

Eric Dupee

12/24/23, Christmas Eve

“In the Hands of a Vulnerable God”

At the church this year, we created a little Advent devotional booklet. If you don't have one yet, I hope you will pick one up on your way out tonight. I know what you're thinking: “But Pastor, Advent ends in less than 4 hours.” It's a short enough booklet that if you curl up with a coffee sometime tomorrow morning, you can get through the whole in no time.

I want to tell you about one of the devotionals in the booklet. One of our church members, Esther Martindale, shared a moment from when she and her husband Vivan went to Paris. As she walked through the Cathedral of Notre Dame, she heard someone singing “Hallelujah” in the distance. She followed the sound outdoors, to the steps of the Basilica of the Sacre-Coeur, where she saw a street musician playing his guitar and singing.

As she listened, she noticed a little boy becoming fascinated with the music, but he was reluctant to approach this musician who was a complete stranger. Esther describes how the musician dropped to one knee and reached out his hand to the little boy. With the crowd gathered around looking on, ever so slowly, the boy put his little hand in his. Esther wrote that, at that moment, “the meaning of hallelujah became flesh, literally.”

When I saw the accompanying photo of the moment the boy placed his tiny hand in the hand of the stranger, and the vulnerability each of them displayed, I got to thinking of the difference in the way the world operates and the way God operates.

At a time when the death and destruction of war fills the news and the state of Maine tries to recover from a recent mass shooting, we celebrate a story in which the divine enters the world in the most vulnerable way possible: as a newborn human baby. The world will be changed through vulnerability.

The contrast between the world's way of operating and God's way runs throughout the story. It begins with the Emperor Augustus decreeing there would be a census taken. The Roman Emperor had the power to force Jewish people to register, so he could extract the maximum amount of taxes from them. That meant roughly 9 months pregnant Mary was forced to accompany Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to be counted.

If any of us had written the story, the Savior of the world might come from a prestigious and stable family with the means to provide the child with a good education. God chose to put the Christ child in the hands of an unwed teenager and her fiancé, who must have been scared to death to take her as his wife.

We might expect the Savior of the world to be born in an opulent palace, in a clean and orderly environment, with attendants to wait on both mother and child. Jesus was born in what must've been a drafty and smelly animal stable. On that night, Mary and Joseph were alone, in the cold, because there was no place for them indoors.

I think a big part of what makes the Christmas story so intriguing and special is the vulnerability of the holy family contrasted with the harshness and violence of the world in which they lived. In fact, it becomes even more stark in Matthew's Gospel.

When he heard a child was born King of the Jews, King Herod was so intent on holding on to power, he ordered all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two-years-old or under to be killed. In an effort to save their child's life, Mary and Joseph fled and crossed the border into Egypt where they sought refuge.

As human beings, we tend to draw on whatever power we have to get what we want. On the other hand, God acts through vulnerability. That's what's beautiful about the Christmas story. The divine entered the world without coercion, without intimidation, and without force or bloodshed.

I wonder if there's an invitation here to think about our own willingness to be vulnerable. If God acts through vulnerability, how might our vulnerability bless our own lives and the world? I'm not suggesting we shouldn't protect ourselves from harm. I'm not saying anyone should submit themselves to violence or abusive relationships. I want to be clear; there are reasons to protect ourselves.

I recognize what comedian and activist, Dick Gregory, tried to get across when he compared himself to a turtle. He said, "I'm hard on the outside, soft on the inside, and willing to stick my neck out." Allowing for some vulnerability in our lives, doesn't mean we don't protect ourselves from harm. But even a turtle has a soft side.

Research professor, Brené Brown, defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. She wrote, "Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, joy, trust, intimacy, courage – everything that brings meaning to our life."

I understand it can be very hard to be vulnerable in our world today. It's hard to embrace uncertainty, and to risk getting hurt, and to reveal our true feelings, but if God chooses vulnerability, there must be a very valuable payoff.

It might be that real joy in life grows from sharing how we feel about other people, sharing our hopes and dreams. It might be that trying something new and risking failure is how we find happiness. Maybe meaning in life comes when we move boldly into an uncertain future.

That grace-filled moment, on the steps of the Basilica of the Sacre-Coeur, could not have happened without the vulnerability of the musician to reach out his hand and that boy taking a risk of his own. This Christmas, I'm thinking of the birth of Jesus as an extension of a vulnerable God's hand in hopes that each of us will come a little closer and take hold.