

“When the hurting care for the hurting”
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Luke 2:8-20, interpolated with selections from Philipians and John

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I used to think that weaknesses were something to hide. Something shameful and best overcome, or at least suppressed. I wanted to be—or at least appear—in control.

I suspect you’ve felt this way too, because this is what our culture teaches. We are taught to fear vulnerability. Careers, and social media, and so much of life become walls behind which we hide chaos or doubt or hurt, and by which we present a picture-perfect image of ourselves. The goal in life, we are told, is to improve and shed our vulnerabilities. Capitalism tells us to become rich. The academy tells us to become wise. Religion tells us to become righteous. Each argues that this strength is the best position from which we can help others. Wealth will trickle down. Wisdom will be passed from teacher to student. Righteousness will convert the wicked. After all, if we’re falling apart, what good are we to others?

What the world needs is heroes.

Yet, for all our striving, for all our heroic endeavor, the world remains broken.

It’s easy for Christmas to become a retelling of this cultural narrative. It becomes a story of kings and deity, a story of presents under the tree and perfectly decorated homes and the image of merriment and faith. But Luke tells a very different story.

In Luke’s telling, Jesus is born to young, unwed parents, placed in a feeding trough, and surrounded by people who hold no political or financial power. They have gathered because they have been compelled to do so by a foreign occupying power—Rome. This is no pretty scene. It’s crowded. It’s loud. It’s impoverished.

There are no visiting kings in this version—no frankincense, no myrrh, no gold.

Instead, angels appear to shepherds living in a field. They show up at Christ’s birth stinking of sheep and wet grass, tracking in mud and singing bawdy songs. It’s clear that they are supposed to remind us of another famous shepherd-turned-king, David, but they also represent the same sort of people Jesus will associate with throughout his ministry: outsiders.

Shepherds lived outside of settled communities and were not all that different from own undocumented farm workers; they were hired hands at the bottom of the social ladder. They were the folks who couldn’t find any other jobs, doing the work no one else wanted to do. They were stereotyped as liars, degenerates, and thieves, grouped with tax collectors and prostitutes. They weren’t allowed to testify in court, and many towns barred them from entering the city limits. They were looked down upon by the ultra-religious since their duties kept them in the fields 24/7

and thus unable to observe Sabbath, making them ritually unclean. The Mishnah even says that if you come across a shepherd who has fallen into a pit, you are not obligated to rescue them; they don't deserve it.

Bishop Craig Satterlee describes these shepherds as people who have spent so much time on the outside, "shunned by decent and religious folk, disappointed by God," that they've given up on religion and God.

These are the people to whom God sends angels. God doesn't wait for them to improve their station or get a college degree or become good church folk. God meets them right in the field where they are. God meets them in their lowliness, just as they are. The angel tells them that a Messiah has been born. God has been born. The shepherds go. They find Mary and Joseph. The shepherds tell them what they heard from the angel in their lowly fields. Luke says, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Their words, though likely crude and poor, are as if angel song to Mary. She must have been feeling so vulnerable, so afraid, in that moment, and then in trudge these shepherds who give her hope, who heal her with their words.

Afterward, Luke tells us, the shepherds return to their fields. They do not suddenly become kings or philosophers; they are not suddenly blessed with wealth and prosperity. They remain shepherds, outcasts. Wolves still prowl. All their hurts are still there. But now those wounds are the place they meet God, the places where hope slips in and tomorrow becomes possible. Because God chose to meet them in their vulnerability and bless it.

Christmas is a story of the lowly caring for the lowly, in which vulnerability is a gift and wounds—all those imperfections we've been told to hide and overcome—are openings for God. That day, God left heaven and came among us, a lowly child. And out of that lowliness, Jesus cares for us all. He shares our wounds, cries our tears, feels the weight of our sins, gets angry and impatient just like us, knows betrayal and failure, and even faces death. We heard it today in Philippians: "Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself."

Turns out we've got it all wrong. We don't lift each other up from our high precipice of pity or charity or excellence, and neither does God. We find each other in the muck and rise together through our love, as "wounded healers," a term coined by the great Henri Nouwen.

What the world needs isn't heroes; it's people who lovingly meet each other in their mutual brokenness and find hope.

Henri Nouwen writes, "Who can save a child from a burning house without taking the risk of being burnt by the flames? Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart?... In short: 'Who can take away suffering without entering it?' The great illusion of leadership is to think man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there... No God can save us except a suffering God."

In the TV show “The West Wing,” Leo tells Josh a story that to me sums up what Nouwen is describing. He says:

This guy’s walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can’t get out.

A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts up, “Hey you! Can you help me out?” The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole, and moves on.

Then a priest comes along, and the guy shouts up, “Father, I’m down in this hole. Can you help me out?” The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole, and moves on.

Then a friend walks by. “Hey Joe, it’s me! Can you help me out?” And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, “Are you stupid? Now we’re both down here.” The friend says, “Yes, but I’ve been down here before, and I know the way out.”

God couldn’t save us from heaven. God couldn’t save us with a law brought down from a mountain, like some prescription or prayer tossed into our hole. God could only save us right here, on earth, as one of us, knowing every pain and tribulation we know. This is the meaning of Christmas. God comes to us as one of us, to heal us. God leads us out of the desert by entering the desert. And we are called to do the same for each other.

Nouwen says that a wounded healer is one who turns his wounds into a source of healing for others, by drawing from those wounds understanding, compassion, and hope. Who else could have understood the needs of Mary and Joseph in that moment but those shepherds? It’s why Alcoholics Anonymous and grief groups are so important; they are the hurting caring for the hurting. They get it in a way no one else can.

What happened in Bethlehem and what’s supposed to happen amid disciples, according to Nouwen, is “a deep human encounter in which a man is willing to put his own faith and doubt, his own hope and despair, his own light and darkness at the disposal of others who want to find a way through their confusion and touch the solid core of life.”

Now to do that, we’ve first got to ponder all this in our heart, as Mary does. We’ve got to face our own demons, our own complexities, our own wounds. If we don’t, we often just end up hurting others out of our wounds. We transfer, triangulate; we try unconsciously to fix our stuff through them; we make them fodder for our need for affirmation, our insecurities, or our rage.

We have to explore the pit if we are going to help others do the same.

To be a wounded healer is to see wounds, not as things to fix or hide, but as truths to confront, care for, and live with, truths which open space for God to enter, and when we do that, when we change how we understand our woundedness, then we find hope. We minister to each other by sitting with each other, holding a hand, laughing and crying when they laugh and cry, sharing

their pain. We hold space for them to meet their wounds as we have, bravely and with hope—knowing they are not alone.

Then we discover that our wounds are not weaknesses; they are strengths. They have the capacity—if we let them—to deepen our love for ourselves, for others, for God, and most importantly, to let God’s love in.

Walls can’t do that. Heroes can’t do that. Only wounds have space enough for God to enter.
Amen.