

The First Sunday of Lent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

February 10th, 2008

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Vulnerable Wings of Power
The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

I just returned last night from a three-day journey that took me across the whole breadth of the continental United States. I was in denial for some time about my itinerary, bought with frequent flier miles, that had me returning home from Corpus Christi via IAH and then IAD to SFO. You intrepid travelers, don't spoil my punch line! In fact, that meant, I flew to Houston, and then to Washington Dulles, and then from Washington to San Francisco. You get to hear today the fruits, perhaps, of labors wrought somewhere over the Midwest at 32,000 feet as we worked our way against the jetstream blowing cold air across the continent. Frankly, my back aches at the memory!

Flying has been very much on my mind. My brother, Steven, received his wings on Friday afternoon from the Naval Aviation School in Kingsville, Texas, in a time-honored ceremony for naval and marine aviators. When his commander spoke of these "war fighters," I was suddenly struck to the core by the serious nature of commitment my brother and his classmates have made.

Even more so as their families each came forward – fragile lives, some with children, some soon to be married, with parents and grandparents, all with people who love them: families fragile and tender putting forward their youngest and brightest and their best skills forward to defend ideals and principles that we struggle to uphold ourselves. Families who have already made sacrifices so these young men and women might study and learn the skills that might one day could stand between them, us, and death.

Steven's newly married. He and his wife, Diane, are about to head out to Virginia Beach where he will now be trained to fly F-18's off aircraft carriers. I'm proud of him. My brother is one of our million-dollar fighter pilots. My seminary debt pales by comparison!

Wrestling with my own mixed feelings about military might, I couldn't help but rib him gently in the briefing room about the 27 million dollar jet he trained in. "So," I asked him, "if you buy the farm, does the Navy send you a bill for \$27 million?"

"No," he grinned, but then with all seriousness, he continued, "but if it's my fault. . . I lose my wings."

That's about power and vulnerability, isn't it? The power of having those wings also brings with it the vulnerability of being at the mercy of forces often beyond his control. Part of becoming military, he knows, means relinquishing the right to protest if he doesn't like what his leaders are telling him to do. "Ours is not to reason why," he told me frankly. To a degree, that's true for our brothers and sisters in uniform. Such is the life of duty. Indeed, it's true of so many of us as we struggle with our vulnerability to the authority that rests over us, whether in the workplace, in the

government, in the church, or, simply, market forces.

As we returned to Corpus Christi by car from the winging, my mother noted a bunch of police lights on the flat plains of Texas. (And they are flat. Flatter than Kansas where I grew up. And *that's* saying something!)

She pointed out a gap in traffic on the interstate coming the other direction. My iPhone suddenly coughed up a fur ball and went dead, proclaiming a drained battery. And then there was a motorcade of flashing lights and armored cars, dark and formidable on the road. As we had learned earlier in the day while visiting the flight line at the Naval Air Station, Dick Cheney was coming to Armstrong Ranch to go hunting.

As the motorcade passed by and my iPhone mysteriously remembered it did have some battery power left, I was caught reflecting on what it takes for a Vice President to go hunting. And the power and prestige the motorcade represents. But is it real, I wondered? Is that sort of power really just an illusion, whether it's found in weapons of war, bullet-proof glass, or political stature and prowess?

Power and vulnerability are the underlying themes in today's Gospel, one that sees Jesus drawn out into the desert by the Spirit to be tempted immediately following his baptism.

Satan, the name clearly means "tempter," a figure the Judeo-Christian tradition, looms large in the narrative. Whether the embodiment of all that opposes God, or a projection of the inner darkness Jesus must face on his own, or a bit of each, we have here a disturbing but familiar passage about the darkness and light within us and among us. Jesus is on his own confronting it.

Perhaps this passage is too familiar to us who have been around the Church for awhile. We often forget that here, Satan quotes Scripture as readily as Christ. We talk about dueling hermeneutics in the hands of evil and good. It stands as a caution to the ease in which we use Scripture sometimes against each other, or demand that our own interpretation be seen as divine edict without reference to our humility or our moral accountability in relationship.

There is also a trap here, perhaps, to imagine dueling powers in a dualistic cosmos. Light struggling against the darkness. Warfare between heaven and hell. I can imagine a Hollywood computer animated effects feature of Satan on one side with his battle fleet, and Christ on the other with his angels ready to fly into combat. The great cosmic superpowers at loggerheads. But this is not the kind of power that is exchanged here.

For Jesus is powerless, vulnerable, hungry, unaided, and alone. He is facing the greatest temptations that arise from the call that was revealed in his baptism. After all, the skies opened, the Spirit descended, and he was called by God "beloved" . . . Doesn't that mean having the Big Cheese in your corner, the real Master of the Universe on your side? Being "anointed" implies kingship, authority, a divine motorcade at your disposal. It's as though Jesus had just been winged. Senior Bird Man. With the might of all Heaven at his command.

