The Vulnerability of Hope

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Here is the link to the Zoom recording: <https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/HOb5GVM-hKPA_jrve7WzR-1hZlFJSCRQR4rDYU5BnSHfu_p8OK1dKIxFBCxYH4MV.VE4068kz5KnHhzFB?startTime=1669561591000>

Texts:
 Isaiah 2:4-5
 Romans 13:11-12
 Matthew 24:37-44

Luisely:

Happy Advent 8th Day! Our official time of anticipation and waiting has arrived! It’s a time of waiting and anticipation for the quality time with loved ones, our rituals surrounding Christmas that help us remember the birth 2000 (and something) years ago, and, most importantly, the celebration of Emmanuel, God here, with us! It is also a time that honors the waiting, the expecting, the anticipation, and the hope of new life.

Waiting for new life, hoping for new life, carries with it a vulnerability. We have this visceral longing for whatever is gestating, to come to full-term and be born full of life. This gestation can be literal, like Mary’s, and so many here, who have waited with love — and all the other emotions — for the birth of a new being we have yet to meet face-to-face. Or it may be of a new relationship with another, or with ourselves. It may be a new job, retirement, the hope for health, for healing. We all are in waiting for new life. And in order to wait for what we do not see, we need hope, or else we tend to fall into anxiety and despair.

Advent, for me, is an openness to new life. An active saying “Yes” to the hope and vulnerability of desiring, expecting, and anticipating that new life. I’ve sat with many clients in their third trimester as they wait with full expectation, hope and vulnerability for the day of birth, without having any control over or knowing when the little one will arrive. If a surrender to this unknown takes place, it gives way to peace for whenever the contractions begin to invite this new life into the world. I’ve also accompanied various clients in their first trimester as they dance between hope and fear as they carry new life in their womb following a previous miscarriage. There is such vulnerability in hoping that this new life will continue to grow, since the reality of the other option is remembered in the sinews of their bodies. The more vulnerability one has, the more one needs hope, and perhaps fears hope.

*Crisely:*

*During Advent we accompany Mary along her journey to welcoming Christ into the world. Imagine her immense vulnerability as a young, unmarried, pregnant mother without means. Nothing was certain for her, for her child, for her relationship with Joseph, for her family. Imagine all of the questions and very real dangers she knew were possible. It could have seemed like an impassable chasm between her current reality and her future desire. What an act of courage to hope that God would be present with her! And God eagerly responds to that yes by pouring overflowing hope into those spaces of vulnerability. Suddenly that impassable chasm is transformed into a vast container for God to flood into.*

*We hear from Isaiah in the first reading describing this invitation to this transformative hope.*

*They shall beat their swords into plowshares*

*and their spears into pruning hooks;*

*one nation shall not raise the sword against another,*

*nor shall they train for war again.*

*O house of Jacob, come,*

*let us walk in the light of the Lord!*

*Mary’s vulnerability, weakness, pain is that portal from which new life in hope is possible. And isn’t that true for all of us? We hear this over and over again from the mystics. As Rumi reminds us, “The wound is the place where the light enters you.” The swords and spears in our life and in our world, those places of pain and vulnerability we are told in scripture can be transformed into tools to foster new life.*

*As I read over this reading, I was reminded of the Intersectional Ecojustice class I just had the opportunity to co-lead. In it, we watched the film “the Ants and the Grasshopper” which follows two women from Malawi, Anita and Ester, as they work to heal their land and wake up the United States to the effects of climate change. Their journey in the film includes them visiting various farms in the Midwest. There is a stark contrast between some of the farmers saying, “The problem is too big” and Anita and Ester’s clarity that there is far too much at stake to not hope and to act freely and courageously out of that hope. They don’t have the privilege of time or distance, because they can already see how their land isn’t fruitful and their river is dry. They can see the direct impact on their children. Rather than simply being a vulnerability, through their hope they use their reality as their power to impact change. They give voice to the wisdom they hold by being directly impacted.*

*Too often we hear statistics or stories of perceived vulnerabilities and forget the immense power and creativity that is possible because of that reality. Necessity is the mother of invention after all.*

*And so remembering the words from Isaiah: What are those swords and spears in the world around us that we’ve yet to see as plowshares and pruning hooks?*

*Which leads us to our second reading from Romans:*

Luisely:

Brothers and sisters:
You know the time;
it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep.
For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed;
the night is advanced, the day is at hand.
Let us then throw off the works of darkness
and put on the armor of light;

Now is our time to awaken from our sleep. As Thich Nhat Hahn reminded us, “We are here to awaken from our illusion of separateness.” It’s so tempting to ignore our vulnerabilities, to believe that if we only focus on all the other parts of ourselves and strengthen those, then that is “tending to our vulnerable parts.” We are being invited to wake up from this sleep we easily find ourselves in and to throw off the illusion of separateness: the separateness of ourselves from our vulnerabilities, our separateness from those who are vulnerable. We are here to remember that we are one body, one whole body in ourselves, and one body in the Body of Christ.

Crisely used this analogy, which is fitting, but also really helpful. When we stub our toe, our toe is the vulnerable one. It feels the pain acutely, the rest of the body isn’t feeling the throbbing the toe is. Yet because it is not separate from the rest of the body, the nerve endings on the toe, let the brain know that we’ve encountered something unpleasant, and then the communication to a more privileged body part, at the time, the hand, has the information of the location of the object that you stubbed your toe against, and it can use its privilege of ability, location, and lack of pain, to move the object to a place that will be less likely to cause pain to the toe (any toe) again… for the time being.

