

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
15 March 2026

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Fourth Sunday in Lent

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“The Good News is...Protection and Care for the Vulnerable”***

Fourth Sermon in *Tell Me Something Good: Grounding Ourselves in the Good News this Lent*

*NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment. My manuscripts often include more material than what I preached in the worship service.*

### *Deuteronomy 24:17-22; Matthew 19:13-15*

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

*“Let the little children come to me”* Jesus said... *“for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”*

Children are utterly dependent and needy. They cannot provide for themselves or feed themselves or house themselves. They are also curious and naïve; they love and trust others easily. All of that makes them vulnerable—physically, emotionally, spiritually. So it goes without saying that children need our care and our protection.

Did you notice though, that Jesus says, *“for it is to such as these”* that the kingdom of heaven belongs? Meaning the kingdom of heaven belongs not just to children, but to those who are in a similar state as children?

The kingdom of heaven *does not* belong to those who are independent and self-sufficient.

The kingdom of heaven *does not* belong to those who have all the answers. **The kingdom of heaven belongs to those *who who have need, those who cannot do life without other people helping them, those who are *Vulnerable*.***

Perhaps Jesus’ welcome of children seems obvious or light-hearted to our modern ears, but welcoming children was not a priority in Jesus’ day. Children were a nuisance. Children were not prized or ooh-ed or aah-ed over. Scholar Michael Joseph Brown provides context for the reality of children in first century Israel: *“We should dismiss ideas of childhood bliss when we read this passage. Childhood in antiquity was difficult. Fifty percent of children died before the age of five. Children were the weakest members of society. They were fed last and received the smallest and least desirable portions of food. They were the*

*first to suffer from famine, war, disease, and natural disasters. Many, some say more than 70 percent, would have lost one or more parents before reaching puberty. A minor had the same status as an enslaved person, and it was not until adulthood that they would be considered a free person.”<sup>1</sup>*

Those are difficult statistics to take in. It’s hard for us to imagine that children would be treated that way. We value children and want to protect them. We treasure them, or so we say. And yet, if someone 2,000 years from now were to rattle off statistics as a measure of our care of children, what they would hear would be equally as distressing.

According to *The State of Children in America’s Union Report* from The Children’s Defense Fund, in the United States of America:

- one child is born without health insurance every two minutes<sup>2</sup>
- one child is killed by gunfire every two hours and 48 minutes, which is 12 per day; another 32 per day are shot or injured<sup>3</sup>
- one child is reported abused or neglected every 54 seconds; which is 1,599 children each day (and that’s just ‘reported’)<sup>4</sup>
- 1 in every 45 children enrolled in public schools is unhoused<sup>5</sup>
- we spend 2.7 times as much (per person) on incarceration as we do on education<sup>6</sup>
- one child is born into poverty every minute<sup>7</sup>

In fact, “in the United States, nearly 11 million children are poor. That’s 1 in 7 kids...5his number should be unimaginable in one of the world’s wealthiest countries, and yet...across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which is made up of 37

<sup>1</sup> Michael Joseph Brown, *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, edited by Brian K. Blount, Gay L. Byron, and Emerson B. Powery, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2024). 120.

<sup>2</sup> The State of Children in America’s Union, 2021, <https://www.childrendefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-State-of-Americas-Children-2021.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Accessed on March 15, 2026 at <https://www.sandyhookpromise.org/resources/gun-violence-facts/#:~:text=1.,4>.

<sup>4</sup> Accessed on March 15, 2026 at [https://www.childrendefense.org/tools-and-](https://www.childrendefense.org/tools-and-resources/the-state-of-americas-children/soac-child-welfare/)

[resources/the-state-of-americas-children/soac-child-welfare/](https://www.childrendefense.org/tools-and-resources/the-state-of-americas-children/soac-child-welfare/).

<sup>5</sup> Accessed on March 15, 2026 at <https://www.childrendefense.org/tools-and-resources/the-state-of-americas-children/soac-housing-and-homelessness/>.

<sup>6</sup> Accessed on March 15, 2026 at <https://www.childrendefense.org/tools-and-resources/the-state-of-americas-children/soac-education/>.

<sup>7</sup> The State of Children in America’s Union, 2021, <https://www.childrendefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-State-of-Americas-Children-2021.pdf>.

countries including Denmark, New Zealand, Spain, and the United Kingdom, the United States is consistently ranked as one of the worst in child poverty rates. More than 4 in 10 children live in a household struggling to meet basic expenses, and between 7-11 million children live in households in which they are unable to eat enough because of the cost.”<sup>8</sup>

To bring it closer to home, a single adult with one child in Denver needs to earn roughly \$85,000 to over \$100,000 annually (\$40–\$50+ per hour) to cover basic necessities like housing, childcare, food, and healthcare without assistance.<sup>9</sup> Minimum wage in Denver is \$19.29 an hour.

Children, then and now, are vulnerable. They need our care and our protection. I realize I’m supposed to be telling you Something Good in this sermon but we need to know the reality of how we are failing to “welcome the children” as Jesus did in order to understand that this gospel text is not merely a ‘warm and fuzzy’ reading about welcoming kids and enjoying

seeing them come up to the steps here at Calvary for Word for God’s Children, taking joy in their wonder and delight. That is all true. But this text, and Jesus’ lesson for us, is far more expansive: it is about caring and protecting the vulnerable. The stakes are high, and children are just the beginning!

