

LEA VERSTRICHT

## **Hope in times of vulnerability**

*A biblical perspective*

### **Preamble**

Vulnerability is perhaps the characteristic of our human condition: we are born as creatures in need of care and we all live in finiteness, until death comes. This is the reality of our physical finite condition. In addition to this comes the fact that we are conscious beings, gifted with the breath of God, which he has breathed into us at creation. Our soul was born. This soul is vulnerable, and maybe this is what shapes our lives more than our physical vulnerability. Because no one escapes death. The wounded soul is above all about what we do to ourselves and to others, about what we experience as the sense or nonsense of our existence. We have to work on this!

That vulnerability is inextricably connected to hope. Hope is one of the three gifts in the letter of Paul to the Christians of Corinth (1 Cor 13). Today we see love as the greatest of these three, but we regard hope as the gift that leads us through our existence, an existence where our human condition shapes our lives, but where hope helps us to find the possibilities of a new beginning. During our days here at Ter Dennen we focus on the hope which finds its form in vulnerability.

We all get hurt, there is no escaping from it. We experience these wounds at every level of our existence. There are personal wounds and wounds we receive from our association with other people, we all know the fragility of and in the communities in which we live. We are touched by the society we live in and of which we are a part, or by the things that happen around the world. And which we hear about through all kinds of media. Often we experience a sense of helplessness. We get hurt by the church which preaches the gospel but which is run by people, with all the consequences that come with that. And on all these levels hope is at work; we are being pushed forwards in an attempt to get our lives back on track.

How are we able to think about hope in a time in which we no longer believe in the positive evolution of history? How are we able to hope amidst all this evil that seems to spread across the entire world and which becomes ever more complex? What is there to hope for in times in which the fragility of the earth becomes clearer and clearer and when world leaders can only laugh about that fragility? Where is the hope in the midst of all this power and capitalism which makes the gap between rich and poor ever deeper?

We are more aware of the tragic dimension of life, and do not put off important things to later, where we think everything will be fine. We are aware of our responsibility in our lifetime.

When this linear thinking is no longer sufficient, when we realise that God's realm is dawning and it is happening now, what is the meaning of hope then? Do we not need to look for a new description of God, do we not need to adjust God's image? Is looking for hope in vulnerability not looking for a new relationship with God? What do the stories about God's care and salvation mean to us humans? Hope is not in the outcome of a situation but is the

way we need to go to get to that outcome! The kingdom of God is not something eternal, infinite and completed, it shows itself in our daily lives, in the midst of our vulnerability. We have to embrace that vulnerability and work with it.

In a moment we will start with an introduction that gives a biblical interpretation of hope in vulnerability. Today we also meet Laurien Ntezimana, who comes to tell us how hope and reconciliation can work in the hopelessness of today's society. And tomorrow Tina Beattie will be here. There will be lots of input with moments of contemplation in between to get familiar with the texts and to connect them to the challenges and vulnerability we experience in our concrete situation. We also have a trip to Antwerp where we will have a walk along places which bear witness to hope in this city. We will watch a film, with the intention that we will look with new eyes on our own precarious and vulnerable situations. To live and to bear witness to the hope which lives inside us. (1Pet3,15)

### **1. The Biblical story.**

The Bible teaches us that life is vulnerable from beginning to the end, and that there are always opportunities for life. Here we think about Genesis where we read the stories of Creation and the expelling from the Garden of Eden, stories of being a stranger, slavery, Exodus and the entry into the promised land. Psalms are songs and prayers in which all the ups and downs of people's lives are mentioned. The exile into Babylon is a period of total loss of home and future, in which the prophets rise up to encourage the people and to give evidence of hope.

DT. 30,19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup> loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

In the middle of that duality of life and death, of curse and blessing, we are called to choose life in order for life to be possible in the promised land. But how do you do that, choose life? It is not always simple. That's why I give you two stories, one from the New and one from the Old Testament, to try to find out what hope in vulnerability means in the Bible. And we will also see if we have to adjust our image of God, if we have to adjust our relationship with Him. The first story testifies to this above all. It is a story of vulnerability, and of what it does to our image of God and our relationship with Him.

### **2. Job as an example.**

When I mentioned the stories of the Bible I did not mention the books of Wisdom. But we will look at one here which concerns the fundamentals of life, in order to look at life and God. The book of Job.

It is a well-known story: God has a conversation with the devil and he accepts the challenge to test the righteous Job. Everything is taken from Job, all his worldly goods and his physical well-being. What happens to his spirit, his soul? Job is visited by his 'friends' and there is a conversation. Those friends present him with a certain image of God in which the righteous are being rewarded and the sinners are punished. The discussions become very heated. At the end there is a curious answer from God and a happy end follows.

