-13**

“Take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them in a storage jar and use them to make bread for yourself. You are to eat it during the 390 days you lie on your side. **10** Weigh out twenty shekels[b] of food to eat each day and eat it at set times. **11** Also measure out a sixth of a hin[c] of water and drink it at set times. **12** Eat the food as you would a loaf of barley bread; bake it in the sight of the people, using human excrement for fuel.” **13** The LORD said, “In this way the people of Israel will eat defiled food among the nations where I will drive them.”

**Sermon: What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Weird at Parties**

This week at Pā’ina Night, we covered the concept: “Is it true that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger?”

If you haven’t heard this phrase, “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” it comes from a billboard hit pop song that I may or may not try to poorly sing to you briefly called “Stronger” by Kelly Clarkson. Essentially, it means that the traumas of our lives serve to make us more resilient. The concept reflects James 1:2: “My brothers and sisters,

whenever you face various trials, consider it all joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.” In modern speech, James is saying the same thing as the pop song – “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

Yet, those of us who have experienced trial and tribulation may take issue with James’ exhortation that we become strengthened by our suffering. We may look at ailing family members and think “Parkinson’s hasn’t made my loved one stronger at all.” We may recall a poor financial decision or a significant material loss and think, “No, I definitely wish I hadn’t lost that asset, I could certainly use it now.” There’s a myriad of trials in life from deaths of children in warzones to random misfortunes of fate that we may feel that did not need to happen, and no, it didn’t make the situation stronger or better than before as a result of it happening. Critics of the phrase say it flippantly disregards the pain and suffering inherent in the human story and tries to gloss neatly over something that is actually messy and terrible.

Pop culture came up with a response to this challenging spiritual concept of strength through enduring trials. After the pop song came out, t-shirts and memes followed by reappropriating the phrase to say: “What doesn’t kill you makes you weird at parties,” which seemed to resonate more with a generation that felt tired of being told to be “resilient” through the chaos of life. There’s a good many situations in life where quipping “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” would come across as an insult. There should never be an excuse for a parent having to bury a child, or a home being taken by fire or flood. Those sorts of tragedy should not be sanitized as a “lesson from God” or “opportunity for growth.”

So then, what does the Bible say about “What doesn’t kill you makes you weird at parties?”

When I was at seminary in Boston, I took a course on Ezekiel because it’s a super bizarre book and I wanted to understand it better. Have you ever read through Ezekiel? Many of the chapters are filled with strange visions and crazy circumstances. My Old Testament professor who taught the course guided us to the conclusion that Ezekiel, in all his dark, turbulent narration and shocking behavior throughout the book, was suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. PTSD is a mental illness that is brought on from witnessing or being involved in terrifying events and often manifests as jumpiness, erratic mood changes, and inability to accurately assess threat levels. She told us that he likely exhibited these traits as a result of watching the destruction of Solomon’s Temple and subsequently being exiled and watching his wife and all his friends murdered in front of him, and that’s why the content and cadence of the Book of Ezekiel is so ... weird. She taught that Ezekiel is a product of a disoriented mind and trying to sanitize it into a story of redemption does an injustice to the reality of the suffering he was experiencing.

Ezekiel is the epitome of “what doesn’t kill you makes you weird at parties.” Imagine Ezekiel lying on his side at a party, heating up a batch of bread on a pile of human excrement. If we saw this, we would indeed not see a man of resilience worthy of

Biblical record – we'd agree with my seminary professor and believe this man is in urgent need of professional mental help!

However, we know that Jesus does create new life from death and that rising into transformation out of tragedy is possible through Him. In fact, the Bible is riddled with stories of redemption and situations of tribulation turning into outcomes of strength with God's guidance, from Exodus to James. And although I intimately understand my professor's point, the message of redemption was what Ezekiel was ultimately trying to convey, which he pointedly says in his own words throughout the book.

Alright time for those Bible history nerd goggles that I ask you to wear sometimes so that we can understand together why Ezekiel is a story of a redemption rather than just a poor weird man suffering from PTSD.

Ezekiel, as well as the more popular Isaiah, both wrote their books through a time period known as the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BC. Solomon's Temple had been the pinnacle of religious life and faith for over 500 years, and the Babylonian Empire came and destroyed it and sent all the Jews into genocide and exile in the year 586 BC. While Ezekiel was grappling with the terrible grief of that event, he wrote this book as an explanation for how God let that happen and words of hope about how they could restore their Temple and religious life together under God's guidance.

The chief difference between Isaiah and Ezekiel, who both wrote about the destruction and rebuilding of Solomon's Temple, is that Ezekiel was written in a 22 year span during the worst parts of the crisis and exile. Ezekiel always knew what he was talking about as he wrote in raw, real time against the tides of his grief. Isaiah was written over a couple hundred years, with more reflectiveness and clarity on the events passing through that time and different authors. Ezekiel is more raw, personal, and painful than Isaiah, and therefore may have been clouded by the effects of real time trauma, as my biblical studies professor suggested all those years ago.

However, it's not just the mentally ill ramblings of a devastated man, although some of that darkness certainly illuminates the text. It's a story of transformative hope through one of the most harrowing events in the history of God's people. The first half of Ezekiel is full of bitter condemnation of his community and declarations that this punishment from God was necessary as a result of their sinfulness. The second half of the book is a message of hope that God will save the faithful remnant and deliver them into resiliency. Ezekiel intended his message to be about retribution and redemption, even if it does come across as chaotic and disorienting for the reader due to the incredible stress he was under as he wrote.

You can take those Bible nerd goggles off now and we'll return to the debate on James' (and Kelly Clarkson's) "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" vs the pop culture backlash of "what doesn't kill you makes you weird at parties."

Sometimes what makes us weirder *is* what makes us stronger. “Weird” in this context has a connotation that the situation isn’t necessarily acceptable, and that it’s ok if it’s messy or painful to endure or remember. The messy weirdness of redemption after tragedy is extremely underscored by Ezekiel, but we see cleaner traces of it all over the Bible, from Moses hiding in the wilderness after murdering the Egyptian to Jesus calling out to God for forsaking him on the cross.

No one, especially not the Bible and most especially not in Ezekiel, said that our journey to strength and redemption was going to be clean. In fact, that journey very often looks like us lying sideways on the floor cooking bread with human excrement (or some messy equivalent of us sobbing while stuffing whole sleeves of oreos in our face). Ezekiel is a story of both strength and weirdness, without those things needing to be mutually exclusive.

The Bible tells us stories of redemption over and over again that what doesn’t kill us does in fact make us stronger. But in the middle of that story, if we pick up some inherent weirdness, that’s part of the story, too. Your redemption doesn’t have to be clean or coherent. It’s ok if it’s frustrated sobbing over oreos or human excrement-fueled barley cake or whatever. But the end of every story of the Bible, from Job to Jesus is the same – whatever it is you’re going through, God can make renewal from it if you let Him lie sideways on the floor with you while you sob.

What doesn’t kill you makes you weird at parties. Let God transform that weirdness into something that gives you strength. The two things need not be mutually exclusive.

Amen.