

Christmas Eve B 10pm
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2017
Luke 2:1-20

VULNERABLE CHILD

From the perspective of public relations, the whole event was a bust. No one of any consequence attended—no politician or intellectual, no celebrity of any sort. And the media? Caught unawares, they were complete no-shows.

The fact that it unfolded in the dark of night, in an off-the-grid hamlet, amid the nighttime sounds and smells of an animal stall—bleating goats and bovine breath—had something to do with that.

The Creator of the Universe, emptied of any vestige of power, knit together in the secret of the womb; assuming every contingency that comes with synapse and sinew, coming into the world as we all do—through the pain of labor and the rush of water and blood.

What does it mean—that God choose these circumstances to make his appearance, so far beneath the radar of the world’s expectations, in such a vulnerable package? Of all the possibilities from which to choose, why did God choose to come as a baby?

In her parable of the Incarnation, Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

Babies do not go to war. They never make hate speeches or litter or refuse to play with each other because they belong to different political parties. Babies depend on people for everything. While no one asks their opinion about anything that matters, almost everyone seems to love them and that gave God an idea. Why not create himself as one of these delightful creatures?

He tried the idea out on his cabinet of angels. The senior angel spoke for them all. He told God how much they would worry about him, if he did that. He would be putting himself at the mercy of his creatures, the angel said. People could do anything they wanted to him, and if he seriously meant to become one of them there would be no escape for him if things turned sour.

Could he at least be a baby with special powers? The baby idea was a stroke of genius, the angel said, it really was, but it lacked adequate safety features.

God thanked the angel for his concern but said no, he thought he would just be a regular baby. How else could he gain the trust of his creatures? How else could he persuade them that he knew their lives inside and out, unless he lived one like theirs?

There was a risk. Okay there was a high risk, but that was part of what he wanted his creatures to know: that he was willing to risk everything to get close to them, in hopes that they might love him again.¹

¹ Excerpted, with editing, from Barbara Brown Taylor’s parable of the incarnation, *God’s Daring Plan*, in her book *Bread of Angels*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997)

Vulnerability is at the heart of what this night is about. But in case you haven't noticed, vulnerability is out of fashion these days. Who of us wants to go there?

Several of us from Peace Lutheran joined others from Westside Interfaith Network congregations at a White Center parking lot yesterday afternoon to serve a hot meal and share practical gifts with folks who needed them.

You can't be in a setting like that and not become profoundly aware of vulnerability.

I was glad to be in community with the people who came. At the same time, I was keenly aware that, when the event was over and everything was packed up and put away, I'd be heading back to a home with central heating, where a Christmas Tree with lights and presents awaited.

I've seen what it's like to be vulnerable—I've had some tastes of the experience during my 60 years, but do I want to go there? No.

Recent articles in the [Washington Post](#) and [Seattle Times](#) have documented how new Administration guidelines forbid federal agencies and contractors from using certain words as they prepare proposals for next year's federal budget.

Top on the list of forbidden terms—the word “vulnerable.”²

Bluff and bluster are in vogue, but when it comes to vulnerability there's no room in the inn.

The story of Jesus' birth, as Luke tells it, begins with a census. Caesar wants to know how many people are in his Empire so his bean counters can determine how much tax to exact.

Most modern governments do the same. The 2020 census is a BIG DEAL with downstream consequences for all Americans, but especially—if it's not done right—for the most vulnerable. The count becomes the basis for how federal money is spent on everything from education to transportation, AND the basis too for the reapportionment of congressional seats.³

Some fear that a partisan political appointee to head the Bureau will hinder rather than help efforts to determine how many people there are in this country, who they are, what their needs are, and where they come from.⁴

The predictable result will be that the people who are most in need, at the bottom rung of the ladder or off it completely, will find themselves ever more invisible and disenfranchised.

As we look back on the changes and challenges we face as a nation and world, it can be tempting to look for somewhere to hide or a place to bury our heads.

² *The Seattle Times*, December 21, 2017. The article was written by Juliet Eilperin and Lena H. Sun of *The Washington Post*. Other words include: entitlement, diversity, transgender, fetus, evidence-based and science-based. <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/trump-administration-targets-certain-words-to-influence-policies-and-perceptions/>

³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/07/15/536908867/could-a-census-without-a-leader-spell-trouble-in-2020>

⁴ *Ibid*. See also the report by Danny Vinik and Andrew Restuccia of Politico: “Republicans are hoping to insert a question on the form asking people about their immigration status, which has never been done before — and which could make people in immigrant communities less likely to fill out the form, given the administration's broader crackdown on immigrants. That in turn could under-count those communities, which would benefit Republicans when district lines get redrawn in 2021.” <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/11/21/trump-census-pick-causes-alarm-252571>

But tonight the heavenly messenger calls us away from these temptations.

To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

We may long for bigger signs. We may long for more discernible divine activity, for a MeToo—like social network tsunami that sends waves across the globe initiating lasting change.

Our preference is for a revelation at least grand enough to match the intensity of the catastrophes—both natural and human-made—that devastate our world.

But tonight we learn that God's ways of transforming the world are not overt and coercive but subtle, humble, and surprising in their vulnerability.

Still, with all that's going wrong with the world, what good can that do?

Richard Jensen tells a story of a young woman named Katie who was part of a Lutheran exchange program visiting church communities in India and Nepal.

As her group was touring a hospital in Nepal one day, an emergency announcement echoed through the corridors: DOES ANYONE PRESENT HAVE TYPE O NEGATIVE BLOOD—
WE HAVE A DYING BAY ON OUR HANDS.

Katie volunteered, for she did, indeed, have TYPE O negative blood. So while the rest of the group continued touring the hospital, she gave her blood to save the life of a child she'd never met.

The transfusion was a success, the child lived, and Katie was changed.

"It was one of the most powerful experiences of my life," she said. "People came up to me and said, 'How nice of you to give your blood for that child.'

"But it wasn't like that at all....It was as if it were not even my blood to give. It was God's blood. It was Christ's blood. It belonged to that child just as much as it belonged to me. I can't explain it. There was a mysterious connection between us. The whole experience was as much a gift to me as to the child."

Sisters and Brothers, this is God's point. Though we imagine God as being most divine in feats power and glory, God chooses to reveal himself most surely in the everyday reality of human vulnerability and suffering. When we join him there, our lives, this world, is transformed.

For it is here at the manger that God meets us, in all our uncertainty, and wraps himself around us as he himself was wrapped, surrounding us with comfort and joy.

**THIS WILL BE A SIGN FOR YOU: YOU WILL FIND A CHILD WRAPPED
IN BANDS OF CLOTH AND LYING IN A MANGER.**

This night, as we kneel at his manger, love is rekindled, as he takes our lives, whatever their shape, and bends them—and us—toward hope.

May this sign of God-with-us lead you to find your place around the manger, and to put your trust wholly in him. Amen.