

OVERCOMING OUR VULNERABILITY OR LEARNING FROM IT?

Genesis 3: 1-7; Luke 4: 1-13

One of the greatest challenges with understanding the bible for us modern people today has to do with the idea of control. In the ancient world people felt much more vulnerable than we do today. They knew they lived in a world where there were many things they couldn't control: from the weather and how it affected their welfare, to conflict, to health and to many other things besides. For all their power to be and to become, humans were vulnerable creatures in a vast universe.

In our modern world, however, the promise of science and technology gave us this illusion that with time we could control the world and therefore have control over all those things that make us vulnerable. We could protect ourselves from the hazards of weather, we could discover knowledge and create the technologies to produce food and be less dependent on things like drought. We could not only improve our health but heal all disease. We could discover other worlds in case this planet became unlivable. We could create prosperity and, therefore, peace for all.

But then we got to the 20th century – a century where through war and genocide, global disease, starvation, colonial domination and environmental destruction, we've seen more suffering and death than all previous centuries combined. What happened? Our technology and science were used to control and destroy more than to heal is what happened.

As many thinkers have said: technological and scientific progress does not equal moral and spiritual progress. The promise of control in the hands of humans who feel threatened by other humans becomes a monster we cannot control. The myth of overcoming our vulnerability rather than learning to live with it creates greater vulnerability for more and more life on this planet. Creation becomes dominated and managed by human creatures like us with technologies that destroy and contaminate life on this planet.

The bible tells us that God made us vulnerably human so that we could fulfill our destiny through our very vulnerability as humans. Our temptation is to overcome our vulnerability because what we cannot control is a threat to us. We make control our God and create a God of control in our imaginations rather than find life-giving ways to live our vulnerable humanity.

In our desire to control our own destinies, we also destroy the freedom and destiny of other life on our planet because we see other life as a threat to our own control. Vladimir Putin is just an extreme example of what our humanity can become if we want to crush all the vulnerability we can out of it.

So how do we find our way back from the precipice? How do we find our way forward through our vulnerability rather than becoming obsessed by the temptation to overcome it? On this first Sunday of Lent, we follow Jesus into the wilderness where he faces the temptation to overcome the threat of his vulnerability with the kind of control he has the power to claim. How does he open up a path for us to follow?

First, we're told, that Jesus is in the desert so long he gets really hungry. The negative voice called "the devil" begins to torment him. Why should Jesus remain hungry when he has the power to get all the food he needs? Isn't the purpose of life to get as much as you can for yourself – bread, money, possessions? Now, the thing with temptation is that the things we humans are tempted by are not bad in themselves. As vulnerable humans we need bread and we need enough to live.

But what is it about us that we can never have enough? What is it about us that we become so obsessed with getting more and more for ourselves even to the neglect of our neighbour? What is it about us humans that we are always looking over our shoulder at what our neighbour has and suddenly what used to be enough is no longer enough and what used to make us content is no longer adequate?

The devil wants to feed that craving for more and more until it consumes us and decimates our neighbour and this planet. But Jesus chooses another way to face this vulnerability of need. "It is written," he says, "One does not live by bread alone." The bread Jesus will feed on beyond the bread he needs to live physically is the love of God which he needs to breathe spiritually. Only as we discover how our neighbour's welfare is our own welfare, how justice for our neighbour is our own well-being, and how care for this earth is our own survival, will we learn the gift our human vulnerability wants to give us.

Vulnerability is against control over others. Vulnerability through love teaches us how to care for each other because we recognize we cannot make it alone. We need each other. The more we recognize and appreciate this truth, the more we will find a richer fulfillment than all the bread we can amass for ourselves.

Second, the negative voice called "the devil" tempts Jesus with control in the form of domination over all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus as the son of the great king David can become as great if not greater than even Caesar. His control can become the freedom of his people from foreign invaders. Of course, this comes with a catch. We're told that Jesus must worship the devil. The devil is the agent of chaos, destruction and violence. Domination can only come with conquest. Jesus must embrace the power of force and violence if he wants such control and he has the kind of charisma people will

gravitate too. God knows the people are desperate for a messiah. Jesus can fit the bill of their expectations to a T.

And what would such control look like for most of us here now? We may not have an inflated megalomania like a Vladimir Putin who wants to conquer the world or a Donald Trump who wants to humiliate and crush all his opponents. But we do want to control all those things about our families, our health, our finances, our workplaces and our communities that cause us stress, no? We are tempted to dominate rather than cooperate. Cooperation requires consent, listening, compromise, working together rather than dictating the way it has to be according to our measure or choosing.

Jesus resists this temptation. He replies to the devil: "It is written, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only God." In other words, the creator God is not a control freak out to dominate creation. God created the universe with freedom. With freedom comes vulnerability. We cannot control the currents of nature and how they impinge on our lives and we cannot control how other people will behave, respond, react or choose.

Rather than try to dominate because we crave control to overcome our fear, we need to learn how to cooperate in love, to listen, to build relationships of care, openness to different points of view, even ones we may question, to learn the art of compromise, and also the art of discerning what justice is and what is mere opinion. How do we make room for difference without dismissing or dising other human beings? How do we make space for the rest of creation without controlling it as a resource for our comfort and convenience whatever the cost?

So then, first, if the temptation to overcome our vulnerability is about amassing more and more for ourselves because it can never be enough, the way of Jesus in learning from it is about sharing with others and depending on each other in order to have enough for all. And if, second, the temptation to overcome our vulnerability is about controlling others and dominating them and every situation, the way of Jesus in learning from it is to build relationships of cooperation and care, allowing freedom for others to be as they may honour our freedom to be, to work together toward a common good rather than apart for ourselves.

And this brings us to the third and last temptation Jesus must face to overcome his vulnerability – safety, security, protection. The negative voice called "the devil" in Jesus tempts him to test whether he is protected from every threat and harm that may come to him. It's in so many of our prayers isn't it? "Protect us, O God, keep us safe." It's a beautiful sentiment, but it imagines a God who controls the universe to serve our safety.

It also imagines a God who is there for us regardless of what else is happening in the world to people and the earth itself. Jesus, however, resists this temptation. He knows

that the path of love he is on will bring great risk, conflict and potential harm to him. Justice is more important than safety. And building relationships of trust is more important than building a wall of protection around himself.

Our own safety and protection as vulnerable humans must include the safety and protection of others, and unless we build relationships of trust, none of us will be safe and protected. God put us on this earth as vulnerably human so we may learn the fulfillment of love. Love grows full and fills us with abundance when we learn how to share, when we learn how to care because we need each other, when we learn how to build cooperation and partnerships, when we learn that the welfare of other life on this planet is also our own welfare, when we learn how to build relationships of trust and become ever more trustworthy in our care for the life of others.

At the very beginning of his journey as the Messiah of God, Jesus calls people to follow him. It all begins as we learn to resist the temptation to control and to overcome all that makes us vulnerably human. God's vision for us human creatures is in how to embrace our vulnerability because it also leads us to embrace the life around us. We need each other to live abundantly. We need each other in order to flourish.

The devil in our North American dream wants to promise us happiness and fulfillment if we get more and more for ourselves, get control and domination over all that threatens us and all who challenge us, and get as much protection and security for ourselves by building walls around us. North America first! But until we learn that the welfare of others, and the most vulnerable at that, is our own welfare, we will not have learned the lesson vulnerability would teach us. The welfare of Ukraine is our own welfare too. Justice for indigenous people of this land is our own redemption too.

As we begin our journey through Lent 2022, we will focus on how to find our true destiny and fulfillment as the humans each of us are, not by overcoming our vulnerability but learning to become ever more human through it. It is only through our vulnerability we can become more of the hands, feet and heart of the Jesus who passed through the wilderness. Vulnerability is the truth about our human condition. Trying to resist and overcome it at all costs is destructive and self-destructive. Learning from it is where true strength, abundance and fulfillment is to be found.

Light the way ahead of us, O Christ. Come and flow through us as fresh courage, insight and motivation, O Holy Spirit; restore us to our true creaturely essence as vulnerably human, creator God, so we can bless the world rather than keep harming it... Amen.