In the book of Job vulnerability is in the spotlight, both physically and mentally. No one escapes vulnerability. Whatever you do in life, however great your respect for God is, no one is able to escape vulnerability. What does hope mean in a situation where someone loses everything? In other words, where can we find hope in the book of Job? Is it only present in the happy ending for the sake of the sustained faith in God?

### **2.a. The beginning.**

In the Bible the book of Job comes before the psalms. It seems as if we first have to adjust our notions of suffering and the image of God before we are able to read the psalms or even are able to pray. The recognition of suffering and the difficulties we have in dealing with it needs to have a prominent place in the life of the people who want to have a relationship with God.

After a remarkable ideal of what a righteous man deserves and how he relates to God, (Job 1.1-5) there follows a meeting in heaven organised by Yahweh. The devil also visits. Immediately there is a discussion between God and the devil about the righteous Job – impeccable, honest, stays away from all evil and fears God -: Job. After the first test in which everything is taken from Job: all his cattle, his land, his servants and his children, a second meeting is organised in heaven, with a remarkable opening scene (1,6-8//2,1-3a). And again Yahweh accommodates the devil, he can take everything from Job under one condition: Job must stay alive. Physical ailments and a wife who turns against him are the result. His friends come to visit and they mourn for seven days.

What is striking is that Yahweh is so compliant towards the devil. And this raises the question about the frequent presence of the name El Shaddai in the book of Job. Usually it is translated with The Almighty, - the name appears no less than 29 times in the book of Job, 41 times in the Bible. But what does it mean when the devil can do whatever he wants with people's lives? It looks as if God is not able resist evil. The God who wants what is good for people is under a lot of pressure. Is this maybe a more a vulnerable God then an Almighty one?

### **2.b. The poem.**

Job's friends come to visit. After seven days of mourning the silence is broken by a complaint from Job in which the question about the meaning of life is very loud:

“Let the day perish wherein I was born,  
and the night which said,  
‘A man-child is conceived.’  
<sup>4</sup>Let that day be darkness!  
May God above not seek it,  
nor light shine upon it.  
26 I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;  
I have no rest; but trouble comes.” (*job 3,3-4.26*)

Then follows a conversation full of accusations and rebuttals. “Did you not hope for a life without flaws”? Elifaz asks. And in between the speeches of his friends, Job answers and challenges God to give an answer to the question of the suffering of innocent people. The image Job has of his God also comes up in the conversation and after a lot of pain, sorrow, hopelessness, powerlessness he speaks out:

Job 23,13-17)  
13 But he is unchangeable and who can turn him?  
What he desires, that he does.  
<sup>14</sup>For he will complete what he appoints for me;  
and many such things are in his mind.  
<sup>15</sup>Therefore I am terrified at his presence;  
when I consider, I am in dread of him.  
<sup>16</sup>God has made my heart faint;  
the Almighty has terrified me;  
<sup>17</sup>for I am<sup>[f]</sup> hemmed in by darkness,  
and thick darkness covers my face.<sup>[g]</sup>

### **2.c. Yahweh’s answer.**

Yahweh’s answer is hard to understand for biblical scholars. What do we read? A few chapters where God asks Job a lot of questions (Job 38-41) only to be interrupted once by Job who does not know what to answer and who puts his hand before his mouth. Only once there is talk about a ‘masterpiece of God’s creating power’ (40,19). Everything else is one big question to Job; is he able to manipulate the world? But God does not tell us either if he can manipulate the world. Job’s friends are also punished because they did not portray a true picture of Yahweh, and, in the end, Job always had the best intentions towards God. At the end, after making a confession, Job is being rewarded with more possessions than before and he is granted a long life, with numerous offspring, in which the women play a remarkable role, they are named and they share in the inheritance.

### **2.d. A vulnerable God.....**

The fact that Yahweh only asks questions and especially the description of indomitability of

the beast in chapter 41, suggests that Yahweh and Job are on the same side of Creation. The monster in the chaos before creation, might be halted, but not defeated by Yahweh.

When he raises himself up the mighty<sup>[g]</sup> are afraid;  
at the crashing they are beside themselves.  
Upon earth there is not his like,  
a creature without fear.  
<sup>34</sup> He beholds everything that is high;  
he is king over all the sons of pride.”

And sometimes, inevitably, the beast pops up in people’s life. Are the many questions Yahweh asks Job and his confession about the beast not a sign of vulnerability? Is it not here in the text that He asks Job to stand beside Him in the creation of a world worthy of humans and that they fight the same battle which leads to new life? Was Yahweh not put aside by Satan, and did God not hope especially for the cooperation of the righteous to testify that it was possible to create a different world, a world where death and destruction did not have the last word?

