

Vulnerability: A God Thing

Scripture

Matthew 1: 18-25

The Birth of Jesus Christ

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" —which means, "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

(New International Version)

Big Idea: Making ourselves vulnerable is God-like. A Dictionary definition of being vulnerable includes our capability to be hurt. The very word comes from a Latin word meaning "to wound." *It isn't about what will happen; it is about what might happen.* God is vulnerable in this story. In turn, Mary makes herself vulnerable, as does Joseph. Is part of the Christmas story our understanding that we can make ourselves so hard, so steeled to the message, that in our effort to reduce our vulnerability, we also eliminate all of the risk?

Our word for the day is vulnerability –God's ... and our own.

Our world view is often shaped as we grow into adults by our experiences as children, youth, and young adults.

I find it fascinating talking to a trained pastoral counselor about things that are now in my head and heart, and have them look at me and say things like -- "were you the oldest child?" -- "were either or both of your parents alcoholics?"

Trained people seem to be able to look into our souls and ask us questions that when answered, reveal to ourselves insights into who we are.

One example of how we reveal ourselves is our attitude towards vulnerability. Our willingness to make ourselves vulnerable is often a function of early experiences in life.

Often that earlier experience dictates what our conditioned response to opportunities later in life becomes.

I have met adults who were abused as children, and often they don't want to truly grow close to others as adults.

I have met women, who put their faith in a man, and then that man finds other loves. After *that* man is gone from their life, these women don't want to pursue another deep, intimate relationship with another man.

I have heard of parents who feel used by a child, and as a result cut themselves off from all of their children.

Too often, we let the hurt in our lives define us.

We use that hurt to cause us to draw deep into a protective womb where we think we are safe from the world.

We don't allow others to get to know the real us.

We find intimacy to be a gamble we don't want to take because we are just sure we are going to be hurt again as we have been hurt in the past.

You don't need to raise your hand and self identify, but my question is to each heart here. Is there anyone here who has *not* been hurt in some way that still hurts you today – hurt by a spouse or a lover, a parent, a brother or a sister, a child, or someone you considered your friend? My guess is that it is the rare person who has not been hurt in some deep, emotionally scarring way.

To be vulnerable means we allow ourselves to be capable of being hurt. The word vulnerable is drawn from a word in Latin which means “to wound”. Vulnerability brings with a certain amount of risk. Accepting risk, means accepting the *possibility* you might be hurt.

Vulnerability at its very core has to do with allowing your history of pain to be set aside, and allow your pain to not define you

Sometimes the damage in a broken relationship never truly heals. We encapsulate the brokenness within our souls, and the wound festers and grows ugly inside of us.

One of our cats recently had an abscess rupture and it was a smelly, frightful, ugly scene.

The damage often done to our souls is like an abscess ... it is often inside of us making us unhealthy and keeping us from being who we are called to

be – to live out God’s purpose for us ... because we don’t lance that abscessed injury and move on to healthy relationships where we treat *that painful experience* as informative and helpful in our search for purpose and our life project but not life defining.

Sometimes pain should aid us in our understanding of who we are, but ensuring that pain never happens again seems to be an insufficient basis by which to define our life project.

Proverbs 4:23 tells us: *Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life.* And some of us may not know the passage, but we certainly know how to guard our heart ... ain’t no one getting in here <point to the heart>... no siree, bob-tail.

I like that passage, guarding our heart *is* valuable advice, but it doesn’t mean put our hearts up in a lock box we throw away the key.

One Christian Writer tells us: The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from.¹ <PowerPoint this>.

I see this as a warning that in our protection of ourselves from risk, we take no risk at all – we shun all opportunities to be vulnerable.

We have been hurt and let down before by other people, and we are not going to let it happen again. How many of us have heard people say as if it was a bad thing – “I felt so vulnerable” as if being vulnerable itself is what is bad, not the hurt and pain that might happen. It is almost like we decide that being vulnerable brings with it too much risk, and we prefer the certainty of our current misery, rather than risk being hurt in what seems an all too familiar way²

Often, many of us decide, we are not going to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and we indeed lock up our hearts and we <draw out> throw ... away the key.

Let’s be clear, I am *not advocating* mindless, risky lives. Reckless behavior is a type of vulnerability that most certainly leads to bad outcomes -- there is truly no question to that. But by the same token, sometimes we – in a God-like fashion have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable in order to experience the fullness of God’s plan for us.

This particular passage from Matthew is about many things, but the shaft I want to mine this morning is the one called -- vulnerability: God’s ... Mary’s ... Joseph’s.

A little context: by the time of Jesus – Israel does not exist. Two tribes of the original twelve which made it to the Promised Land are now left – and they live in a country renamed for the larger of the two tribes: Judea. The term Jew means those who come from Judea.

The Jews have lost their kinsmen to the north some 700 years earlier. The Jews have been conquered by the Babylonians. They have been servants to the Persians. The Greeks followed by the Romans use their country for the greater good of Greece, and later Rome. <slowly> Their King isn't even a Jew.

It could be argued that part of the problem is their relationship with God.

The owner's manual is replete with the voice of prophets telling the remnant of the Israelites that God calls them to a deep, meaningful, intimate relationship but by and large, their relationship – particularly the royal leadership's relationship -- with Yahweh is not consistent. It has ebbs and flows ... and I would have to think from God's perspective, a certain amount of what we as humans call pain is experienced. The prophetic message is filled with the idea that God is feeling pain ... combined with disappointment.

God's pain is caused by a lack of willingness of the chosen people to conduct themselves *as* a chosen people, *as* a people set aside by God, to act. God is at times in this book (holding up the bible) rejected by the people he has freed from slavery, bondage and protected from their enemies. The story is replete with the idea that they suffer from institutional amnesia and forget repeatedly what this God has done for them as a people of God.

But – thankfully -- we worship a God who is willing to be vulnerable in the world and he is going to use the willingness of others to be vulnerable to advance and move his project along.

Insanity has been said to be the repeating of the same action over and over again, and expecting a different result.

Our God certainly isn't insane, and the plan outlined in the owner's manual calls for him to give us a “new thing”, a “new messiah”, a “new savior” and God is going to do something different in order to get a different result – he is going to walk with us – incarnate .. a fancy word meaning in the flesh.

And he does this new thing by making himself vulnerable to pain again ... the pain of being hurt by people and our condition which rejects the intimacy and relationship offered by God.

God exposes himself to the risk of being hurt ... again, by us.

And he does it through a woman who is vulnerable in her own culture of being stoned to death for the sin of being pregnant before being married ... and a man whose male pride may be hurt over his future wife being pregnant and he knows with certainty he is not the father.

A vulnerable God.

A vulnerable young woman.

A vulnerable young man.

And I would add, that the means by which God chooses to appear before us, is in the form of a newborn human infant – about as vulnerable a creature as exists.

This story seems replete with examples of vulnerability. In fact, this book seems replete with examples of vulnerability.

A childless nomad who trusts that God will make of his family a great nation.

A shepherd guarding his sheep who hears his name from a bush that is on fire, but is not consumed.

A youngest child, guarding sheep while his brothers are interviewed for the job of ultimate new leader.

A fisherman or two or three or four who are asked to change the world by following an itinerant rabbi.

A Pharisee bent on hunting down followers of “The Way” who encounters God on his way to Damascus.

Everyone of them could be hurt – and some WERE hurt – but they let their guard down and instead of ‘steeling themselves against the harshness of reality with the same steel that secures their lives against being destroyed – they allowed their lives to be opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from.’³

I think there are two points we need to reflect upon as it relates to vulnerability:

First is the depth of the relationship that is being sought. Second is the amount of trust that we feel is needed in order to allow ourselves to be open to potential pain and hurt.

God desires a deep, intimate relationship with us. Why else would he offer to walk with us hand in hand through the valley of the shadow of death, go to the cross in order to change our human condition, and promise us that he will be with us always, even to the end of the age?

Love – and I am here talking agape God-like love that truly bears all things, not passion - - is about allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. It is said in music and song that when we allow ourselves to love another – “that you see the face of God”⁴.

I have a news flash: God isn’t looking for us in order to expose us to the potential of hurt – and at its core, that is what vulnerability is all about – the *potential* of pain and hurt – in order to experience a cheap easy thrill.

God isn’t like us. God isn’t the best looking guy in the bar surveying the women without a companion at closing time to see who is going to accompany him home for the evening for some mindless, no commitment fling.

