

The Hope of Safety...The Fear of Vulnerability
Luke 1:26-38; 3:7-14
December 13, 2009

A time of crisis can leave us feeling vulnerable and exposed. In the initial moments, we often feel overwhelmed by uncertainty, not quite knowing which way to turn. We feel like the deep-sea diver who had scarcely reached the ocean floor when a message which left him in a dilemma came from the surface. It said: "Come up quickly...the ship is sinking!"ⁱ

In the past 16 months many people in our nation and around the world have experienced a vulnerability never imagined. Economic security suddenly disintegrated. Many continue to feel vulnerable, fearful of unemployment or foreclosure or downsizing or furloughs. The news remains grim as evidenced by last week's announcement that our own Acalanes High School District may face the elimination of 50 positions in the next two school years.

We felt a similar kind of vulnerability following the attacks of Sept. 11. We realized that in spite of the extreme security our nation enjoys, we were still exposed. Even the vast amount of wealth, intelligence, power, and technology possessed by our nation did not protect us from terrorism.

In the face of vulnerability, we long for safety. When we are fearful of being harmed, we hope for security that will protect us. We wish we could be insulated from all the negative forces that threaten us. Parents wish that they could protect their children from situations in which they are teased or bullied. We want to be immune from diseases that are debilitating. These are among the life experiences that make us feel defenseless and long for safety.

In the Hebrew language in which the Old Testament was written, the same word translated as safety also means "trust" or "confidence." When people live in trust, they are able to live in safety. Recently I had an experience in which someone questioned my action in a financial matter. I suddenly felt insecure, not only because my integrity was attacked, but I was also fearful of financial consequences. A wise one pointed out the lack of trust, which led to the other person's accusation. Because the other does not trust me, I am not safe from attack. If trust can be rebuilt in the relationship, perhaps both of us can feel secure once again.

Where trust is lacking, safety is threatened. Where there is trust, a relationship can grow on a foundation of security. This does not mean that the relationship will be absent of problems or conflict; however, the tension can be dealt with on a foundation of trust.

When we feel vulnerable, we long for safety. Safety is trust or confidence. Our trust is found in God. In our relationship with God, we find the confidence

that we need to confront our challenges. God is trustworthy and will not fail us. In fact, God is most frequently found in solidarity with those who are weak, those whom others deem “the least of these.”

As difficult as our personal experiences of vulnerability may be, one value for North Americans is that they enable us to taste the daily and ongoing powerlessness known by many people in our country and around the world. Almost half the people around the world – over three billion people – live on less than \$2.50 a day. According to UNICEF, 25,000 children die each day due to poverty. Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names.ⁱⁱ These are just a few statistics to remind us of the deep pain in which much of our world lives. Billions of people exist in desperate circumstances, longing for the hope of safety – security in terms of food, finances, health, and education.

In the days of Jesus and John the Baptist, people were also living in similar straits, lacking the protection of basic human needs. In preparing the way for Jesus, John called people to repentance, to a change of mind, life and heart evidenced in action and attitude. By taking appropriate action, the needs of the most vulnerable could be met with the hope of safety.

Three groups present themselves to John for instruction as to what it means to bear good fruit. In Jewish wisdom literature, “bearing fruit” is a euphemism for one’s actions. John calls them to actions of social responsibility. Food and clothing are to be shared with those who have none. Taxes are not to be calculated according to the greed of the people who are in power. The military must stop victimizing the poor people under their occupation by constant threats, intimidation, and blackmail. These are among the social implications of the gospel.ⁱⁱⁱ

John is speaking to individuals as well as to societies. He is calling those with resources to share with those who do not have enough resources. He is calling for an end to systems that are abusive and corrupted. Ethical reform is necessary in order to secure the safety of those who are vulnerable.

The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church has taken the call of John the Baptist and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to heart. They have recently issued a pastoral letter called “God’s Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action.”^{iv} The Bishops address the “web of brokenness” confronted by our world and its people. They focus on three interrelated threats:

- pandemic poverty and disease;
- environmental degradation and climate change;
- a world awash with weapons and violence.

These issues pose a common threat to God’s creation and God’s people. The Bishops call United Methodists to serious contemplation of these issues in a spirit

of repentance, with openness to having a change of mind or going beyond the opinions we have already established.

One example of this web of brokenness is the fact that in Angola farmland is rendered unusable by landmines. The land simply lies fallow because farming it would be deadly, and removing the landmines is too expensive and dangerous. Angola is one of 82 countries affected by landmines manufactured in 15 other countries. The most conservative estimate is that removing landmines costs 100 times as much as making them. An estimated 15-20,000 people are hurt or killed by landmines every year. The lingering aftermath of warfare not only damages the earth, but it also hinders a nation's ability to feed its citizens. God's people and God's creation are vulnerable, longing for safety.

