

God's M.O.
Preached by Rev. Patrick Hunnicutt
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Focus Text: Genesis 17: 1-11

Let me begin with an excerpt from a speech given by Bono, the rock singer turned humanitarian, during his keynote speech at the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast. Amidst his passionate, if not meandering speech, Bono speaks poetically about the nature of God, about God's "M.O." if you will. He says,

The one thing on which we can all agree, all faiths and ideologies, is that God is with the vulnerable and poor.

God is in the slums, in the cardboard box where the poor play house.

God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives.

God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war.

God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them.¹

I want to talk this morning about vulnerability.

Vulnerability isn't the most natural of subjects for a week like this one, when we have observed and again celebrated the *strength* of our democracy.

Looking across the bright masses in Grant Park shadowed only by the girded frames of towering skyscrapers, one saw the strength of joy, idealism, hope; the strength of a process that peacefully transfers the reigns of power and the courage of those who have defended the liberty that enables such a transition. Even those deeply disappointed by the outcome of this election could not help but be "uplifted" as President Bush put it, by the power of the American dream and its manifestation on Tuesday night.

But in the midst of that triumphant moment, President Elect Obama spent much of his victory speech speaking of our nation's vulnerability: two wars, threats to the environment, and a financial climate that is more than the talk of financial pundits, but a very real and present danger to the lives and livelihoods of so many people in the country, even those in our well-situated congregation.

On a night that showcased the promise of our nation, we were reminded of where that promise is weak, exposed, and frail. Vulnerable.

Maybe this is a good thing.

"Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "Blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, for they will be comforted, and they will inherit the earth." These are the words of a more famous speech by Jesus, echoed in the gospel of Matthew, and again by Bono in the company of presidents.

Jesus speaks in his Beatitudes not of victory, but vulnerability, for it is among the weak and exposed that God's blessings are most vividly met.

¹ [Source: 54th Annual National Prayer Breakfast speech, February 2, 2006]

This is what screams to me in our text from this morning.

We find God repeating his amazing promises to Abram

- God promises fertility...that a 99-year old Abram and his barren wife will be the ancestors of a multitude of nations.
- God promises Abram worldly prestige, that his progeny will become the stuff of kings and queens.
- God promises Abram a new identity, made known in a new name that means “ancestor of a multitude.”
- God promises land, a perpetual holding for his people who have known nothing but wandering
- And most significantly, God promises God’s very self. “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations...to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”

The promises God makes here are beyond belief, but the great surprise of the text is what God expects of Abraham to receive them.

We might expect God to demand everything of Abraham to earn such heavenly favor.

- A giant sacrifice.
- A perfect moral life, perhaps.
- Another leap of faith that will set an impossibly high bar for those who would follow.

But this is not what God asks.

“This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.”

In exchange for the moon, God wants, in effect, a sliver of skin.

But we know that it’s not just any sliver. Right? I don’t have to spell it out, other than to say that God wants to leave a mark on the part of Abraham where he is the most vulnerable, the place he most needs and wants to protect, cover up and conceal.

Walter Brueggemann, in commenting on this text, refers to circumcision as a sign and seal of trust. Neither the sliver of skin nor its origin is the point. The point is the trust Abraham shows in yielding his most vulnerable self to God, and the blessing that is experienced through that trust.

God offers Abraham a choice: offer me your vulnerable self, and you will know me, and all that I have to offer you.

The same choice is given unto us. But it is not easy.

There’s a web site called Post Secret...anybody heard of it? Every week, the site posts postcards where people reveal their deepest secrets. While some of the cards are funny, like the guy who admits to bashing the office fax machine to pieces, most are scary and sad. There are angers and hurts, impurities and insecurities that speak of the darkness in us, in life.

- In this week’s post, a young woman describes how she went to a costume party dressed in the New Testament to spite her fundamentalist mother.
- Another card, featuring a lone rubber ducky, says “my father makes drugs in the bath tub.”
- Another card says, “I never sent in my secret, because I was afraid it wasn’t good enough to get posted. Then I realized my real secret is that I’m deeply afraid I’m not good enough.”

Even in a land of great strength, we the people have places of great weakness and vulnerability.

We have deeply vulnerable parts of our spiritual and physical selves that we are prone to hide, conceal, and jealously defend. It is the white, protestant, upper-middle class thing to do, for we value our privacy, our rugged individualism, our faith that hard work is the path to security. Ours is the nation of the stiff upper lip, and we expend great energy to hide, or hide from, that which causes our lips to quiver.

But in God's encounter with Abraham, we see that God wants to leave a mark on those vulnerable places, if we would only entrust them to God. Because in that trust, blessings are to be found.

We celebrate the baptism of infants for many reasons, primarily because it is a sign and seal of God's enduring love for the little ones. But to experience that love, poor parents like Sean and Celeste, have to hand their child over to the pastor and watch helplessly as he or she douses holy water on the child's forehead. That which they most want to protect, they must relinquish, in order that their child might perpetually know that he is beloved by an ever-loving God.

This is not a male thing, not a female thing. We are all vulnerable. We all have places of weakness. God wants access to those places. For our benefit and the benefit of those around us...

In the history of humankind, our darkest acts as nations and people have come when we fearfully seek protection from our vulnerability.

Hiroshima. Racism. The Holocaust.

Recall the moment of Jesus' arrest, when one of his followers reacted to the provocation by brandishing his sword and cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus rebukes him: "put away your sword, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

Whether we're a toddler afraid that our favorite toy will be taken away, or a nation who suddenly finds its way of life imperiled, our inclination is to act rashly when faced with vulnerability; to hit our sibling over the head, or brandish the sword of fear and manipulation.

The God of Abraham lays forth another option. To entrust that vulnerability to God, because God is the God of the vulnerable.

In fact, it is in vulnerability that God is known to us. The great hymn of Philippians speaks of Jesus Christ, "who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, *but emptied himself...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death---even death on a cross.*"² Jesus is Lord to us, and with us, less because of what he did with his power and strength, and more with what he did with his weakness and frailty.

In these uncertain times, our greatest challenge is not to properly allocate our strengths, but to be good stewards of our weaknesses, our places of vulnerability.

We must make choices.

How will we care for the man living in the cardboard box, the mother and her infected child, the children stuck under the bombed rubble of war?

What will we do with the dark, hidden parts of ourselves that need more than postcards to air out?

How will we respond to the fear that lingers with us in the evening, and paralyzes us in the morning?

² Philippians 2: 6-8

Will we raise our swords in fear, or be open to the circumcision of our hearts, and trust God, the God of Abraham and his descendants?

God's promises meet us, not as much in triumphant victory marches or in the joyous swaying of the masses, but in the whimpers and fears of a nation and its people, who are called simply to trust, to allow God to leave God's eternal mark where it's needed most.

For our sake, and the sake of our world, may we so do.

Amen.