I made Crisely’s analogy much more long-winded than she did, but please stay with me a bit longer. The body does not benefit from pretending to separate itself from the toe and making the toe come up with its own solution, since it’s the one bearing the pain. Nor does the body glorify the pain the toe is going through and look for more pain. The hand doesn’t feel shame about its privilege; rather, having listened to the toe’s pain and its needs, it responds with the privilege it has to help prevent the pain in the future.

The same goes for the Body of Christ. When we awaken to the truth of our wholeness in and with one another and God, then we are more receptive to listening to the other members of the body and embodying our part free from narratives of shame, fear, or resentment. This freedom allows us to respond to the needs of the Body naturally, organically.

In the midwifery practice I work with, part of our postpartum visits includes asking the birther about their thoughts of the birth experience, as well as how they are adapting to shifting relationships, etc. Often, not always, especially if they have support systems, birthers respond, “it feels natural.” They notice themselves being in tune with their little one. Attuned to their smacking lips in the middle of the night, or their wiggles after peeing, all their rhythms, and responding to them. This deep attention and listening to the most vulnerable one in the house, allows the parent to respond “naturally” to the need.

If we do the same to the parts of ourselves that are most vulnerable, we will respond. Again, it’s easier when we have a support system. Even more so, if we feel ourselves held by God’s no-matter-whatness love, palpably feeling our belonging and having it modeled back to us. In allowing ourselves to be in God’s presence as we listen to our vulnerabilities, we can then follow God’s lead into teaching us how to welcome the pain, or our rejected parts, with tenderness, and persistent invitation. In God’s unabashed welcoming of all of our parts, we learn to do the same with those parts, and bit by bit, we learn to embody our wholeness, our part in the Body of Christ.

As we learn to welcome the most painful parts of ourselves, we also learn how to do the same to the members of the Body of Christ that are closest to the pain. If we listen to and tend to the parts of the Body of Christ that are most vulnerable in the way that the recent birther listens to the newborn, we will be guided, and we will respond, as fit to whatever part we embody.

This leads us to the reality we will listen to and, as a community, put our attention to during this Advent, and hopefully, beyond. The reality of black maternal and infant health in the US, and in DC, to keep it local as well.

*Crisely:*

* *The US ranks 60th in maternal mortality rate out of 187 ranked nations, placing well behind other developed nations. Unlike other countries, the American maternal mortality rate has increased over the past ten years even though three in five pregnancy-related deaths in the USA are preventable.*
* *The DC maternal mortality rate is still almost twice the national rate despite dramatic improvements since 2014. Within DC, Wards 7 and 8 experience the highest rates of preterm births, low birth weights, and infant mortality.*
* *Nationally, African-American women are 3.3 times more likely to die in childbirth than white women.* ***Between 2013-2017, 95% of pregnancy related deaths in DC were African American despite the fact that African American comprise only 44.5% of the population.***
* *The US had an overall infant mortality rate of 5.6 per 1000 live births in 2019. The infant mortality rate among Black babies was almost twice that at 10.8 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2018. (Source: CDC)*

<https://www.american.edu/spa/metro-policy/upload/maternal-mortality-in-dc-poster-spr-2020.pdf>

<https://blackmamasmatter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/BMHW22-SM-Toolkit-PUBLIC_-1.pdf>

*I first heard these statistics in that very same Potter’s House room we’re in now during my doula training in 2018. And the pain, disgust, nausea and rage I felt in that moment still feel so real. Over and over again the bodies of women of color are being valued as less than. Let us throw off the illusion of separateness and allow God’s light to shine into this deep pain and injustice.*

Luisely:

This awakening to the wholeness, this deep listening to the vulnerable, to the ones closest to the pain is what I hear as the invitation in the Gospel today.

 “you also must be prepared,
for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.”

At an hour we do not expect, the oneness of the Body of Christ, aka WHOLENESS will come. Wholeness within the body of Christ will come. Wholeness in ourselves will come. This wholeness, however, comes only from welcoming the vulnerable, within and among us. Which, if we think about it, is the invitation of Advent and Christmas. “Welcoming the vulnerable and resilient woman of color, without a place to stay, as she gives birth to a vulnerable and resilient newborn of color.”

Which leads to our invitation for you, for us, today.

I invite you each to get comfy, wherever you are. And breathe. As you arrive to your body, I invite you to place yourself in the presence of the Divine. Notice the shifts in your body as you find yourself in God’s presence. Only once you feel yourself in God’s presence… I invite you to notice what pain or vulnerability are you being invited to stay awake to within you? Where are you being invited to wholeness? This place may be scary to tend to, typically is, if not we would have tended to it before. Can we ask God for the grace of hope to stay awake to the places that need wholeness? And patiently, as an expectant mother, wait for the wholeness in all our vulnerability and hope.

As an individual, what pain in the wider community (plants, animals, humans included) are you being invited to welcome and stay awake to and help humbly walk with into wholeness? And can you ask God for the same grace of hope as you stay awake to this longing and need for wholeness you’ve been awakened to?

As a community we are also being invited to stay awake to the injustice and the disgusting reality that Black mothers and babies try to live through and survive in our nation, and in our city. How are we being invited to embody our part to bring wholeness to the Body of Christ in this concrete way? And again, can we ask God for the grace of hope, humility, and perseverance as we stay awake to this ache for wholeness we’ve been awakened to?

Amen.