The Bishops call us to move out of our fear and isolation and into the streets of our communities and our world with hope and promise because *we cannot help the world until we change our own way of being in it*. This resonates with John the Baptist's call to repentance in order to prepare the way of the Messiah and the reign of God. We still await the fullness of God's reign on earth as it is in heaven. While we wait, we are called to change our lifestyles and attitudes to be in accordance with Jesus' teachings.

Our Bishops encourage a number of actions to be taken by people of faith and good will. Let us order our lives toward God's Holy Vision for peace, peoples and planet Earth. Begin by reclaiming the "commission" as a faithful, hopeful caretaker of the earth. Let us practice social and environmental holiness by deepening our understanding of the triple threat to God's world. Let us learn from one another and practice prayerful self-examination, acknowledging our own contribution to the problems. Each of us is called to discern concrete actions we can take in cooperation with God's renewal of creation.

The full content of the Bishops' Letter is found on a website www.hopeandaction.org. The Foundation Document is especially helpful in fleshing out the issues and the challenge.

As the Bishops said earlier this year in a statement on the economic crisis, "We are no more secure than the most vulnerable among us; no more prosperous than the poorest; and no more assured of justice and dignity than those who live in the shadows of power, void of fairness and equity."^v When people feel vulnerable, the safety of all is threatened. When our planet is in peril, the security of all is at risk. When justice does not reign, peace cannot prevail.

This may not be the kind of message you anticipated two weeks before Christmas. But John the Baptist tends to appear every year during Advent, reminding us that the real preparation for Christmas is the hard work of changing our minds and changing our ways. If we are to make room for Jesus to come and

truly abide in all his fullness, we need to examine ourselves and our society and to clean out the clutter that hinders Christ's presence.

Jesus wasn't even born in his own home; he was born in a shelter designed for animals. He was born into vulnerability. After his birth he was forced to flee to Egypt as a refugee, for King Herod was threatened by the presence of the newborn Prince of Peace. Jesus spent his three years of ministry wandering the land as a homeless man, traveling to be present with the people he was called to serve. He chose to be vulnerable to identify with the vulnerable and to offer them the hope of safety.

Christ came to restore trust with those who are vulnerable to personal pain, poverty, disease, warfare, or any other kind of harm and therefore long for safety. Safety is rooted in trust, not only our trust of God, but also our trust of our neighbor. As we grow in relationship with our neighbors near and far, a foundation of security grows. As we follow the teachings of Jesus, justice will grow. As it is often said, if we want peace, we must work for justice.

I'm reminded of the story of Wally. Wally was only nine but he was big and clumsy for his age. He was never chosen for a sports team at school because he would usually bungle the play. Nevertheless, he would always hang around and watch the games, standing up for the younger boys if the older ones bothered them.

One year he was chosen to be the innkeeper in the Christmas pageant. His husky size would make the refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

On the night of the pageant, the time came when Joseph appeared, slowly and tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door. Wally the innkeeper was there waiting.

"What do you want?" demanded Wally, swinging the door open with a brusque gesture.

"We seek lodging."

"Seek it elsewhere," Wally said sternly. "The inn is filled."

Joseph pleaded, "Sir, we have asked everywhere in town. We have traveled far and are very tired."

"There is no room in this inn for you," Wally said harshly.

"Please good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is going to have a baby soon and needs a place to rest. You must have a small corner for her. She is so tired."

Now for the first time the Innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment.

"No! Begone!" the prompter whispered from the wings.

"No!" Wally repeated automatically. "Begone!"

Joseph placed his arm around Mary and Mary laid her head on her husband's shoulder. The two of them started to move away, but the Innkeeper did not return inside the inn. Wally stood there in the doorway watching the couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, his eyes filling unmistakably with tears.

Suddenly Wally cried out, "Don't go, Joseph! Bring Mary back." Wally's face grew into a bright smile. "You can have my room!"^{vi}

Wally couldn't bear to see this vulnerable couple walking away into the cold, dark night. From the depths of his young, compassionate heart, he changed the story to offer Mary and Joseph the hope of safety. May we be so bold to take actions that change the story of despair into the gospel of hope.

ⁱ Robert J. Wicks, *Seeking Perspective: Weaving Spirituality & Psychology in Search of Clarity* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 18.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred Carddock, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 48-49.

^{iv} www.hopeandaction.org. Pastoral Letter and Foundation Document, November 3, 2009.

^v *A Message to the People of the United Methodist Church* from the President of the Council of Bishops, the Chair of the Table of General Secretaries, and the Chair of the Connectional Table. February 2009.

^{vi} "Trouble at the Inn," by Dina Donohue.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA