

Sheer vulnerability

The nakedness of the incarnation reframes what it means to be strong.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 2024](#) issue

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If you've never undergone a procedure in an outpatient surgical center, you can expect an experience like this: a nurse hands you some nonslip socks and one of those open-in-the-back hospital gowns. They then instruct you to head to a changing room, take off your clothes, and place them in a tiny locker. The locker key you'll be given will look about as sophisticated as a screwdriver. Once you manage to tie the neck cords of your gown into a bow, a task that always challenges me, you'll step

into a large room.

The instant you look around that room, some version of four uncomfortable words will rattle your psyche: *I feel extremely vulnerable*. Six or eight other patients, facing you from their own bays (with their privacy curtains half-drawn or not drawn at all), sit in recliners just like the one assigned to you. Aware that your own backless gown resembles your health insurance plan in a conspicuous way—every time you turn around you discover something that’s not covered—you’re eager to have a seat. As you wait for someone to confirm your birth date for the ninth time, you try to look comfortably at ease, which is what every other scantily clad person in the room aims for as well. If you’re lucky, an aide will place a warm blanket on your lap—a luxury that Adam and Eve would’ve loved to have instead of their fig leaf. There you sit, surrounded by other precious people in skimpy gowns, frail creatures all of you, feeling particularly vulnerable as you await the call for surgery.

If we’re honest with ourselves, to be alive is to be vulnerable. It’s inextricably part of being human. We’re born naked and without any self-protecting parts. No fangs. No venom. No horns. No camouflage. Just tender flesh waiting for some clothes to arrive and a few modest protective devices that we learn to develop over time.

Through all too many circumstances in life, though, we resist vulnerability, fighting any and all association with it. Many of us are taught to view vulnerability as an embarrassing sign of weakness. “My nakedness embarrasses me, Lord,” Elizabeth Rooney opens her poem, “Unfrocked.” “I am accustomed to some shreds of self-deception / patches of pretense, coverings of conceit. / I am not much as I am.” But such a sense of powerlessness can serve as an opening.

When Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn tried to retain some degree of control over his vulnerability in the Gulag, desperate to acquire basic clothing and food, he found himself at the mercy of his jailors. But as he accepted and embraced the fullness of his vulnerability and deprivation, his captors had less power over him. As their power shrank, his only grew.

In Christian worship during most of the year, we celebrate God as invincible power. But when Christmas rolls around, our normal calculations of power and influence suddenly get upended. A strange recalibration occurs within us as we find God showing up not in marble or mosaic but as an unashamedly naked infant, what Frederick Buechner calls a divine descent into the “ludicrous depths of self-

humiliation.” The nakedness of the incarnation will always seem scandalous to some, but to others of us it becomes an urgent call to acknowledge the vulnerability that will connect us with others in love.

After a year of political campaigning, in which powerful people strut around as invulnerable saviors, encountering God in a birthday suit deserves to be more than a sideshow. This one who arrives undressed in Bethlehem is precisely whom we must come to know if we’re to discover the power and love that can spring from life’s most vulnerable moments.