

Well, as most sermons today will begin, we can note the obvious: Christmas Day has come and gone and we are now in the significantly less celebrated 12 days of Christmas leading up to Epiphany. Today is day 5 so I believe our true loves should be showering us with golden rings, so that's something.

All through Advent we spoke, prayed and sang of waiting and preparing expectantly for the arrival of the Messiah. We talked about how those in the time of the Bible were looking for the arrival of a Christ but in our time we focus our hearts and minds and lives toward the promised second coming of Christ. More realistically, we focus our lives around the Christmas celebrations. Decorations, parties, gifts, music and food all culminating in Christmas Eve services and a day spent with loved ones, kith and kin, around the hearth or tree, or as one headline of The Onion noted, "Relatives Gather From Across The Country To Stare Into Screens Together," with a picture of a family on the couch all staring at their smart phones and tablets.<sup>1</sup> But things are slowly beginning to return to normal. Decorations will be boxed up, trees taken out to wherever they go, the little needles will linger in the carpet and along the base boards for a few more months; visitors will begin to head home.

Matthew tells us in the gospel lesson that after they had left, after the magi, AKA the Wise Men, headed back east, leaving behind the wrapping paper from their gifts, treasure chests filled with gold, frankincense and myrrh, the lives of the holy family, Mary, Joseph and Jesus, returned to a new normal. The magi fill the story of Jesus' entry

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<sup>1</sup> "The Onion," <http://www.theonion.com/articles/relatives-gather-from-across-the-country-to-stare,34842/>

into the world with a sense that something special is going on here – like Christmas – but the visitors make their way home and the focus of this story falls on this small, new family.

Mary and her future husband, Joseph, find themselves alone in their home with this warm, squirmy, baby boy who happens to also be the Creator in newborn flesh.

Some of you have had the experience of having a new baby in your lives. One Morningside member who is a relatively new father was telling me at a Christmas party about what a mind-blowingly terrifying experience suddenly being alone with your child is. After the nurses and doctors and parents and in-laws have all gone home, leaving behind their gifts of clothes, blankets, diapers and bits of wisdom from their own experiences - as valuable as a treasure chest of gold - you find yourself alone, with this vulnerable human life, literally in your hands.

One of my younger sisters had a baby girl in October. I was fortunate to be there in the hospital the day she was born. When I arrived, my family was gathered there in the small room, anxious, excited, telling the story of Riley June's birth as my younger sister sat, now transformed into a mother, with the baby in her arms.

I've held my fair share of babies, but when I got to hold her I was overwhelmed by her fragility, her vulnerability, at mere hours old. As I took her in my arms I was rigid, my shoulder up, elbow out, as if I moved the wrong way, or moved at all, she might crack like a robin's egg. I was amazed as nurses and doctors moved in and out of the room, lifting the baby and tossing her around like a pizza dough, examining her as one might a cantaloupe in the produce aisle at Publix, looking for bruises or rotten spots. Their brash confidence highlighted my own uncertainty. That day my sister would call the nurse in if something seemed amiss about her baby's feeding or if she made a strange sounding

gurgle. What happens when they are all gone? What happens when all I know of the heartache, the terror, the uncertainty of this life comes face to face with this soft, fragile robin's egg of a baby? The vulnerability of us all made me afraid.

If you've loved a child: your own, a niece or nephew, a friend's, if you've ever set in the waiting room of a Children's Hospital, you probably have some sense of this feeling – the desire to protect this child from all potential threats, known and unknown. As guardians we often want to make everything perfect and right, protect them from the things that hurt us. (I wonder if this is how the guardian angel felt as he kept coming to Joseph in his new parent, sleep-deprived dreams?) There are also so many who long to experience this as parents but are not able. Wherever you are in this, perhaps you've had a feeling of helplessness wash over you – a vulnerability that is terrifying. But I wonder, can we somehow become OK with this?

And so as they all left Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus there in their small home in quiet suburban Bethlehem, the terrors of this world roared forth and the angelic protector of this holy family came to Joseph saying, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt for the world is upon you, the world outside the safety of your love and protection still rages, still storms.

When the ruler of the Jews finds out from the Magi of the birth of the *real* king of the Jews, foretold in ancient Hebrew prophecy, King Herod, who's really just a puppet of Rome, is vulnerable and terrified and out of that terror he sends the Magi to find out where this would-be-king is. He tells them he too wants to pay the baby homage, but we know he really wants to snuff out this potential threat before he grows up.

Brené Brown, a vulnerability specialist, (yeah there's such a thing) says, "Feeling vulnerable, imperfect and afraid is human. It's when we lose capacity to hold space for

these struggles that we become dangerous.”<sup>2</sup> ‘Dangerous’ is a bold word for her to use isn’t it? To run from our vulnerability and not hold space for it is dangerous.

I think the church is suppose to be that sacred space for us broken vessels to hold this vulnerability, hold it up together so the warm light of this vulnerable Jesus Christ can shine healing love on us all. We can be like a mosaic of broken peaces bound together in the warmth of the sun. Can we create that space here to bring our struggles before God and one another? Can we be vulnerable and afraid right here? Can we be OK with that?

In a world that revolves around the whims and fears of political leaders grappling for greater power and control, there is no space for vulnerability. For many of us, facing the uncertainty of this life and our ultimate inability to control really much of anything, we throw up armor to keep us safe and wall out that which makes us human. Herod, fleeing the terror of his vulnerability, becomes a *dangerous* terrorist.

In the story from Matthew, those angelic forces activate again and appear to the Magi in a dream to warn them not to return to Herod, and so when they leave, they go home another way and so Herod is not able to have the baby Jesus killed. His anger, fear and now humiliation lead to one of the more horrific scenes in the New Testament, the Slaughter of the Innocents the church has named it. Matthew is the only gospel writer to talk about it. I think Matthew is bold to bring this story to light, to place the story of the birth of baby Jesus in a world where these kinds of things happen. Bold because he’s not afraid to create a space in the Bible for the creator and savior of the world to be incredibly vulnerable. Our Lord is as fragile as a robin’s egg and has nothing but his peasant, refugee parents between him and the most powerful empire in the world. Matthew forces us, the church, to create a space for our savior to be fragile and

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<sup>2</sup> “On Being,” <http://www.onbeing.org/program/brene-brown-on-vulnerability/4928>

vulnerable in the face of extreme terror. Can we handle that? Our savior being non-anxious but vulnerable and afraid, not a mighty warrior, not a conquering hero who throws up armor and pushes the world away?

The bright lights and music and parties of the holiday season do not ultimately mask the darkness that exists around us, and among us. There are still parents, friends, children huddled in hospital waiting rooms. We are painfully aware of the slaughter of innocence in our day, from sleepy New England towns to the streets of Chicago, to the juvenile detention centers in our city. Even now, there wars and rumors of wars in South Sudan and Central African Republic, a bombing in crowded trains station in Russia this very sabbath morning.

What we see in the story of this small, new family of refugees fleeing for their lives, is a vulnerable family that does not flee God, but instead welcomes into their lives, into their own vulnerable arms the vulnerable God in-fleshed in this baby. What we see are two people like any one of us, making space for God to enter their lives and being vulnerable and afraid and they still keep going. Twice an angel comes to Joseph and tells him to get up, take the child and his mother and flee and twice, with out a single word, Joseph gets up, takes his child and his wife and goes. They do not push the world away, they do not push the God who they hold so dear away, they keep getting up and they keep moving, fragile and uncertain though they may be.

I recently went to a Christmas gathering for the Six Star Refugee organization which helps refugee families when they arrive in Atlanta from the homes they have fled find a way forward in their new homes. During supper with a former Catholic Priest who was forced to flee his home in the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of the board members said, between bites of wild rice, “Imagine someone shows up at your home in

the middle of the night and says, its time to go. You have no time to pack your life up, you just take your family and go and the next thing you know you are standing at the arrival gate at the Atlanta airport.” Imagine, an angel comes to you in a dream and says, it’s time to go, take your family, your child, the infant Emmanuel, and go. Imagine the moment when the uncertainty of the world breathes its icy breath on the vulnerability of your life and God says, still, “Get up, it’s time to move on.”

Where do the precious human children of God in this world find their strength in these post Christmas days? Maybe, like Mary and Joseph we can turn towards the source of their faith and their hope, the promises of God that we heard Caroline remind us of from the Prophet Isaiah, “and he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.” Our hope is a function of our struggle and we struggle together and we struggle with the holy family and their baby Jesus who grew into the man we know struggles with us.<sup>3</sup> He hears the cries of the inconsolable Rachels of the world and he knows those cries personally and he moves towards that vulnerability and shares in that space. We know ... we know how this story will go; we know that he never ever moves away from the vulnerable. What about us? Can we follow Christ into this uncertain space of vulnerability? Can we hold one another through the storms? I think we can become that space. I hope we will.

**Let us Pray:**

Oh God, to you we will sing: “Hark the Herald Angles sing, Glory to the new born King” and to us you Sing: “Arise, your light is come! All you in sorrow born, Bind up the broken-hearted ones and comfort those who mourn.” Help us make it so. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*