

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18  
Psalm 27  
Philippians 3:17-4:1  
Luke 13:31-35

Lent 2C  
St Thomas, Medina  
February 21, 2016  
The Rev. Karen Haig

### Vulnerability and Grace

Well, there's no doubt about it now, it's the second Sunday in Lent and we are well on the way to Jerusalem. No more glowing white garments and transfigured faces. Jesus has set his sights on Jerusalem, and not even that sly fox, Herod can stop him. It's quite something, really. While it's likely that the seemingly friendly Pharisees simply want Jesus to move out of their neighborhood and into Pontius Pilate's, the fact is everybody knows that Jesus' life is in danger. Yet even knowing that he will surely die, Jesus will not be dissuaded from his mission. He has set his sights on God's dwelling place, Jerusalem, the very place God's glory will be revealed ... not in the magnificent temple, but on the hard wood of the cross. Everything is in motion now, and this holiest of holy cities, the place where God is both worshipped and ignored, is where the story will unfold. While Jesus is sure and certain and strong and brave, what strikes me most, is how profoundly vulnerable he is.

All of our readings today are about people who find themselves in the most vulnerable places. Abram believes God in the face of a promise that surely won't for the third time come true, the psalmist, up against all kinds of enemies and looking for shelter in God, even Paul, who at first glance sounds arrogant in telling the people to imitate him, is weeping for the ones who have no faith. And Jesus? Jesus is the most vulnerable of all. Fully human and knowing full well that he is moving toward certain death, he continues the work he has been given to do, and laments over Jerusalem because she will not turn to him. *Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing...* Evil is everywhere, and like a mother hen, all Jesus can do is meet it face to face and try to keep the flock safe from evil's harm. Knowing that many will scatter and reject the shelter he offers, Jesus will still stretch out all-embracing arms on the cross, just as a mother hen spreads her wings to shelter her little ones. And both in the face of certain death. Such courage. Such vulnerability. Such love.

It occurs to me that love and courage and vulnerability all go together. And that all of them are the grace of God. I know it seems paradoxical, when you really think about it, it takes great courage to allow one's self to be vulnerable. Yet we're much more likely to think of vulnerability as a weakness and something to be avoided rather than being a measure of great strength and something to be embraced. We may be willing to be more or less vulnerable in our most intimate relationships, but out there in the big wide world? I don't think so. Yet that's exactly what Jesus did. He made his way to Jerusalem, the biggest, most important place in his world, knowing he would die, and all for the love of God's people. Just like a mother hen, a mother lion, a mother bear, a mother who loves her child more than her very own life, Jesus would stop at nothing to protect God's children.

I know that being vulnerable for the sake of the ones we love is not limited to Jesus and mothers. And I've spent quite a bit of time thinking about what that means. If we're to love God and love

our neighbors as ourselves, I'm quite sure that means we need to be vulnerable in those relationships. And that can be very scary. If we're going to be vulnerable, we will need to be brave. And we'll need to remember that being brave is not the same as not being afraid. Being brave is being afraid, and by the grace of God, doing it anyway.

There have been many well-meaning people in my life who have suggested – or even insisted, that I need to toughen up, and get a thicker skin. My response is always the same. “I don't want to get a thick skin.” Mostly those folks tell me I'll be sorry, that there will be too big a price to pay, that people who aren't “worth it” will drain my energy and even people who are “worth it” will at best suck the life out of me and at worst, do real harm. But I still don't want to get a thick skin. I want to be like the mother hen, with arms outstretched to gather all of us in for the sake of love. It sounds crazy, I know it, but it is something I'm actually really sure about. Do I end up getting hurt? Well, yes, I do – but then anyone who loves, gets hurt. The amazing thing is, when we are willing to be vulnerable, when we stop spending our energy protecting ourselves and give all that energy to compassion and care and surrender and love, we actually come to the only real place of safety – that place where we're all gathered together under the shelter of God's wings. The psalmist this morning said it so beautifully – in all our vulnerability, God's is our only shelter. We try so hard to be good people, to do the right thing, to care for others in the midst of our busy lives, but we spend so much energy TRYING, and all that striving doesn't really work. Oh, it isn't that we don't need to be co-creators with God or that we should be complacent. It's just that making another list, working harder, or constantly worrying about doing the right thing, isn't a very good way to go about it. All those good things we do? God is the source of those good things. Not you and not me. It is only by God's unspeakable grace that any good gets done at all.

And there, dear ones, lies the beauty in giving up on control and self-protection, and instead just being real and tender and yes... vulnerable. Because when we are vulnerable, we accept the reality – not the idea, but the reality – that we live by God's grace alone. It isn't easy, but then easy is a poor measuring stick for a rich and real life. You see, grace and vulnerability go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other. It is only in being truly vulnerable that our hearts can fully open to God's love and grace. And when we are truly vulnerable, we are utterly dependent on God's grace. To be vulnerable, to allow ourselves to be truly seen, to hope out loud, to recognize that every single thing we do truly matters, to love with abandon no matter what the return, to follow Jesus in a culture that has all but forgotten who he really is – to be vulnerable is to recognize that it is only by the unmerited favor of God's grace, that we have any life at all.

Where are you feeling most vulnerable? Is it a place you let yourself think about and feel about very often? Or is it a place you shy away from because it's scary and painful and uncertain? What would happen if you knew that vulnerability to be the very place where God's compassion and love and grace live? Do you think it might be a bit easier to explore those tender places?

I'll leave you with some words from Fredrick Buechner that have helped me to find my way into the scary places, and to know that those places, when I let them, become the beautiful openings to God's unbounded love and grace.

*After centuries of handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shop-worn nobody's much interested anymore. Not so with grace, for some reason. Mysteriously, even derivatives like gracious and graceful still have some of the bloom left.*

*Grace is something you can never obtain but can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream, or earn good looks, or bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever **tried** to love somebody?*

*A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace.*

*There's nothing **you** have to do.*

*There's nothing you **have** to do.*

*There's nothing you have to **do**.*

*The grace of God means something like:*

*Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because God's creation wouldn't have been complete without you.*

*Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.*

*There's only one catch.*

*Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.*

*Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.<sup>1</sup>*

Amen

---

<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Fredrick: Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith