

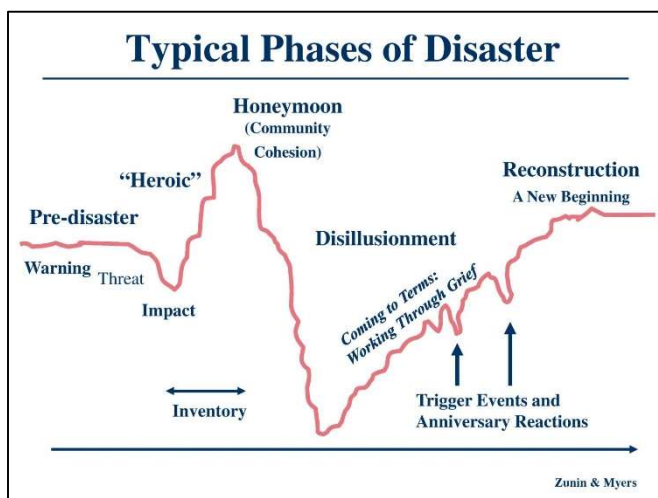
I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.
Genesis 12:2b

Blessed to Be a Blessing

It's been almost three weeks since fire swept through Pacific Palisades and Altadena, but it's only been this last week when everyone could go back to their homes and see what's left. At some point we will need to acknowledge that the world continues to go about its business, and so we need to move on, even though our lives will be in some level of disarray. That disarray can look quite attractive at times. I have always said that my nicest clothes are hand-me-downs from my sister. Now that I'm starting over, I've already warned the staff that they will see me in more avant-garde pieces than before. (Ericka Smith-Stephens saw me later and pointed at my top and said "is this your sister's?") I was able to speak at the grand celebration of MEC's 30th anniversary last weekend—what an incredible event!—and I was wearing a striking piece that I would not even have if not for losing my entire wardrobe.

As we move forward in this long journey of recovery, I want to learn from others who have gone before us, and sadly there are many who have walked this road before. So, for instance, the staff of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has been meeting with pastors and presbytery leaders each week to check in and talk about what's next.

There's a chart that has been used to describe the phases of response to disasters. It was developed by Diane Meyers and Leonard Zunin, medical experts in trauma and loss, and while there are some variables, these phases are relatively predictable.



Normally I appreciate roadmaps like this, though I'm not sure I wanted to hear that after the hero phase (when folks leaped into action during and right after the fire), and as we move out of the honeymoon phase (when we remark how the community is pulling together), there is a drastic drop into the pit of disillusionment. As the adrenaline subsides and old conflicts find a place in this new reality, people begin to assess the adequacy of the response and community spirit gives way to blame and resource inequity. I don't believe we should strive to ignore this phase, but we also don't want to get stuck there.

More than anything, we need to pace ourselves, because this process of moving towards rebuilding will take years. An article on the town of Paradise showed that six years after the fire, the town has not yet completed the rebuilding—though what has been rebuilt is safer than what was there before.

Last week I mentioned that our Presbyterian church buildings were all spared, unlike so many of the churches in Altadena. One of our pastors suggested that since we Presbyterians are the "frozen chosen," we didn't burn in the fire, we just thawed out! I do hope that even as we were saved from the fiscal damage, our hearts are opened to other communities of faith who have lost their home base. Having been blessed, they are being a blessing to others, by welcoming other churches onto their campuses, or being hosts to service providers as they offer hot meals or tangible provisions to the displaced or those who are helping them.

As we look ahead to reconstruction, many have raised concerns that the community spirit of Altadena—the spirit of mutual concern and shared history among a diverse demographic—will be erased if commercial developers are allowed to come in and build large look-alike housing developments, priced beyond what many Altadena residents would be able to pay. In talking with others about what churches can do to allow for diversity and creativity in the new Altadena, I've thought how the churches can go beyond advocacy and actually build to include affordable housing on their campuses. With one of these churches, their denomination is proposing a significant investment in pastoral leadership so that they could call a full-time pastor who would tend to the existing congregation in its rebuilding, but also be a community organizer for Altadena as the community rebuilds. My fellow presbytery leaders in the Synod of Southern California and Hawaii and I had just discussed how we can participate in such an effort, even though we do not have significant needs for ourselves. One thing to understand: PDA plays a significant role in disaster response, especially in the long-term redevelopment phase, and not just for our own churches but in partnership with all community leaders to rebuild the entire community, preserving the best of what the original community enjoyed.

I understand this is very far off, but I want to plant this seed now. I am proud of the ways our churches are opening their facilities and hearts to other communities of faith, and to the community in general. My news is that I will be able to move to Eagle Rock in mid-February, which is a great relief for me, but I am aware that at least one key elder in one of our churches is serving the congregation through a critical time while she and her family are still living in a hotel room.

Let us thank God for the blessings we have seen so far. Let us care for and mourn what has been lost, and celebrate the many ways our members are supporting others in significant ways. Let us allow for a whole range of emotions, especially as we prepare to walk in the valley of the shadow of despair. And let us be open to God's creative genius in transforming ashes into new life. We serve a great God; let us be bold in our obedience. Now is the time; now is the opportunity.

In peace,

Wendy