This is precisely what Satan wants demonstrated: an awesome might; a show of force that rivals that of the Roman occupiers and the puppet kings. For Satan knows that to play God – to play by the rules of domination and control means being trapped by those rules, too.

He asks Jesus first to make food for himself – to issue a gut-based order out of personal desire and need. Allow the basic command of human instinct for survival to take over and drive the show. Jesus reminds Satan that bread is a gift that comes from God, from the very center of all Being. It cannot be demanded. For everything that we demand as human beings and then receive tempts us to demand more.

Next, Jesus is invited to put God to the test: to dishonor the temple of his body only to prove that God is really in charge – that God *really* loves him, despite all that was said in the Jordan. It is yet another great temptation of the human condition. But Jesus responds that testing God is to lose trust and abandon faith. How many of us have had to learn with even our most beloved families and friends the simple truth that loyalty and loyalty are gifts to be given – like bread – not expectations?

Finally, Jesus is taken to the mountaintop and is offered everything that real kings ought to have: power, dominion, and control. Surely the beloved of God deserves such things? At least as a sign of God's power and divine favor, recognizable to all of us? But, no.

For powerlessness and vulnerability is the way forward for Christ: the shedding of dominionism, the ways of greed. . . above all relinquishing the temptation of making oneself equal to God. This is the primordial sin of our human state: the one articulated in Genesis this morning when the snake persuades the human family to partake in the forbidden fruit – to try to be equal with God.

We might protest that we claim Jesus is equal to God, but then we forget that the incarnation, God in Christ, does not come as a demonstration of power in the world's eyes, but as a demonstration of God's solidarity with the weak, the powerless, the famished, the forgotten. . . the vulnerable. As Martin Smith writes in *A Season for the Spirit*, "From deep within Jesus emerges his refusal of the way of power, a refusal he will have to repeat again and again on the way to the cross. His vocation is to be the Servant, he will be 'numbered with the transgressors,' not the rulers."¹

This is the message and the quest of Lent for us as Christians. To put down the power at least long enough to recognize the Christian way as the way of vulnerability, the way of powerlessness. To follow Jesus into the wilderness and remember the claims that duty, birth order, genetics, family, and accidents of birth and geography have over each of us. To remember that against our shared, deepest darkness, we cannot, if we are truly honest, even hold as much as a candle.

If truth be told, my brother's wings are tender and fragile. Even with one of the most sophisticated machines ever made at his command, he is vulnerable. Paw Bear, grandfather of my sister-in-law Diane, lovingly presided at their recent marriage. He is a military veteran as well as a retired Episcopal priest. I caught him after the winging looking thoughtfully at a case filled with the numerous wings of one of the training squadrons in Kingsville. He pointed out one that was broken, indicating the death of an officer.

This is the fragile life of power and vulnerability, I realized – balancing tremendous machines and skills with a chosen devotion to high ideals. And now I understand now what it means to have a profound respect for those who stand in our name in harm's way, even while we hope against hope that they never have to be sent to

¹ *A Season for the Spirit: Readings for the Days of Lent* by Martin L. Smith. Church Publishing, 2004, pg. 13.

defend the ideals we enjoy. So now I'm part of a military family with all the risks, responsibilities, and worries that entails.

Paw Bear prays for his granddaughter and her new husband as he trains to be in harm's way. He prays for us here at Church of Our Saviour and the burdens we share. That's the kind of generous soul he is: generous in his recognition of vulnerability. For prayer is the refuge of the vulnerable. It is the refuge of Jesus in the desert.

For Paw Bear knows in his heart that we are out in the wilderness, too, with Steven and Diane, and all our sisters and brothers who remain in harm's way. Out in the wilderness with our sisters and brothers close here at home who are down and out, suffering from addiction and despair. Out in the wilderness with our sisters and brothers far away who suffer from war and degradation. Out in the wilderness, too, with all those who struggle with their own illusions of being powerful. Out in the wilderness with each other here this morning, where the pressures and stresses of this day promise only to transform into the pressures and stresses of tomorrow.

So as you choose this Lent, choose the paths of humility; the paths that acknowledge that you are really vulnerable, and learn to pray by that. It's honest. Our fragility is the composition of God's grace, the tapestry on which God paints redemption. Our powerlessness in a capricious universe is the raw material of God's love: the desert experience where we are broken open again – naked, even, before our Maker, like Adam and Eve before they claimed for themselves and us a knowledge that belonged only to God and then covered themselves with embarrassment. Vulnerable as Christ was to God's tender mercy.

For after all the temptations of power are done, and the Darkness retreats to await a more opportune time, we are fed and nurtured in the bread and the wine, the bounty of God's overflowing love for us, the Beloved Community, the Body of Christ. For when we stop our grasping after power, we are drawn again towards becoming the creatures we were made to be: free of the delusions of this world, and blessed in all our vulnerability, and raised up on eagle's wings to soar above the desert, and home to the Garden again, raised from death.