

*Angels Among Us**“The Power of Vulnerability”*[Matthew 2:1-23](#)

Over the last four weeks of worship we have heard about the Angels Among Us. Today, on this First Sunday after Christmas we will conclude that series. Before we began, however, I'd like to take a moment to thank Pastor Ouk-Yean for allowing me this opportunity to come before you and participate in this worship. At the same time, I'd like to say how much it means to me to stand here before you, my church family, and connect with all of you in this way. Some of you are aware of my journey but for those that aren't I'd like to quickly share with you that over the past three years I've been following my call through seminary at Pacific School of Religion. This month I completed my graduate course work in Theological Studies and am looking forward to graduation this coming summer. And thanks to the support of this church and the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, I'm also currently a candidate for ordination as a Deacon. Thank you. Thank you to each and every one of you for the words of encouragement and support that you've offered me.

The season of Advent as we've heard over this last month is replete with angels of all sorts. They've been encountered in both moments of consciousness and dreams, with everyone from the priesthood to the peasant shepherd, and both men and women. It even seems that angels transcended possible religious boundaries as many religious scholars consider that the Magi—who we heard about this morning through Bob's reading of Matthew 2—were in fact distinguished Gentile foreigners. Finally, these angelic sightings might also be interpreted as ways in which God is actively engaged with His creation that unfolds throughout all history.

Yet the Christmas Story is so much more than a story of angels, although their otherworldly presence sets its exalted key and tempo. Their inclusion immediately tells us that something mysterious can interrupt normal life and the flow of time, and has. It is a story of making what would seem impossible possible, taking Elizabeth, a barren woman and making her fertile, or even more supernaturally expressed through Mary's virgin birth—transforming God's word to flesh. Some may rationally question, debate, or outrightly reject parts of this narrative yet it is theologically foundational to the ways we may understand the Son of Man. He is not just some prophetic man but as God incarnate, of flesh and blood.

There are many other ways that Jesus' birth and death are connected and even mirror one another. For the remainder of our time together today I'd like to talk about one of those ways, in particular, the way in which Jesus came into, lived and left this world through unwavering humility and vulnerability. And it is the way in return that we are all called ideally to live our lives.

Jesus' appearance could have taken many different shapes and yet He came to us in the most vulnerable of all possible ways, through His birth as a defenseless baby who was totally reliant on Mary and Joseph. His very survival as an infant was accented by a level of malevolence from King Herod that would have him kill countless two-year-old and younger boys in Nazareth. Jesus' birth into a modest family like Mary and Joseph's also made Him much more vulnerable than if He had been born into a wealthy or powerful family. He entered and departed this world in a role that had all the appearances of powerlessness. As we consider the life of Jesus from birth to resurrection an uninterrupted story of vulnerability emerges. This might seem especially true when we consider the ways in which such openness is inseparably connected and interdependent with love, compassion, and even humility.

Humility, a term used with some regularity within the Gospels is closely related to vulnerability but has some important differences that we should not overlook. Humility by definition is a quality or voluntary act of placing oneself below the station or position of another and is the antithesis of pridefulness and arrogance. Jesus, for example, teaches us the value of humility through His acts of washing Peter's feet and allowing John to baptize Him. And while relating to either the humble or vulnerable person would be pleasurable, it is the later, with their greater transparency that would make connection deeper and more intimate.

According to Dr. Brené Brown, a mental health researcher and author, we as humans have brains that are wired for connection. It is one of the primary reasons why we are here, and what gives purpose to our lives. And yet when we examine the ways in which we, as a society, live today we find ourselves in a world that is highly individualistic. It is our culture that threatens shame onto men that are perceived as being too weak or women unable to fulfill an unattainable list of expectations. How many of us might relate to those entrapments? Social pressures demand for example that our bodies look a certain way, that the cars we drive have a certain emblem, and our children perform to some idealized standard.

In the meantime, the internet lulls us into a sense of connection that is anything but. Our feelings of shame flowing from grief, disappointment, fear, and other anxieties can throw us into a flushing spiral of unworthiness. As a possible defense, a mind might create a narrative that says, "I am afraid you will not approve of me," and so I busy myself putting up sturdy armor around my heart—layer after layer—to protect myself from whatever it is you might think, long before I know what that is. I might guess that at least some of us can relate to this way of protecting ourselves. And if a strategy like that doesn't work we can attempt to cope by seeking perfectionism, expressing foreboding joy, or 'numbing out' and in so doing have become a nation with growing intolerance and record levels of indebtedness, obesity, addiction, and medication usage. And while speaking of addiction in this context we might acknowledge the way in which the 12-step program, used in many addiction recovery programs, encourages its members to be both vulnerable and humble through their declaration of powerlessness over their addiction. It is equally interesting to recognize the vital role that interpersonal connection plays in the lifelong recovery process. Vulnerability can tame shame and transform lives.

Shame is the one emotion that most often inhibits us from that need for meaningful connection with others that we encounter. And as it turns out, vulnerability is the one trait that allows us to deeply connect with one another, to be truly worthy of appreciating one another. Only when we lower our emotional shields to fully expose our naked inner self can we be fully seen and affirmed by others. Shame according to Dr. Brown invalidates us through silent whispers from our inner critic of "I'm bad" to "I'm not good enough," or "Who do you think you are?" There is, however, a cultural myth that suggests that vulnerability is a weakness which cheats us of those deep connections we long for. For those here that might think otherwise, I invite you to consider the last time you saw someone being vulnerable and didn't think or feel that they were being courageous, open or honest. Vulnerability is the birth place of many positive emotions including: love, belonging, joy, tenderness, empathy, and even traits like change, creativity, and innovation.

"Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness."¹

¹ Brené C. Brown. *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. New York, NY: Gotham Books. 2012.

From the time that I entered elementary school and until about ten years ago I shielded myself in every conceivable way to avoid exposing my own deepest and darkest vulnerabilities. I quickly learned in school that being different meant being exposed to criticism and bullying and so I made myself into a chameleon and blended in the best I could. It was a natural survival response and it worked for the most part barring the self-imposed 'solitary confinement' like isolation that left me generally safe but also depressed. Every few years I'd tentatively open myself up ever so slightly, like gasping for a breath of air, and trying to discern what it was that laid hidden within me that was so different. A decade would pass before I began to get an inkling of what I was shielding not just from everyone around me but also myself. The growing realization that my sexual orientation was not just different but apparently shameful heightened my need to guard my secret.

My official 'coming out' process began unexpectedly some ten years ago as I opened Pandora's Box while exploring my gender identity. After finally realizing my true feelings of 'who I am' after nearly fifty years was too much for me to bury. Those feelings could not be returned to the box and protected despite the shame that was connected to them. Being invulnerable was quickly disappearing as an option. And despite superhuman attempts my now true and full-self could not be coerced into the life I had just occupied.

The choice to remain connected to a life where I couldn't be my fully authentic self was not a choice. Ultimately, my world crumbled around me and yet the vulnerability that I surrendered to brought an unimaginable sense of liberation, peace and joy. Grief and sadness for what was left behind looms in an immediate past. That same surrender also brought me ever closer to God while leading me to seminary, this church, and before you. My faith, and trust in God's boundless Grace and Love has allowed me to greet each day, including this one, with an openness and vulnerability that allows Him and His creation to work through me. Vulnerability opens life to transformation.

In our day-to-day lives, each of us is likely to find it necessary [sic] and even desirable in certain circumstances to vulnerably open ourselves up in order to make our lives work for us. We might, for example, drive to and fro with a numbed awareness of the dangers that might befall us. We place our trust, the gateway to vulnerability, in our doctors to care for us or those that we love. And as a final example we might consider the vulnerability we bring into our intimate relationships that without would be anything but. Most of us don't give any of those a second thought and so I invite you to consider how you might become more naturally vulnerable to your neighbor and God's call. To live life more deeply and fully.

As I conclude I'd like to once again return briefly to the vulnerability that Jesus, the Son of Man, demonstrated when He came to us. His vulnerability invited us to see the possibility of Him and all His potentiality in us and us and our humanity in Him. This is the 'Power of Vulnerability in our life' and this is the way that we are called, you and I, as disciples of Christ to walk among one another and the world.

Let us come together in prayer for ourselves and one another as we...



“Perching,” Mixed media Painting by Jodi Hugo



Benediction

May the Lord bless you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord give you the grace never to sell yourself or God short
The grace to risk something big for something good,
The grace to know that the world is too dangerous for anything but the truth
and too small for anything but love.²

May God take your mind and think through it
May God take your lips and speak through them
May God take your hands and do something good with them.
And may God take your heart and set it on fire!

...and so, as we leave today, on this New Year's Eve
going into the future
as yet unmapped
take faith with you as you go;
into the parts of your life not yet traveled by love
into the parts of the world unexplored by grace
let compassion and hope be the roads that you follow
today and always. Amen

² William Sloan Coffin