

## “Laid Bare”

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*<sup>12</sup>Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. <sup>13</sup>And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. <sup>14</sup>Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. <sup>15</sup>For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup>Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

*(Hebrews 4:12-16)*

Going around town this week it is apparent that local families are really getting into the spirit of Halloween. Yards are already decked out with holiday decorations, and the most popular choice by far for those decorations is the skeleton. Big skeletons, little skeletons, dog skeletons. Funny ones, scary ones... crawling up out of the grass, sitting in lawn chairs, or hanging off balconies. Just across the street, our neighbors put up a colorfully lit skeleton that stands nearly twenty feet tall and is clad in a t-shirt that reads, “Beware of the kids; they are little monsters.” Based on what I am seeing, it is clear that pretty much every family in Larchmont has at least one or two skeletons in their closets.

And that seems like a perfect place to start with this passage from Hebrews, which tells us that, though we might try to stash certain secrets away or hide embarrassments from our neighbors, it is impossible for us to hide things from God. Before God *“no creature is hidden... all are naked and laid bare.”*

This is, after all, a perfectly logical thing to say about our relationship to God. We understand God to be all powerful and all-knowing -- that there is nothing in all of creation that can be hidden from God’s eyes. For example, in the Westminster Larger Catechism, written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a way to teach the Christian faith, the basic question “What is God?” is answered this way: “God is ... infinite... all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty; knowing all things...”<sup>1</sup> In light of who God is, it would be silly to think we could possibly hide anything from God.

At the same time, human beings by nature are not at all comfortable with this kind of exposure. The Bible addresses this truth from the very outset, in the Garden of Eden. In the beginning, we are told that Adam and Eve were in the garden, and both of them were naked, but they were “not ashamed.” Unfortunately, they decided to go and do what they had been warned not to do, and they each took a bite from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Immediately, scripture says, their eyes were opened, *“and they knew that they were naked,”* and for the first time, they experienced shame, fear, and vulnerability. And that’s exactly what nakedness represents – a feeling that we are dangerously exposed to insult or injury. Adam and Eve, for the first time, felt vulnerable.

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<sup>11</sup> The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I, Book of Confessions (2016), §7.117.



And they did not like it at all. It was radically uncomfortable to them, and it is uncomfortable to us, too. None of us like the feeling of being exposed or vulnerable. We much prefer to be in control. We try to control what we say and what we do not say. We try to control the narrative... control what other people know about us... always show the best side of who we are... and try to keep the skeletons locked securely away from view in the guarded corners and closets of our lives.

This discomfort that we feel in the presence of God is something that the book of Hebrews lays out very plainly. As imperfect and broken human beings, we stand completely vulnerable before the God of heaven and earth, the all-holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-righteous God whose light cannot abide darkness, whose strength rejects all weakness, whose perfect presence cannot tolerate sin. This God knows every secret, every blemish, and every imperfection. And, just like Adam and Eve when they grabbed some fig leaves and went running for cover, we know that when we stand in the presence of God with everything about us laid bare, then without a shadow of a doubt we are in real trouble.

And yet, unexpectedly, even miraculously, the book of Hebrews claims that we have nothing to fear. Just as we have reason to fear God because of who God is, we also have no reason to fear God because of who God is.

If that sounds like a contradiction, the same can be said of vulnerability. Brené Brown, a scholar, author, and Ted Talk celebrity who has spent a career studying shame and vulnerability, says that the root of our discomfort is basically a fear of disconnection... a fear that there is something about us that, if it was seen or known by others, would cause others to turn on us or abandon us. It is the fear that, if we allow ourselves to be truly seen, and truly known, then we will be rejected and alone. That is exactly what Adam and Eve felt, both about each other, and especially about God. They did not dare to let God see their true selves. If they did that, they would be too exposed, too vulnerable, and disaster was sure to follow.

And yet, ironically, it is only by confronting this deep fear, and allowing ourselves to be fully known and vulnerable, that we can truly feel alive. Vulnerability is what makes all the best things in life possible. Without it, we cannot feel empathy. Without vulnerability, there is no courage. Without vulnerability, there is no innovation, no creativity, for if we are unwilling to put ourselves out there, unwilling to trust that something good may come, then we will never take the kind of risks that are necessary to make a positive change, or to create something new and better. Without vulnerability, we will never truly experience joy, because we will be so afraid of losing the things that bring us joy, that we will never be able to take hold of them in the first place. It is no exaggeration to say that vulnerability is the key to happiness, fulfillment, and the best things in life.

But here is something else that Brené Brown teaches us about vulnerability, and it is firmly rooted in common sense. Yes, we have to be willing to risk being vulnerable if we want to be the best versions of ourselves, but we still have to be selective about who we are willing to trust with our vulnerability. "People have to earn the right to see our vulnerability," she says. "Vulnerability is about trust, and intimacy, and connection [that] we share with people who earn the right to hear the story... What's [in your heart] is the most valuable thing you have... it's the most valuable offering you have in your life, and

people have to earn the right to see it—[and] they have to *know* -- when they're seeing it -- that it's an absolute honor and privilege for you to have let them in."<sup>2</sup>

And that brings us back to this passage in Hebrews. Yes, when we stand in the presence of God, we are completely vulnerable, because we have secrets with God. Our lives are completely laid bare before God. But here is the thing, the real good news. We are vulnerable, but we need not fear. We can trust God because, God, in Christ, knows us better than anyone, and despite knowing all the skeletons in our closets, God still values us, still loves us, and still chooses us. This is what Hebrews means when it says that we have a "great high priest." In Christ, we are in the presence of the high and holy God who was, is, and always will be – the God who is without sin, without blame, and without blemish. But at the very same time, we are also in the presence of the God who is with us -- the Word who became flesh and dwelled among us. In Christ, God is no longer a distant and unforgiving judge. Having drawn near to us, he knows us intimately and understands completely the struggles of being human. Christ experienced the world just as we experience the world – the victories and the losses, the shames and the glories, the good days and the bad days. Like us, he has felt the sting of judgment, emotional pain, physical pain, and even death. And that is why scripture tells us that "*we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.*" Instead, we have a priest and an advocate who truly gets us, and chooses to see the good in us instead of the bad.

So, yes, we do have to be selective about who we trust with our vulnerability, but the essence of faith is to dare to place that kind of trust in God. It is like the little boy who went hiking with his father. The two of them were scrambling up and over rocks and boulders. At one point, the father turned around and realized that his son wasn't behind him. And then he heard a voice from above call down to him. "Hey Dad! Catch me!"

As the father turned around, his son was already joyfully plummeting down toward him from the top of a large boulder. The boy hadn't even waited to see if his dad saw him. He just jumped. The dad had only a split second to get under his falling son, but he managed to catch him.

The father was shaken. All he could do was think about what could have happened if he had not been able to catch his son safely. If he had hit the rocky ground from that height, he could have been critically injured, or even worse. Eventually the dad blurted out, "Son, can you give me one good reason why you did that?!?"

"Sure," the son answered happily. "Because you're my dad."<sup>3</sup>

As we take all those skeletons out of our closets and drag them out onto the lawn this year, perhaps we can all take a moment think about all those things we are sorry for... those things we have messed up... those sins and disappointments that might make God want to turn away from us... and remember that, if we had a God who kept His distance, a God who was quick to anger and slow to forgive, then we really would be in trouble. Thankfully, we do not have a God like that. Instead, we have a great high priest who is slow to anger, quick to forgive, and is always ready to catch us should we fall.

**Amen.**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.byrdie.com/forced-vulnerability-5120240>

<sup>3</sup> "Trust," <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/t/trust.htm>, October 17, 2020.