

Christmas Eve Meditation by Leonard VanderZee from Luke 2:1-7

We can hear this story over and over again, and never really get tired of it. Our imagination takes over and we see the scene with our mind's eye. Mary and Joseph, tired, exhausted after their long journey. We can smell the stable, that pungent mixture of dung and hay. We can hear the animals bleat and cackle and moo. We picture a woman in the sweet distress of childbirth, her heaving sighs, her groans of pain. We see the little baby, all red and wrinkled, olive skinned, thick dark curly hair, but a face that looks like Winston Churchill, as all babies do. We watch him at his mother's breast, sucking hungrily on those first rich drops of colostrum. We see his eyelids flutter and close, as the breast slips away, and he sleeps. We see them lay him in a feeding trough, and clean up after the birth. We see the shepherds peeking in by the light of a fire, rough men, wrinkled by wind and sun, a little smelly, eyes filled with awe and wonder.

We'd love the story anyway, but we especially love it because it's the story of God coming to earth in love. It's the story of God taking up residence in a barn, and being cradled by human hands. It's the story of infinite, powerful...vulnerable love.

C. S. Lewis said, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything; and your heart will certainly be wrung; and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one. . . . It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable impenetrable, irredeemable. . . .The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell."

One who loves must be willing to accept its vulnerability. We've all had these experiences. You confess to someone your faults, your sins. You were miserable, but at least your faults were known to you alone. Now someone else knows. It's a great relief, but it makes you very vulnerable. You shed some tears that are furtively wiped away, just a few seconds too late, and another person sees, and knows the hurt. You have exposed your wounded heart. Or perhaps you remember the first time someone said, "I love you", and at that moment your poise is shattered, your defenses are down, and you are utterly vulnerable.

Romantic love is dazzling in its wild desire and deep vulnerability. But parental love wins the prize-- for vulnerability—and for sheer endurance. Mothers feel this especially. It begins in pregnancy as another person literally takes over your body, hording, demanding its nutrients, making a home for himself where none existed. And then, the child signals it's time to be born.

Suddenly there she is, this bloody, hunched, screaming, beautiful baby. You ache with a love you've never felt before. This child owns you; you don't own him. Your lives are forever meshed, tied, locked together. As a young mother in the congregation told me recently, looking at her little baby, "I never knew I could love anyone so much."

Yes, love makes us vulnerable. And the same is true for God. It's especially this parental love that lets us see just a little bit into the heart of God. Like all love, even God's love involves risk and makes him vulnerable in a peculiar way. God is the great, almighty, and holy God. God, in himself, is the one person in all the universe who is by nature

utterly untouchable, utterly self-sufficient. He doesn't need anything. He is insulated, invulnerable in heaven's glory.

But God is love, and that means that even God's love makes him vulnerable. We see it already on the pages of the Old Testament. God makes a covenant with his people. He ties himself with bonds of love to Israel. "I will be your God and you will be my people." But time after time, they turn their backs. The prophets portray Israel as God's child who turns away and treats Jahweh with contempt, following after other gods. The prophets do not hesitate to describe God having that peculiar mixture of hurt and anger that every anxious parent knows. Love made God vulnerable.

Fredrica Mathewes-Green once told the painful story about a friend of hers struggling with her rebellious teenage child, and then she relates it to God's parental love. "God longs over us as over a lost and contemptuous child, a child at the edge of gaping danger, ignorant, sulky, rude. We spurn, laugh, ignore him, pinch each other, boast "I don't know him," slam the door. He waits. We ridicule him, trivialize his gifts, preen and bicker. And he waits."

That helps us to understand what happened at Bethlehem. God, our divine parent, with daring and dangerous abandon, bared his heart at Bethlehem. He does not wish to be God without us, so he becomes God with us. He comes down from the far reaches of eternity to become an infant. In that infant, born of poor people in a stable, God comes to earth and says, "I love you. Can't you see, I love you." Look upon the baby Jesus," Luther once wrote. "Divinity may terrify us. Inexpressible majesty will crush us. That is why Christ took on our humanity...that he should not terrify us but rather that with love and favor he should console and confirm."

And once it's done, it's done. God cannot, will not, go back to heaven at the end of a day's work. He has chosen in love to share the hurt of fallen humanity. God joins the human race.

We seldom feel more vulnerable than when we are naked. Remember that story at the dawn of time when Adam and Eve hid from God? Adam says, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself." (Gen. 3: 10) Mary Ellen Ashcroft points out that the renaissance artists often portrayed the babe at Bethlehem not wrapped in "swaddling clothes," but naked on his mother's lap. To get ready for Christmas, she says, God undressed. God stripped off his divine finery and appeared—how embarrassing--naked on the day he was born. "God rips off medals of rank, puts aside titles, honors, and talents, and appears in his birthday suit." As Charles Wesley has us sing each Christmas, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail th'incarnate deity." And the flesh of the baby is also the flesh of the man. The naked baby must be flesh so that God can be stripped again, and hung for all the world to see, on a cross.

How utterly appropriate that we celebrate communion on Christmas Eve, for where is this vulnerable love made more real, where does it touch our hearts more than at the communion table? The baby laid in the manger was also nailed to a cross. The God who laid himself in Mary's lap, placed himself in the hands of Pontius Pilate. The God who

humbled himself to become an infant was also, as Luci Shaw puts it, "nailed to my poor planet.

God laid bare his heart at Bethlehem. Here I am. I love you; I place myself in your hands. There is no other God than this naked baby, expelled into the night. There is nothing hidden in God's heart but what we see in the baby's face.

He comes to us tonight in the bread and the cup. He invites us all to eat and drink that vulnerable love, receiving his loving self-sacrifice into our hearts.

You've heard the story countless times before. Do you believe it tonight? Do you sense how close God has come to you, how he longs to be with you? When you hear this story and believe it, like the shepherds did, you will never be the same again. No matter what happens for the rest of your life you know that God is with you. God loves you. God has joined our human family. And everything will be all right.