

“Grow, Stump, Grow”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Has life ever kicked you in the teeth, or you have ever been driven to your knees in a problematic moment? Almost all of us have had the experience of having the life sucked out of our lungs, by the most shocking and difficult adversity. But some people have the ability to stand back up and try again, while others stay on the ground and give up.

I have always ached for those people who have had to try so hard to make life work, and I have been impressed with those people who could get up and try again - persons left holding their children's hands while their ex-spouses walk out the door. The person who tries to pick up their dignity after they have been laid off from a job and they don't know where their next meal is coming from. For the children who are made fun of because of their religion, the color of their skin, or their shabby clothes, when everyone else seems to have things nicer than their own. I've always been impressed with those people who can pull themselves up, after they have been harassed with social media, or have had to struggle with one another, leaning on the stump of degradation. God gives us that ability to pull ourselves back up, if we are willing to try again, believing that God can move us forward.

Part of it is realizing that there are asps and adders - those are snakes, by the way - all around us. God never said he was going to lay out a perfect life for the faithful. God just said, “I will give you the ability to stand firm and stand strong in the faith, not that I will make it that easy for you.”

In fact, the more you are able to get yourselves back up, the more you are able to stand amidst the asps and the adders, the more God can be glorified. Sometimes, by the very act of pulling yourselves back up, you're showing God at work in your life. If you had it that easy, you wouldn't be saying very much about what God is doing. People would be talking, and pointing, and saying, “Look at how easy you have got it.” But you, who have had it the most difficult, [show that] God is alive and present in your life, and we can see it on your face, by your determination. We can see it in your heart as you get - as difficult as it is - on your feet again, and again, and again. Even the most painful moments of your life can be the greatest blessing in retrospect.

Sometimes it is hard to understand Scripture until you look at it within its context. That's why I have so much trouble with those fundamentalists who just pull something out of context in the Bible. Almost every single verse in the Bible has to be placed within its context to find its understanding.

So we turn, once again, to the Old Testament, to the book of Isaiah 11:1-10. The year is 733 BCE, and in this context you have King Ahaz wondering, “What in the world I'm going to do?” because he is king of the southern kingdom of Judah, and the northern kingdom of Israel, and the people of Damascus - the Arimatheans of Damascus - are all trying to say, “Let's fight the Assyrian army.” And Ahaz knows that if they all take on the Assyrians, who were a much more powerful nation with an incredible, almost Nazi-like, military, they would be wiped out. Yet, he is scared and feels vulnerable. So Isaiah goes to King Ahaz and says, “Do not take them on. Do not listen to the people in Damascus. Do not

listen to the people in the northern kingdom of Israel. God will protect you. You just trust that no matter how vulnerable you feel God will protect you.”

Well, King Ahaz and his vulnerability couldn't sit still. He didn't side with the northern kingdom. He didn't side with the people of Damascus and fight them. But, he started having negotiations with the Assyrians, trying to work it out on his own, and it didn't work. It was as if the whole tree of the southern kingdom of Judah had been knocked down.

But even then, when the king knew he had made a terrible mistake, and the entire kingdom might be at risk, Isaiah goes to him again and says, “Don't worry. You have made a mistake. But, if you start over, pull yourself up now. A stump [will come, and] out of that stump I will grow a root - a branch - and you can start again. This time if you believe in God to protect you - to allow yourself to be vulnerable and let God take over - I will create in you a strong and viable nation, stronger than any nation, whether it is the Egyptians, the Babylonians, or the Assyrians.” And, that is the end of the passage. We don't know at that point what happens. It is left in the King's hands to decide if he is going to trust God, continue to trust his own finagling, or his army - but it required the King to become vulnerable, vulnerable enough to trust God rather than himself, or any other army in order to survive.

When you have been laid low it is awfully hard to not start working at it yourself. “If I was just better I could do it. If I was just stronger, I could do it. If I had been more cunning, I could have done it.” But, over and over again, it is when you allow yourself to be vulnerable - you hand the situation over to God - that your life can be transformed. And that is hard to do. We want to fix it, we want to work it, we want to be in control. That is the joke. The more we try to be in control, the less we are [in control]. The more we just let go - be vulnerable, let God take it - the stronger we become. It takes a whole lot of faith and a whole lot of struggle to make that happen.

I love the writer Brene-Brown, and a lot of people do. She is on TED talks all of the time. I have talked about her book before, “Daring Greatly.” But she talks in this book specifically about what it means to be vulnerable. Ahaz was vulnerable. She defines vulnerability as exposure, uncertainty and emotional risk. She said, “Until you have placed yourself in that moment of being vulnerable, you will not know what it is like to live. Because feeling vulnerable - at its core - has difficult emotions, like fear, grief and disappointment. They will fill you at your weak moments. But,” she continues, “vulnerability is also the birth place of love, belonging, joy, empathy and innovation and creativity. [If] You refuse vulnerability, you refuse all of those good things as well.

Brene-Brown continues by saying, “Sometimes the best way to figure out what vulnerability is, is to look at what it is not.” She names four myths of vulnerability: number one - vulnerability is weakness. It is not. Vulnerability takes a great deal of strength to hand over your life to someone or something else to take control. It isn't weakness, it's real strength. Myth number 2: “I don't do vulnerability.” Yes, you do. You just don't admit it. All of us are vulnerable, whether we want to admit it or not. None of us are on an island unto ourselves. We live in a global society. We live in a society where we trust in other people for our hospitalization, we trust in other people for our jobs, we trust in other people for our spiritual life. We are ever interconnected and that makes us vulnerable by its very definition. Number three: We can go it alone. “I could do it myself, I don't have to trust

anyone else.” It doesn’t work that way. And, number four: Trust comes before vulnerability. “If I can trust you, I can be vulnerable to you.” That is not how it works either. Number one, we are all sinful. We all fall short of the glory of God. Everyone will disappoint us and break our trust, time and again. Vulnerability is placing trust before you are sure it will work; knowing that even when it falls short, you have the strength to get back up again and again and again. That is what it takes.

As children we had ways of putting on armor to protect ourselves, to use our behaviors and emotions as a weapon. We learned to make ourselves scarce or even disappear when we got scared. But, we are adults now and running away and fleeing isn’t always the best way. As adults we realize that to live with courage, purpose and connection, we have to work together with others and be vulnerable yet again. Accepting vulnerability requires amazing amounts of courage and leadership. It requires resilience as we walk in our journey through life, and just like the king’s vulnerability transformed his leadership, when he finally handed it over to God, the Assyrians fell, just like Pharaoh and the Egyptians fell, just like ultimately the Babylonians fell. All of those countries, all of those armies, were so much greater than the tiny little places we call Judah and Israel; and yet they all fell because God is so much stronger.

The question is, in your moment, when you are at your weakest and most vulnerable, when you are struggling to get back up again, will you trust in the God who did all of that for that tiny little nation? Will you trust in that God to do it for you no matter how many times you have been knocked down? Will you trust God to lift you back up again? You have nowhere else to turn and God has ultimate power.

Sometime today, take a moment and pray to God to pull you up - to give you the strength the courage and the dignity to let God allow you stand tall again, with your head up, your shoulders back and your eyes forward, to meet yet another day; if not for yourself, for the people who rely on you - your children, your grandchildren, grandparents and parents - so that they can see that when you are follower of Jesus Christ you cannot ultimately fail. They can knock you down but they cannot keep you down.

May God bless you with that strength and determination, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen