

Bethel Staffer: 'The Carr Fire Stole Our Home, But It Can't Steal Our Hope'

Editor's Note: This article comes from the author's personal blog and is not intended as a statement from Bethel Church.

Furthermore, if you want to help those affected by the fires, you can give through Charisma's nonprofit partner, Christian Life Missions. One hundred percent of your donation will go to those affected. We have already sent \$5,000 to Bill Johnson and Bethel Church since they know where the needs are. Send a check to Fire Disaster Fund, Christian Life Missions, 600 Rinehart Rd. Lake Mary, Florida 32746. Or give through PayPal at . or call 407-333-0600 during business hours to give by phone.

It was 4 a.m. when I woke up, groggy and feeling strange. As I looked around my house, I realized it felt much darker than usual, and the smell of smoke surrounded me. I woke my husband up, trying not to panic, thinking I must be overreacting.

The night before, Drew and I had learned of a wildfire being fought by firefighters miles away from us in a national park. While it was eerie to see the horizon filled with smoke, we took solace in knowing that it was miles and miles away. We would be fine. We would be safe.

We weren't.

Drew and I tried to turn on the lights. The power was out. He went outside to check on things, and when he came back inside I began to feel nervous because of how silent he was being. He researched where the fire was, and found out that our area was under evacuation.

I'll never forget the moment when my husband, who is normally cool and collected, looked at me with fear in his eyes and said, "I think we have to get out of here."

We held each other in our living room for a moment, both in total shock and disbelief. It was the last time we would ever be inside that room.

The next hour was a blur as we ran through our house with flashlights in hand, trying to pick out the items we could not live without. Thankfully, because we travel often, important items like passports and other documents were easy to find and not left behind. What did not come as easily was having to choose what few objects from my house would be coming with us. I took our wedding vows and beaded necklaces we were given on our honeymoon from Hawaii. I took some sentimental photos and art pieces off the wall. We took some clothes. We brought our dog and our cat.

Then, just like that, we left our house. We didn't know at the time that we would never step foot inside our beautiful home again.

The sun rose and Drew and I waited for any news throughout the day, constantly checking reports of the fire. It felt surreal. *Did that just happen? Were we really evacuated from our own home?*

Being from Florida, wildfires are a completely new concept for us. We're used to hurricanes and the occasional flooding, but this was so different. In my inexperience, I remember thinking that the fire would certainly be out within 24 hours or less. In my mind, firefighters and law enforcement would be able to get a handle on whatever fire might be looming and put it out with ease.

As the days went by, I realized how naive I was. My perspective couldn't have been further from the truth. I spent days not knowing anything about the state of my home—

even a week later as I write this, the fire is still only 40 percent contained, raging on and destroying whatever is in its path.

As we waited to hear any news on our neighborhood, floods of phone calls and text messages came in from friends and family. Some of them were kind and incredibly supportive. Others were wildly unhelpful and, dare I say, insensitive.

The waiting felt like purgatory. Every day, Drew would tell me he couldn't guarantee our home was still standing. I felt confident it was—somehow wanting to hold on to any hope I might have. I had heard stories of neighborhoods completely destroyed, with one or two houses miraculously surviving. It felt like luck of the draw, but I was choosing to cling on to any kind of belief until I heard for certain that our house was gone.

We spent the days in Sacramento, then Los Angeles, with other evacuated friends, some new and some old, and actually had a beautiful time of community during it all. Then, we received confirmation. A picture taken by a reporter revealed that there was nothing left. Our home was gone.

The grief hit me like a wave. All of the false hope and denial that I had been clinging to broke in that second, as I realized that everything was destroyed. Our beautiful, peaceful home that overlooked the mountains of California, that housed many friends, family, artists and visitors, that hosted holiday parties and friends' pregnancy announcements, was completely and utterly no more.

Until that moment, I had never experienced anything quite like this. The word "calamity" was something I had never truly understood before, but now it felt like I had a real grasp. We were homeless. As a victim of abuse, I had felt some of these familiar feelings before—something coming for me in the middle of the night, unexpected, unwanted, violating.

What was heartbreaking about this was not necessarily losing objects in our home, but losing the memories that were made there. In this fire, I lost my beautiful and cherished childhood piano. We lost our freshly remodeled bathrooms. We lost furniture that had moved with us cross-country from Florida to California, pieces that reminded us of our Tampa Bay home. We lost a memory box filled with ticket stubs, pictures and letters that went back to when we were dating. We lost dozens of art pieces and decorations we had acquired from adventures all over the world. In my worst moments, I visualize those valuables burning. The materials weren't the valuable part; it was the history of who we are that was stored inside of each of the components.