## **2.e. ....Or the almighty God?**

But why then Almighty? The word Shaddai is used 31 times in the book of Job. A lot is unclear about the meaning of this word. What are we talking about, apart from the Book of Job? The first time it is mentioned is in the book of Genesis, (17,1-2) when God makes Himself known to Abraham as El Shaddai. There are several authors who think that the word refers to the plural of the word ‘shad’, what means breast. It is often used in the context of protection, caring, feeding.

Gen 49, 25

by the God of your father who will help you,  
by God Almighty<sup>[g]</sup> who will bless you  
with blessings of heaven above,  
blessings of the deep that couches beneath,  
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.

Jes 60,16

You shall suck the milk of nations,  
you shall suck the breast of kings;  
and you shall know that I, the LORD, am your Savior  
and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

Joel 1,15-16

<sup>15</sup> Alas for the day!  
For the day of the LORD is near,  
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.  
<sup>16</sup> Is not the food cut off  
before our eyes,  
joy and gladness  
from the house of our God?

The word also has destructive connotation, (from the verb 'shadad', destruction or destroy) this could mean that when people do not behave according to what is given to them from the life-giving womb and breast, that death will sow destruction. With El Shaddai it is rarely about a supernatural intervention from God in our world. But it is more about feeding the power, to support, safety and blessing.

### **2.f. Hope in the book of Job.**

What do we learn about hope in the book of Job? Is there only hope at the end, where Job is twice rewarded for his unwavering loyalty to God? Or can we detect hope earlier in the book? In the recognition of what it means to be a man we can find traces of hope. Wealth and happiness do not ensure a carefree future. Not even the pursuit of justice or the loyalty towards God can guarantee us that. As human beings we are left to the mercy of existence, in which God and Satan seem to be in constant conversation and where Satan inevitably comes in.

There is also hope when we ask about the image of God. Even though there is a lot of discussion needed before things get clear, the fact that they are still talking and Job doesn't give up stressing his innocence can be seen as a sign of hope. It is a sign of not giving up the search for what is a righteous and a decent existence in the proximity of God.

We can also read hope in the questions in which God asks us to stand together as partners to resist death and to always choose life and the things that are life-giving. The shifting of God's image as an almighty god who can manipulate the world, to a more vulnerable god who, as a mother, takes care of her children and makes clear that hope and vulnerability are not so contradictory as it seems. Together they can be of great significance. This becomes clear in the incarnation of God when he becomes human in his Son, Jesus.

The latter is especially obvious, when God gives himself to connect with man, and becomes man in his son, Jesus.

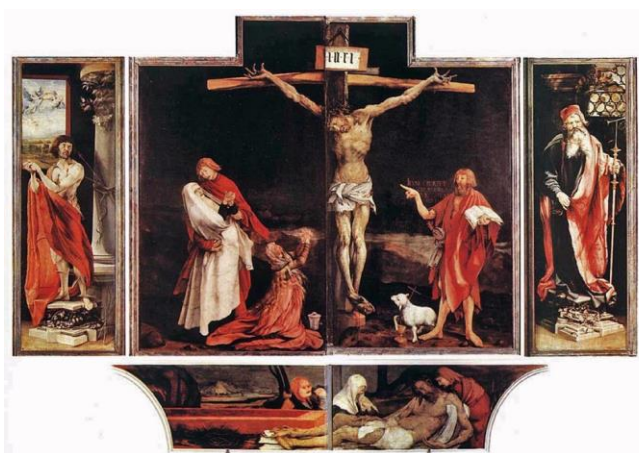
### **3. The incarnation of God, or the ultimate choice for vulnerability**

The theme for this General Chapter is reflected in the story around which you have built up your spirituality: the stories of the Holy Sepulchre and the Resurrection. Those stories are set

in the midst of all the misery that preceded it: the betrayal, the denial, the loneliness, the torture, and the death of Jesus. You know all these stories of course. Those stories are repeated all over the world, every day. If they mean anything today, then it is that God became man, was born in a manger, that he had to suffer a death which we wish onto nobody, but which repeats itself again and again through history. God shows himself in his most vulnerable side . If ever the incarnation means anything, it is about recognising vulnerability and death, the knowledge that we are dependent on each other, with all the risks that that entails. .

