

*A Vulnerable God*  
John 11:1-45 (focus on v. 35)  
Rev. Henry Pascual

*Prayer: Gracious God, we come before you now to worship you and listen to your Word. Open our ears to hear. May we understand your Word more fully and follow the path you have set before us. Amen.*

We spend so much of our lives trying to stay in control. We hide how we really feel because we want to look strong, and we want everyone else to think we've got it all figured out.

Naturally, we tend to want a God who does the same. A God who fixes problems. A God who functions like a high-level CEO or a superhero. Efficient. Powerful. Unshaken by the mess.

But what if strength is gentler than we've been told? What if power isn't a clenched fist—**but tears?**

This is the unexpected image we encounter this morning in the Gospel of John. A verse in the passage says it all: **Jesus wept.**

At the grave of his friend, Jesus didn't exert control, but shed tears. He does eventually raise Lazarus from the dead, but he doesn't jump straight to the miracle; instead, he chooses to be vulnerable. He lets himself be broken, too.

We hear the story. Jesus goes to Bethany to visit his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Before he reaches their home, Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus: "Our brother is ill."

But he doesn't go immediately; instead, he decides to stay longer where he is.

Jesus finally gets to Bethany, knowing Lazarus is already dead. By the time he arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. When Mary sees Jesus, she falls at his feet. She cries out, "Lord, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died." She's weeping. Her friends are weeping.

And in that moment, we see the heart of God in two simple words we hear earlier: "Jesus wept."

Here we see Jesus' sheer humanity. As the Word incarnate, Jesus is truly one of us. He mourned. He cared. He felt loss. He stood among friends and strangers alike, their hearts joined in tears. And for us today, he shares our grief at the loss of a loved one or a friend. He lets his own heart break right along with ours.

But here's the part that's hard for us to understand. For centuries, we've been influenced by classical Greek philosophy. According to this view, **perfection** meant being **unchanging** and **untouched** by emotion. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle argued that a *perfect* being couldn't be affected by anything. If something moved you, changed you, or caused you pain, you weren't truly perfect. These ancient thinkers argued that if God is truly perfect, then God is beyond our reach—untouchable and unchanged by our lives.

So they described God as the "Unmoved Mover"—the cause of all things but remains untouched by any of them.

And honestly, that mindset still shapes us. It's woven into the fabric of our culture. We see it in our legal systems and in corporate boardrooms, where "strength" means "cool detachment." We reward leaders who run on data alone. Vulnerability isn't seen as an asset—it's a liability.

We also hear it in the "**self-made story**" we tell ourselves—the idea that we don't need anyone's help. But "**rugged individualism**" is a **myth**. The truth is that no one exists in a vacuum. We are relational to our core. We inherit our language, our culture, and our families. Whatever success we claim stands on a foundation we didn't build.

Then there's the **role of the community**—the public investment we all share. Every business relies on things we built together—the roads we drive on, the internet we use, the laws that protect us. Business thrives because of a healthy, educated workforce that we—as a society—invested in first.

Yet, despite this profound web of interconnectedness, our leadership culture often insists on a narrative of total independence. We often think of power as a solo act—a closed door, a stoic front, or a show of force.

But honestly? That "cold logic" is burning us out. We're exhausted from trying to be 'Unmoved Movers'—staying detached in a world that keeps

breaking our hearts. We have mistaken a philosophical construct for a spiritual mandate. This 'Unmoved Mover' isn't a biblical idea; it comes from classical Greek philosophy we mentioned earlier. It's the image of a "perfect" God who is distant, unchanging, and incapable of suffering.

But the theologian William Placher challenges that whole concept. He argues that God isn't vulnerable because God is weak—God is vulnerable because God is Love. **And to love is to be vulnerable**; it is to be truly affected by the one you love.<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel calls this *divine pathos*. It's the idea that God is emotionally involved in our world. According to Heschel, **God is moved by injustice, grieved by suffering, and protective of the vulnerable.**<sup>2</sup> As the Book of Proverbs puts it: "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker" (Prov. 14:31).

This is the consistent image of the Bible. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God Jesus calls *Father*—is not distant. This is a God who enters into relationships, makes covenants, and dares to love fully.

The Gospel of John shows us exactly what this looks like in the flesh. At Lazarus's grave, Jesus demonstrates a different kind of strength: **the transparency of his grief**. By choosing to weep, he showed us that the most "divine" thing we can do is **not** to stay detached. It's to admit how deeply we are connected to one another.

This is not a distant deity. This is a God with a heart—a God who is invested to the point of heartbreak.

Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates often appeared on the evening news as steady and unshakable. But behind his office door, it was a different story. In his 2014 memoir, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, Gates admits he spent many nights in tears, handwriting letters to the families of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He didn't want those soldiers to become just numbers. For each one, he asked for a photograph and a hometown newspaper clipping. He learned

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<sup>1</sup> William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology and Scripture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Theology of Pathos," Part II, Chapter 12, *The Prophet*. Harper and Row, 1962.

about their families, their coaches, and their lives before writing to their parents. And he kept their photos on his desk.

When visiting wounded troops at Walter Reed Hospital or Landstuhl Medical Center, Gates said he often struggled to keep it together. He felt a deep, personal bond with them—once telling frontline troops he had come to see them **as his own sons and daughters**. Gates realized he couldn't lead with cold detachment while sending people into harm's way. He had to let himself be moved.

We find ourselves longing for that kind of connection today. We're all looking for leaders **who keep their hearts open to the people they serve**.

This longing for an "open heart" isn't just a political hope; **it is a spiritual one**. We feel so deeply because in the Gospel, we see that God didn't just ask us to be vulnerable—**God showed us how**.

We see this vividly at the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus, the Word made flesh, steps into the pain of Mary and Martha. He lets the heartbreak of his friends become his own.

The implication is profound. If Jesus shows us what God is like, then God has tears in God's eyes. In Jesus, we meet a God who's vulnerable like us—one who steps into our pain and shares our sorrow. A God who loves us right at the point of our deepest hurt.

When we realize that God isn't watching our suffering from a distance, but standing within it, **it changes how we live our faith**. Our prayer is transformed. In prayer, we aren't trying to line ourselves up with a distant, impersonal force. **It's about a relationship**. And God cares about the things that break our hearts.

Once we realize God is moved by our personal sorrow, we start to see that God is just as moved by the world's suffering. This **changes everything about how we work for justice and peace**. It's what Abraham Heschel called "Divine Pathos." It means God isn't some distant observer of injustice—God is actually, deeply affected by it.

As we dream about our future, we have a beautiful chance to move beyond the pressure of "having it all together." **Our future is bright because it's rooted in one another**. Instead of staying guarded, we can celebrate the

true strength of being real. We draw our strength from the love we share and the honesty of walking with those who weep. **In that transparency, we discover the quiet grace that makes us whole.**

So what if our message to the world was simply this: *"We are a faith community who are not afraid to weep with you, because we follow a God who wept with us."*

At the end of this story in the Gospel of John, Jesus cries out, *"Unbind him, and let him go!"* Today, Jesus is calling us to unbind one another from the need to be perfect and step into the light of our shared vulnerability.

As we continue our Lenten journey this week, let's find one place in our lives—individually and corporately—where we feel a bit uncertain. Let's hold it as a **sacred opening**, for it's in these honest, open spaces that the **God who is vulnerable meets us**. And it's in these moments of brokenness that we find the transforming power of God's grace.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**