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## A Vulnerable Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 4, 2016,  
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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Nkosi was born in a township east of Johannesburg in 1989. He never knew his father and he was HIV-positive from birth. He was legally adopted by Gail Johnson, a Johannesburg Public Relations practitioner, when his own mother, debilitated by the disease, was no longer able to care for him. In 1997, a primary school in a Johannesburg suburb refused to accept Nkosi as a pupil because of his HIV-positive status. The incident became highly public and caused tension at the highest political level because South Africa's Constitution forbade discrimination on the grounds of medical status; wisely, the school later reversed its decision.

Nelson Mandela referred to Nkosi as an "icon of the struggle for life." This young boy, along with his foster mother, founded a Johannesburg refuge for HIV positive mothers and their children, called "Nkosi's Haven." At the time of his death, in 2001, he was the longest-surviving HIV-positive born child and in November 2005, he posthumously received the International Children's Peace Prize. But before Nkosi died, he was the keynote speaker at the 13th International AIDS Conference. Standing there, at the age of 10 or 11, he encouraged AIDS victims to be open about the disease and to seek equal treatment. Nkosi finished his speech with these words:

"Care for us and accept us – we are all human beings. We are normal. We have hands. We have feet. We can walk, we can talk, we have needs just like everyone else – don't be afraid of us – we are all the same!" We are all human beings. We are all the same. And a little child with HIV shall lead them.

Maybe we wouldn't have as many problems in the world if we would just allow children to lead. There would surely be a lot more laughter and playfulness in our lives. A lot more tickle games. A lot more hide and seek. Perhaps we wouldn't take ourselves so seriously if the children led. We need children to keep us grounded like one child did to me on my final Sunday as a pastor in a Switzerland church. On my last Sunday there, this little boy around the age of 8 or 9 came up to me and handed me a picture he had drawn. It was a picture of me in the wooden French Reformed church pulpit preaching and then some images of others in the congregation, snoring and laying on cots. His memorable title across the top of his artistic sheet was "Luke preaching to sleeping people." A little child shall lead them.

A child is a vulnerable person with no real social status or able to galvanize true respect. Children are fragile, easily overtaken by adults or aggressive animals. There are missing adults in society but a plethora of unfortunate images of "missing children" posted on bulletin boards at grocery stores. Missing so many of them means we are missing out on a whole lot of joy in our world. We're missing the gift of their presence—the sparkle of their eyes, the curiosity of their questions beyond the famous road trip one "Are we there yet?" We're missing the tenderness of their touch. According to an African proverb, "The world is precious not...because our parents gave it to us, but because our children lent it to us" (Lammin Sammeh). Weren't we all children at some point, including God? Child advocate

Marian Wright Edelman prays, “Lord, we have pushed so many of our children into the tumultuous sea of life in leaky boats without survival gear.”

But a little child shall lead them, according to prophet Isaiah. A child without a lot of experience or education, hasn’t read a lot of books on leadership or strategic planning, but they are out front in the energies of the Spirit paving the path forward. It’s just another example of how the ways of God’s kingdom are not our ways. The little vulnerable one reminds us all that he or she, too, is a human being. In fact, on the journey of Advent we will soon discover that this little child is God. The most vulnerable are often those chosen to be God’s anointed leaders so that we wouldn’t be tempted to boast in ourselves but boast in God. Little unlikely leaders, not the fortune 500 CEOs with MBAs who are fully equipped, but a child with nothing but the grace of the spirit pouring over their life to usher us into the kingdom of God.

The Spirit rests on the apparently weak and foolish to bring forth God’s vision and kingdom. Not just a little child but a shoot that comes out of a stump. Historically, this is a context of devastation. The Davidic kingdom is nothing but a stump at this point, axed down by the Assyrian empire. There among the “briers and thorns” is a little old stump, the remnant of what is left of what was once a great domineering tree. But that stump is a holy seed too (6:13) and sprouting from it under the noses of those who thought they’d won is a tiny shoot. In God’s economy, all you need is a tiny shoot of hope. A small shoot with a lot of spirit can turn the world upside down. It is that shoot from the stump, that many ignored or just missed because of its size, not a whole blossoming tree or the oaks of Lebanon, but one little sprout, one sprig of hope that is anointed by the spirit. “The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” It doesn’t take a huge grand plan but only one willing small vulnerable person, one shoot, one little child, to be empowered and used by the spirit of God to shape God’s vision for the world. When the blessing of the spirit rests on a shoot or a little child, it can be the messianic hope and spark plug for the wide utopian vision of God, a new creation that influences the national and international scene (11:10, 11).

We may think it’s nothing, a little shoot or child with HIV, but God makes nothings into somethings. At vulnerable times in history with vulnerable people, God sends his spirit to move to recreate the world as promised. When the small anointed shoot becomes a little child leader, we see that hope is born as a tiny sprout sticking out its green head from cracked concrete or a destructive situation after a long winter. This helps us not to boast in ourselves but in God and God’s power. This little vulnerable child leader king is part of God’s larger vision of vulnerability. The greatness of a nation should be judged by its treatment of the most vulnerable in our midst. And God calls us to be vulnerable.

These days, people are on edge, defensive, and adversarial. Walls are up or at least threatened to be put up. Swords and guns and knives are in ready position. Self-protection is the name of the game. Hunkered down for self-preservation. We need the words of Nkosi, the little child, more than ever, I think: “We are all human beings...don’t be afraid...we are all the same.” Starting with the vulnerable little child, a vision of mutual vulnerability emerges from the mind of God through the prophet.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.

This vision of God's kingdom initiated through a royal child is like no other. Before the "I have a dream" speech even made it into this world, this was God's dream for us; this is *the* prophetic speech we should be talking about all the time. A vision of being vulnerable with each other, particularly with those whom might devour you, sleeping with the so-called enemy while living in peace without fear. A child can play over a viper's hole and not be bitten. Interspecies violence comes to an end and harmony begins. Even the child king doesn't kill the lion, which would be expected as a sign of one's worthiness to rule, but rather lives among it and leads it, revealing power, not through violence but vulnerability. The victory of God will come through vulnerability, not violence. "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

When the Spirit is at work, this type of community is possible. A community of all creation or what could be called an ecological shalom (Ellen Davis). In this community, in this peaceable kingdom, we are safe with each other as peace disarms us to love more deeply. This vulnerable vision and enactment of it is a risk because it is acting in ways that are not viewed as normal. It is a movement of hope in that we might expect life, instead of death from each other, and work toward this new creation, new relationships and new communion. It is risky to expect goodness from one another and have a hermeneutics of trust rather than one of suspicion. It is a call to let our guard down, to self-reveal and not self-preserve. The strife or battle will never be over if we only duplicate Black Friday shopping scenes, struggling over who gets to be first to buy the latest electronic gadget.

The victory will only be won through our vulnerability toward each other and God. This prophetic vision beckons us to trust God and God's way more than our own because peace will win and we will see the ultimate victory of vulnerability when we hear again at the advent of God, "Peace on earth...goodwill to all people..." Isaiah paints the heart of God. A heart that is not division and fighting but communion and peace. A heart that places deemed enemies in relationship so that in his kingdom they are friends. God places those together who are supposedly not to be together to show the future present of God. Gathering difference in communion, a differentiated unity where justice is the theme of hope for the world. Where children are safe from predatorial behavior and care for all creation is the new order of the day. A heart for a peaceable kingdom where we'll study war no more and lay down our weapons, put down our guards, enmity will cease, and children will lead the way, echoing the refrain, "we are all human beings."

To know Jesus doesn't mean knowing the facts of christological dogma but knowing him in the praxis of discipleship so this call to vulnerability is striking and challenging because this call is a call to a wounded life. What do I mean? The word 'vulnerable' derives from a Latin noun that means 'wound.' To be vulnerable is to be open to attack or critique, to be open to physical or emotional wounding. It is the recognition that peace and this peaceable kingdom doesn't arise without wounds. There is hurt and struggle on righteous road and love lane. So when we as disciples strive to live into this vision on earth as it is in heaven, and we pray such words as, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me," we are asking God to make us vulnerable and aware of our open wounds on the path toward communal healing.

This can be a vulnerable advent for you just as God's advent, God's coming, was vulnerable. God's own self-revelation in Jesus Christ in the form of a human was a vulnerable act.

Though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross. (Phil 2)

Jesus Christ is a wounded God. God's self-revelation in Christ was a risk as he was touched with our griefs and infirmities and bruised for our iniquities. He was vulnerable enough to self-disclose even though he might be rejected. He led those who didn't even want to follow because not everyone can handle wounds. God showed us who God was in Christ and it was a risk that cost him his life. He laid down his power to destroy for the power to make peace but it was costly. He went against all odds to create a world for eternal rest, an eternal Eden, and in his very own being in Christ we see that even divine and human can live together peaceably in one person. In his kingdom, God brings together that which is not supposed to be together.

Through his body and blood, we receive the spirit of vulnerability that is his very nature. Through his vulnerable offering at the communion table, Jesus gives us his body and blood to consume with the hope that we might become wounded healers in the world. At the table, we meet a God who believes in this future vision so much, he dies and rises for it and for us because he knows we all have needs and we all are the same—one—through his body and blood, and there's no need to be afraid of him or one another. Let our vulnerable advent begin.