### 3.a. The Cross

Western art history shows us that it is not easy to portray God on the Cross. Mathias Grunewald was the first person in the 16th century to paint Christ on the Cross. Until that time the resurrection was already represented in the Cross. It teaches us that it is not self-evident to think about God as being as vulnerable as human beings. The painting was meant for and placed in the chapel of the Antoniten Convent in Isenheim (Germany). The sick, mainly people who suffered from the plague, were brought before the altar before starting their treatment because it was hoped that Saint Antony, who is seen at the left hand side of the painting, would perform a miracle or at least give the sick some spiritual comfort by seeing the altar.



Matthias Grunewald, "Isenheimer altar" (1512 -1516)

"The artist shows in gripping detail the torture and the pain of his death, using exaggerated proportions: the head of Jesus is crowned by an unusually large crown of thorns and is covered in blood and wounds; the agony of death is in His face. One sees a pain cramped finger, pierced feet, spines in the body and on the legs, which refer to the flogging; and bleeding wounds. It is to help the sick remember just how much Jesus suffered for the people and to give them hope and comfort".

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We read the stories in more detail. Where does hope emerge in the stories of the suffering and death of Jesus, the stories about the tomb and resurrection?

### 3.b. **The Passion**

Someone who did an enormous amount of work on the theology of suffering is Johann Baptist Metz. He dedicated an entire book to the memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis. To him, we Westerners live in an age where God is totally forgotten and the focus is only on personal happiness. According to Metz, the God of Christianity brings danger and risk in the way we believe. Christian faith is no romantic idea; danger and risk are a part of our faith, the cross plays a central role. That memory is an 'intentional memory', because it is totally integrated with the cross. He also calls it a 'dangerous memory', because we would like to forget it. Metz emphasized that this is something we must not forget. At Easter we forget too easily the cross and the suffering and we only remember and celebrate the joy of the Resurrection.

We can only fully understand the Resurrection when we take the suffering and death of Jesus seriously, when we ourselves 'live' through it. Because it is precisely this memoria passionis that keeps the future open, namely the future for those that seem excluded from any future.

Is hope then only present in keeping the future open for those who don't have one? Metz is criticised for placing himself at a distance from the victims with this way of thinking. A theology that has the victims at its heart is only in the early stages of development. Where is the hope, strength and future for the victims themselves? A possible answer might be: hope is *in* remembering, in the stories that are remembered, told and written down. The power of the gospels would not lie so much in the fact that they tell stories about Jesus, but that the evangelists were people who remembered the events, and that they kept the memory of the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus alive. This makes it possible that we readers can remember what happened, and are able to express this via rituals like the eucharist, and - more clearly - the liturgy of holy week, realising that we also are (possible) victims of injustice, humiliation, abuse of power etc. In other words, we are vulnerable creatures, and in this we can experience God.

Memory makes it clear that a promise of heaven, peace and calm towards the end, is not the only possible expression of hope, and even does injustice to the suffering. The memory of the cross keeps us with two feet on the ground, or even better, in the mud of this earthly life. And the fact that we do not deny it or run from it - just in this there is a paradoxical hope. This places the vulnerable God who has connected Himself to the people into the foreground, he became man and was humiliated to the bone, tortured and beaten to death. But for God it does not end there!

### 3.c. *The stories from the Tomb*



The four Gospels tell us the story about the women who went to the tomb to care for Jesus' body. His death was not yet a turning point in their lives. It was something they had done all his life and his death was no reason for them to stop doing it. Life would go on as they knew it, they would continue to take care of Jesus. We can ask ourselves what they were hoping for. Probably they hoped that none of it had happened, that everything would be ok, and that life would continue in the way they knew it. But was that possible? Is this what we are hoping for?

We choose a fragment from Mark, the oldest Gospel.

From Mark 15-16

*15, 40* <sup>40</sup> There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, <sup>41</sup> who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

*42* And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, <sup>43</sup> Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.

*46* And he bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. <sup>47</sup> Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

*16,* And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup> And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. <sup>3</sup> And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" <sup>4</sup> And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back—it was very large. <sup>5</sup> And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. <sup>6</sup> And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. <sup>7</sup> But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." <sup>8</sup> And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

<sup>9</sup> Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. <sup>10</sup> She went out and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. <sup>11</sup> But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

In this text, which is at a low point in the life of the women and the other followers of Jesus, the hope is in the details, that are described carefully. Some elements from the text point to the hope in (non) everyday life.

a. The two Marys looked to see what had to be done in this situation of helplessness and sorrow. This is where the memory begins, in which hope becomes visible.

b. The work the two Marys needed to do; they knew from their former lives when they followed Jesus and cared for Him. What happens in Jerusalem has its beginning in Galilee and will return there too. Keeping focused on the hurts can make hope invisible. Hope is in the context, in the margin, in ordinary life where people look out for each other with the necessary care and love.