After we learned the news, my husband held me, and we both cried. We grieved together.

Then, we began to pick up the pieces.

I don't really understand how we can grieve but feel the comfort and closeness of God nearby in the midst of it all, but we do. I can say with such confidence that He is near to the broken-hearted. While I have felt fear, there has been this unshakable hope that the story is not quite over, but just beginning. *We will have the final word, and God will literally create beauty from the ashes.*

The craziest part about the timing of this wildfire was that just a month before the fires came through our city, Drew and I lived perhaps one of the dreamiest months of our entire lives. As we settled into this city where we've lived for almost two years now, I began dreaming about creating a "boutique hotel" that we could rent out to those visiting Redding. We looked at a few options over a few months, and though some were very promising, nothing quite fit.

What I saw in my head was a building with a coffee shop or restaurant attached to it, thinking about how beautiful it

would be to create a space that both locals and visitors could call home. Then, a friend of ours called to let us know that a local coffee shop, "Coffee Bar," was for sale, along with the building it was in, with two beautiful apartments above the cafe.

At first, the idea of having a coffee shop intimidated me because it wasn't something I originally wanted to have my hands in. But, as I processed with friends, I realized how perfect it could be. I began to dream about remodeling the coffee shop and turning the apartments into hotel rooms, and my love for interior design began to get me excited about the undertaking.

But I needed more than that. I needed godly confirmation that this was something that had purpose and that we were called to do. As I began to wonder and pray about this, I felt a prompting to think about the street names that Drew and I lived on. In Tampa, we lived on Forest Avenue. When we moved to Redding, our house was on Highland Circle. I looked up what street Coffee Bar was on, and laughed to see it was on Pine Street. Immediately, I was reminded of an image God gave me years ago, of Drew and me worshiping atop a massive pine tree, looking up to the heavens. As we sang, other trees began to sprout up from the ground, worshiping as well.

I began to research trees in the Bible, and I learned about how strong and beautiful they are. I found one passage in particular that moved me to tears:

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongues fail for thirst, I, the Lord, will hear them, I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive tree; I will set in the desert the fir tree, and the pine, and the box tree

together, that they may see, and know, and consider, and understand together, that the hand of the Lord has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it (Isa. 41:17-20).

As I read this Scripture, the name “Evergreen” flashed across my mind. I teared up thinking about what these trees represent symbolically in Scripture as well as how they speak to the beauty of Northern California. It resonated with me that these trees are symbols of hope for the poor. My desire is to use my life to work with women who have been sex-trafficked and abused, and I was moved to tears to think that through this coffee shop, I might be able to create a place filled with community and laughter for the oppressed. A place where perhaps we’d be able to one day provide jobs for those in need. A place where I could dream about starting something in our city that was a place of belonging for all.

As we came back to Redding, we were homeless, but we closed on the coffee shop anyway, filled with grief for what we had just lost but equally filled with excitement for what we had just gained. Though some of our land was taken from us, God has generously given us new land. Though the enemy came to fill us with despair, God has graciously filled us with an abundance of peace and joy. Though there have been and will continue to be moments of intense heartache and grief, we feel miraculously held and cared for by the goodness of God.

The name Evergreen now means even more than it did just a week ago. These wildfires came to burn away all of our trees and land, but in the middle of downtown Redding, we are planting something new.

The fire stole our home, but it can’t steal our hope. The fire could steal our past possessions, but it can’t steal our future. The fire can’t take anything that’s to come: It can’t take our creativity, our resolve, our community, our love.

Though I hate that we and our city had to go through something

so horrific, we feel so honored to be a small part of bringing restoration and hope to what will become the new Redding.

I've said this before and I'll say it again, Redding is a special place with special people. While we have faced tremendous tragedy, we have looked it in the face as a whole and have remained strong and courageous. How beautiful.

So, we stand with this city that we love and look forward to the beautiful days of redemption to come.

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Kristine Coffman is the outreach administrator at Bethel Church, leading strip club outreaches and ministering to the poor. When she's not running her new coffee shop or leading an outreach, you can find her at the dog park with her pit mix and husband, enjoying the beauty of Northern California.

If God leads you to support this family in their rebuilding efforts, check out their GoFundMe page, created by a friend:

This article originally appeared at .