No ... God is seeking us out – pursuing us constantly – in order to be in a deep relationship with each of us: a relationship which is profound, fulfilling, and life-altering.

I wonder if that is not the real story this last Sunday of Advent: Mary and Joseph's lives were profoundly fulfilled and the world was altered by their act of vulnerability, an act of vulnerability preceded by God willingness to be vulnerable in divine fashion.

Given that the act of vulnerability was over 2,000 years ago, and we are still talking about it, it appears to have yielded fruit ...

And that act of vulnerability – allowing Mary and Joseph to bring Jesus into the world as a vulnerable child – had to have been accompanied by trust:

Mary trusted Joseph,
Joseph trusted in God,
God trusted them!

Trust was needed in order to allow their guards – their shields – down in order to allow this miracle to occur.

Trust is part of what we need to have in order to allow God's miracle to work within us.

God became vulnerable in the form of a child that Christmas two thousand years ago, and God asks us to be vulnerable to the idea that intimacy and trust call us to a place where our hearts allow that transformation to take place – today .. here .. now ...not simply two thousand years ago.

Yes, we are called to take some risk. No question about it ... the safest place for our heart may seem to be locked up in a shelf in a safe somewhere, but is that what hearts are for?⁵

For sure, God doesn't ask us to pitch our brain in this journey and do stupid rash things. An example is missionaries traveling to places where disease is rampant and the culture is different ... do they go without preparing themselves with vaccines and an understanding of the culture? Of course not.

Sure these missionaries guard themselves from things that are obvious and use their reason – their free will exercised appropriately – to protect them from doing stupid things.

But at the same time, they allow themselves – God-like, Mary-like, Joseph-like to be vulnerable to potential rejection, hurt and pain. Why? For the joy of unlocking the hearts of others to the joy of the celebration of Jesus in their lives. A celebration preceded by trust and culminated in a deep meaningful relationship.

Our word for today is vulnerability. It is about the potential of allowing ourselves to be hurt. In fact the word is drawn from a word in Latin meaning “to wound”.

God is willing to set aside past hurts, past indifferences by his people and do a new thing—a new thing different than that which was expected and hoped for and ... truly desired.

And he accomplishes this new thing by being vulnerable as God and as a child. By trusting two people – Mary and Joseph to be vulnerable to the risk of trusting God.

And the richness of that day is what we celebrate this season.

God’s coming into the world – in the flesh – to be with us ... in the most vulnerable form imaginable – a human baby.

Where is God calling you to take risk in your life?

When do you hear the small still voice of God speaking to you, inviting you to set down the pain and hurt you feel from earlier flawed relationships?

What direction do you feel God leading you at this moment?

God is offering to us intimacy – a depth of relationship and meaning that is like nothing we have not known before, and will only know when we are talking about relationship with God ... through this vulnerable child that will bestow on us Grace at the cross ...and in order to experience that intimate relationship, he is asking us for our trust.

(Sing)

Softly and Tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me;
See, on the portals he’s waiting and watching, watching for you and for me.
Come home, come home; you who are weary come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, O sinner, come home!

Vulnerability: It’s a God Thing – and a Mary Thing – and a Joseph Thing ... and a Thing for each of us here today We have spent four weeks preparing ourselves for the coming of God – God’s Advent --- God is now here .. here ... now .. in this very moment ... today ... calling to each of us ... softly and tenderly with a message of trust leading to a life of deep, intimate relationship.

Let us pray

This Sermon was delivered at Stratmoor Hills UMC in Colorado Springs on December 23, 2007. The copyright belongs to C. Dennis Shaw and dates from December 23, 2007.

¹ Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister and American writer (1926—), and harvested from Preachingtoday.com which cites: Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey*.

Vulnerability: A God Thing
Sermon at Stratmoor Hills UMC – December 23, 2007

² Little reminder here of earlier sermon theme, we often prefer the misery of our current certainty for the misery of uncertainty.

³ An intentional paraphrase of the above quote.

⁴ *Les Miserables* and Valjean's arias as well as *Mary did you know* come quickly to mind here.

⁵ A paraphrase of the John Shedd idea that the safest place for a ship is in harbor but is that what a ship is for?