

1-11-25 Sermon: “Salvation in Vulnerability” – Isaiah 42:1-9

Today we celebrate Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Today we remember our own baptisms, and we remember how Jesus joined us in his baptism by John in the Jordan.

Now, this is my 10th time preaching on Jesus’ baptism in this congregation, and after a certain number of times with a text, you do kind of run out of things to say. So this year, I went looking for inspiration in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah. And oh was I in luck, because Isaiah 42 is a song of introduction for Isaiah’s Suffering Servant.

The Suffering Servant is a recurring character in Isaiah. He is an unnamed servant of the Lord who comes to establish God’s justice on earth. Isaiah introduces him in this morning’s passage: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights. He will not cry or lift up his voice, a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in all the earth.”

Biblical scholars love to debate the identity of the suffering servant because no one knows for sure who he is. Some think he’s Cyrus of Persia, the world leader who ended the Babylonian exile and brought the Hebrew people home. Some think he stands for the whole people of Israel, through whom God chooses to bless the earth. Traditional Christian interpreters have identified in this character a pre-figuring of Jesus, which is fitting, even if not what Isaiah himself intended.

This week, however, I have been more persuaded by the argument that the servant isn’t mean to have one particular identity. Rather, he is the disposition that God requires for any who would be God’s servants. He is humanity at its best: tender, compassionate, humble, willing to be vulnerable with God and with God’s people. The Suffering Servant executes God’s justice in a way that is gentle, that will not break an already-bruised reed or snuff out a dimly burning wick.

My friend Roger says he is especially drawn to that imagery this year because it describes how he has been feeling recently. We live in a world where human vulnerability is acutely on display. We see how quickly disasters can happen, how power can be abused, how easily we and our neighbors can be snuffed out. But rather than despairing, Roger says he sees this as a hopeful reality, and he quotes theologian Kristine Culp, who says that, “vulnerability is the pivot of salvation.”¹

Vulnerability is the pivot of salvation. “Experiencing vulnerability,” Roger says, “can awake within us possibilities that, if acted upon, can be salvific. Vulnerability can awaken in us what it is to be the church – the body of Christ in the world.” Because when we are vulnerable to devastation, we are also vulnerable to transformation. Vulnerability is simply susceptibility to being changed. That change can be for ill, but it can also be for good.²

Vulnerability is the pivot of salvation. Because embracing our vulnerability allows us to be changed, and it allows us to connect with one another at that basic level of our shared humanity. There is an absolutely contagious ‘me too’ effect that comes with vulnerability.

Maybe you’ve experienced this before. You take a risk and share something personal, “I’m an alcoholic,” or “I’m a cancer survivor,” and someone else responds, “Wow, thank you for saying that. Me too.”

I live with mental illness. Ah, me too. I’m going through a messy divorce. Oh, me too. My mother died too young; I’m no longer talking to my brother; I’ve done something that I believe is unforgiveable. Me too, me too, me too.

Vulnerability cuts through loneliness, isolation, and shame. We learn that our afflictions are the stuff of shared humanity, that our deepest darkest secrets are neither as deep nor as dark

as we've made them out to be. We discover that the things that break our hearts and wake us in the night are the same things that bind us together with our neighbors in a common bond of humanity.

I wonder if this is what Jesus is up to when he goes to get baptized. John's baptism was about repentance and forgiveness for sins, so what business does a sinless Savior have entering these waters? John himself is scandalized by Jesus' request; he tries to stop him. Yet Jesus insists: this is how the world gets saved.

I wonder...if Jesus chooses baptism because he wants to connect with us through our shared vulnerability. I wonder if he wades into the waters of salvation because that is the place where we all go to bare our souls. Maybe he hopes, when he emerges from the water and the Spirit descends on him like a dove, that we will hear those words from God and claim them for ourselves as well: "You are my son, my daughter, my child, the Beloved. With you I am well-pleased."

This week, for me, has served as a hard lesson in shared vulnerability. Because, like many of you, I have been unable to stop thinking about Renee Good, the woman shot and killed by an ICE agent this Wednesday in Minneapolis.

I've been unable to stop thinking about her, partly because we have so much in common. We're the same age, race, gender. We're both lesbians. We're both single mothers of little boys. We're both Presbyterians who spent time in our formative years doing work with PC(USA) mission partners in other countries. Her uncle is actually still a Presbyterian minister in Nebraska, and there are conversations starting up in our denomination about how to support him and his family during this time of grief and horror.

We have so much in common, and quite frankly, what she was doing on Wednesday when she was killed is something that I have been known to do many times: showing up at a protest to stand in solidarity with her neighbors.

Others of you have named different points of connection with Renee. A shared home of Minnesota, or Colorado Springs. A shared love of writing or poetry. A shared Christian faith.

Ultimately, there's the basic fact of our shared humanity. We care what happens to our fellow human beings because God cares, yes; but also because we are human and we know the same things can happen to ourselves and to our loved ones. It frightens and horrifies us to see people get shot in the street. It is human evil and human vulnerability on full and total display.

In times like these, it is tempting to become hardened to the pain of reality. To numb out, look away, retreat into some sort of protective shell. We try not to think about these things, try not to imagine that what happened to Renee could happen to us, or to the people we love.

Which is all to say, friends, that I know that what I am about to ask you to do is very hard – and painful. But the call of our faith is to *lean into* that vulnerability. To let our souls rest in that space of shared humanity and feel that common bond all the way to our bones.

It is easy to grow hard. But the call of our baptism is to grow...soft. It is to immerse ourselves in the waters of vulnerability, of shared humanity, because that is the place where salvation takes hold. That is our only hope of redemption. To recognize that we are indelibly connected to one another. That our neighbor's joy is our joy, and our neighbor's suffering is our suffering.

So friends, lean in. Let the tears flow. Let the pain take up residence for a little while. It may feel like it could suffocate you, but do not fear: these waters are big enough to hold all that.

Let this vulnerability transform you – let it transform us – into the people God has created us to be. Amen.

¹ <https://pres-outlook.org/2025/12/first-sunday-after-the-epiphany-january-11-2026/>.

² Ibid.