c. Respect for the sabbath and for the day of silence (Holy Saturday) means that we can give out attention to what is happening and to the pain. Even in times of vulnerability and hurt, the orderliness of time and its moments of rest which are integral to creation, are beneficial.

d. The care the women took of Jesus before his death, continues. They want to embalm him. At that moment they are not able to think of anything else. Going back to ordinary life is a sign of hope in their life. Even though they worry about the 'extraordinarily big stone' which is in the way. But on arriving at the tomb they see that that stone has been rolled away.

e. They are experiencing fear. First they are scared by the young man in the empty tomb. Then they tremble with fear and are unable to speak. The fear cannot be over-stressed, despite the first words: 'Fear not'. The acknowledgement of fear testifies to hope, even though they walk away and are silent. It does not say, as others do, that they did not believe. Fear is a sign that what happens to them was not expected but yet is taken very seriously. It is the beginning of knowing that nothing will be the same ever again, and coming to terms with this.

f. Mary Magdalene will testify to what has been said and to what has happened to her. It is described as a very personal story. From one human being to another. The fact that her listeners do not believe her makes it clear that this is something that is not easy to share with others. Believing has to do with allowing new life to present itself. It is contrary to the desire to take up the old life, especially in moments of great uncertainty. The challenge is a new way of looking, thinking and living, and this is difficult in moments when life is challenging. And yet this is what is asked.

### ***3.d. The Resurrection stories***

The stories of the tomb have a great similarity in the four gospels. The women are always the ones who visit the tomb, white figures who speak to them from the tomb, they are afraid, are not believed, and return back to life. The Resurrection stories that take place after the stories of the tomb are different in every Gospel.

In Matthew's account, the evangelists gather at a mountain where they receive instruction to make disciples of all the Nations. We have just read Mark. Thanks to Luke we are familiar with the story of the Walk to Emmaus, the sudden entrance of Jesus and the pointing to the wounds on his hands and feet. John is the one who has much to tell, he tells the story of Mary Magdalene in the garden with the gardener, the story of Thomas who wants to see the wounds and the story of the fishermen on the lake. In spite of the fact that there are differences in the stories, there is also a similar pattern. People want to return to normal life, just like the women who went to the tomb and notice that nothing is the same. The stories of the tomb with their desperation, their fear and disbelief, are in fact Easter stories which take place on the third day. The Resurrection stories last for forty days. So, a long time, and from the start they are never clear.

What also stands out is that the resurrection stories take place in people's lives. We project resurrection into life after death, but they are stories about human experiences about how life can be lived in the here and now. And that it takes time to recognize them. Hope in vulnerability doesn't call us away from everyday life, but forces us to transcend human relationships. And to see beyond what death confronts us with. "He is not here" the white figure tells us. "Turn around", "Go back to ...", "do not hold me...". Hope is something divine that enters our lives. And that is why lives that are touched by vulnerability and death are never the same as before. Hope is not something that repairs what has been, but it tells us about something new and unexpected that can begin in a very small and sometimes unrecognizable way in our daily lives. Hope transforms our life. Like we sing in the requiem: "transire ad vitam".

### **Closing remarks**

'Someone asked Erik Borgman (the theologian) "What can we hope for?". His answer was: "that we are able to hope!".

We return to the term Shaddai, the Almighty, or the One who feeds and blesses us, or the One who called us to life. Hope is there where we feel blessed or where we choose for life. And this happens, as we just heard, in everyday things. Flora Keshgegian calls this "the housekeeping-model". When we want to keep the earth habitable, and live together in harmony and peace, then it is best to adopt a form of household language: a continual process of caring, clearing up the mess, making diner, eating together, doing the dishes etc. But also a process of conflicts, abuse, fractures, estrangement etc. Hoping is no romantic action in which we move to a time and place outside our earth. But is a way of searching for what presents itself in our lives.

Therefore, the road that we travel is more important than the destination. We discovered in Job that hope presents itself in the ongoing conversation, and with the evangelists in the returning to normal everyday life and noticing that nothing is the same anymore. This change

of the image of God into a vulnerable God, who has become human, and together with the people takes the earth under his care, became clear by living life, day by day, step by step.

And that will take time. Job's conversation lasts a long time. The respect for the Sabbath means that the work will not be rushed. The stories of the Resurrection take forty days, the number of completion. After forty days we will understand. What is not now, can be tomorrow. Hope is something created by God and people together, both in their vulnerability, and in this they will support each other. We are able to hope for this because we know that we are never left alone!