*“Let the little children come to me”* Jesus said, *“and do not stop them, for it is **to such as these** that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”*

*“**Such** as these.”* Not just these, but others, too, who are like *these*.

Children are not the only vulnerable ones in society, they are just the representatives that Jesus chooses to use here, perhaps to pull on our heart strings a bit because while we often look down on other vulnerable folks in our society, children are at least, on face value, ones that we want to protect and care for because any vulnerabilities that they have we say “aren’t their fault.” It’s not their fault they are poor. It’s not their fault they are hungry. It’s

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<sup>8</sup> Accessed on March 15, 2026 at <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/basic-facts-children-poverty/>.

<sup>9</sup> Accessed on March 15, 2026 at <https://smartasset.com/data-studies/family-minimum-income-state-2024>.

not their fault they only have one parent, or no parents; it's not their fault they cannot read or write. The vulnerability of children is accepted by us.

But when children grow up and become adults, vulnerability becomes a sign of "incompetence" or "societal burden," not a sign of shared humanity or a signal that we are mutually dependent upon one another our whole lives long, not just from years 0-18.

And because Jesus says "*For to such as these the kingdom of heaven belongs...*" that suggests that Jesus wants us to think about other vulnerable people in our society that we must welcome and care for and protect as well. For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them too. To the *vulnerable*, no matter their age.

Jesus' own faith had a strong focus on caring for the immigrant and refugee, the widow and the orphan, as our Deuteronomy text reminds us. Widows, orphans, immigrants...these are all people who are in situations where they cannot make it on their own. They need others to help them. Their dependence is obvious, overt. And of course,

socially stigmatized and marginalized too.

Orphans are children without parents. Meaning, these are kids without assigned adults to care for them, so there is no other choice than the community to care for them; they will starve and die without care. Orphans are vulnerable emotionally too. As they grow up, they may struggle with their sense of belonging or the knowledge of where they came from. They may feel a bit unrooted.

Widows are women whose husbands have died. In that day, men not only provided for the family in terms of financial support, men were the access point for women to connect to the greater society...to be a part of the Temple, the community. Widows were stigmatized and had no status without the men they were connected to. Widows are also vulnerable emotionally because they are grieving. Grief does odd things to us. We are not quite as sharp. Our faculties are dulled. We are in a fog for a good many months sometimes.

Immigrants are vulnerable because to leave one's homeland—one's language, one's home, one's family, one's cultural identity and

understanding—is to sacrifice everything. To be a foreigner in another land is as vulnerable as it gets. For refugees, the vulnerability is heightened even more, for there is an urgency to their escape; they are fleeing for their lives.

In Deuteronomy, the reason the harvesters are to leave sheafs in the field and olives in the trees and grapes in the vineyards is because in a foreign place, and without owning their own land or having a means of earning income—they would be completely dependent on others for survival. They are vulnerable, not just because they are hungry and need food and shelter. They are vulnerable because they are an *automatic outsider*, not knowing the customs of the new place they are in, the language, the land, the community.

And so as Jesus holds and blesses the children on his lap he is saying to his disciples and to us today...do you see *these*? These Children, Widows, Orphans, Immigrants, Refugees, These Who are *Vulnerable*?  
 “For to **such as these** the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

Today’s verses are just 9 of the 2,000+ verses in scripture that speak to caring and protecting the vulnerable, particularly the poor and underserved, under resourced. Themes of poverty and justice are deeply woven into Biblical teachings and into the life and ministry of Jesus.

Consistently and repeatedly, across the Old and New Testaments, our faith calls for compassion, for fairness, and for a collective responsibility to care for the vulnerable and oppressed.<sup>10</sup> Not to have pity on them saying “that’s too bad.” Not to shun or judge them and say, “if they would only work harder.” Not to ignore them or pretend we don’t see them because if we don’t see them that means they don’t exist. Not to lament them in prayer, asking God to meet their needs. Not any of those passive things. Our faith calls us to act: to care and protect the Vulnerable.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote in his book, *To Heal a Fractured World*: “Greatness, even for God, certainly for us, is not to be above people but to be with them, hearing their silent

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<sup>10</sup> Statistic accessed on March 15, 2026 at <https://sojo.net/list-some-more-2000verses-scripture-poverty-and-justice>.

*cry, sharing their distress, bringing comfort to the distressed and dignity to the deprived. The message of the Hebrew Bible is that civilizations survive not by strength but by how they respond to the weak; not by wealth but by how they care for the poor; not by power but by their concern for the powerless. **What renders a culture invulnerable is the compassion it shows to the vulnerable.**" (pg 37).*

My, my.

We are at war right now because we have people telling us that what will make us "invulnerable" is to arm up, attack, protect ourselves, be aggressive, dominate at all cost; we must "protect our country, protect the world," even! But it's an illusion, this hunger for power and control. Military might and warfare does not make us invulnerable. It just creates more and more vulnerable people.

And the thing is, we are called not just to care for those who are already vulnerable, we must do our best to prevent more people from becoming vulnerable in the ways that

violate human rights, and the right to life itself.

It's been devastating and infuriating to read about the school that was bombed in Iran, seemingly by an error by the United States. An investigation is under way. No matter its findings, the deaths of that many little girls is awful and unjust. Our leaders will say "loss of a life is just part of war." But, exactly. Loss of life IS part of war. We know this. So why do we accept it and normalize it as okay? Jesus said, Blessed are the *Peacemakers for they will be called children of God...*" (Matt. 5)

The kingdom of heaven belongs to Iranian children who died as they were learning in school.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to Ukrainian children, forced out of the classroom and into bomb shelters day after day after day.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to the children of South Sudan and Eritrea and Myanmar and Venezuela...forced to flee due to violence and civil war.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to the children whose lives were threatened at the Early Learning

Center this week at the Jewish Temple in Detroit, as someone with explosives drove their car into that sacred place of worship and education.

And the kingdom of heaven belongs to the 20,000 children of Gaza who have been killed, and to the 56,000 children who are now orphaned, and to the 21,000 Palestinian women who are now widows, many caring for children that are not their own as they seek to bring in orphans under their care.<sup>11</sup> At one point last year, almost 10 Palestinian fathers a day were being killed simply while trying to get food for their families. This new generation of widows must bear the double burden of grief and responsibility, caring for children, managing households alone, and making life-or-death choices alone, amid famine, displacement, and collapsed services.<sup>12 13</sup>

The kingdom of heaven belongs to the 1.1 million people who have been forced to flee their homes in Gaza, who live in tents or temporary shelters without water or sanitation because their

homes were destroyed, even months after the “ceasefire” was declared.

Salwa Taha, age 35, whose husband was killed early in the war, says her greatest challenge is protecting the emotional well-being of her four children. *“I try to hold them close and make them feel safe even though danger surrounds us,”* she explains. *“I’m naturally frightened by the sounds of bombardment, but I have to remain strong so they don’t break down.”* She says grief often has to be pushed aside in order to continue caring for her family. *“I lost two of my brothers and a nephew but I stop myself from thinking about it so I don’t collapse.”<sup>14</sup>*

A report from the Palestinian Ministry of Women’s Affairs found that 75 percent of women in Gaza suffer from depression, while many others experience insomnia and constant anxiety. The report notes that most women have been displaced at least four times and continue to live in conditions lacking safety, sufficient food, and stability.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Accessed on March 15, 2026 at <https://www.eupac.org/on-international-womens-day-21000-widows-in-gaza-struggle-with-loss-and-survivalsunday/>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

The stories of these Palestinians are reverberations of stories of so many displaced peoples. In 10 years, from 2015 to 2025, the number of refugees in our world has doubled from 16.1 million to 30.5 million. And those are ‘recorded refugees’ who are now settled somewhere. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that displacement at large has also continued to soar, with over 121 million people around the world forced to leave their homes.<sup>16</sup>

For to *Such as These*—the *Vulnerable*—does the kingdom of heaven belong. Let the displaced, the immigrant, the widow, the orphan, the children come to me, Jesus says. I will protect them. I will care for them. That is *good news*. That Jesus cares for them. But have you ever thought about *why* Jesus cares?

Perhaps it is obvious, but it never hurts to be reminded that Jesus, the Son of God, was *Vulnerable*. Jesus, the Incarnate Presence of God in the World was *Vulnerable*. God did not enter our world as a Super Hero or a Super Power or Military

General or a Wealthy Billionaire.

God entered our midst as a baby, which is as vulnerable as it gets. Jesus could not eat by himself or shelter himself; he depended on others for everything as he grew up, including teaching by the rabbis in the temple, and baptism from his cousin John.

God entered our world born to a teenage mom who would later become a widow. A widow whom Jesus ensured was cared for even as he was dying on the cross, when he asked his beloved disciple John to care for his mother, Mary.

God entered our world as one who would experience having to flee state violence, as Mary and Joseph took toddler Jesus across the border to Egypt to escape Herod’s violent decree to massacre baby boys.

**Jesus was vulnerable as a child.**

**Jesus was vulnerable as a refugee.**

**Jesus’ mother was vulnerable as a widow.**

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<sup>16</sup> Accessed on March 15, 2026 at <https://concernusa.org/news/largest-refugee-crises/>.

Jesus knew the teachings from his own Jewish tradition that spoke of caring for widows, orphans, immigrants, but he himself knew all these identities too.

Jesus, born in Palestine in Bethlehem, Jesus—the incarnate presence of God on earth—held all of these vulnerable identities within himself. Vulnerability was his lived experience.

God as Godself living in the world is Vulnerable.

So to love God *is* to love the vulnerable. EVEN IF we had no scriptures commanding us to do this, we have the very incarnate presence of God in the person of Jesus saying: “*If you do it to the least of these, you do it to me,*” (Matthew 25).

But also, if God is Vulnerable, and we are created in the image of God, are we not also Vulnerable too? *ALL* of us?

We are. And we cultivate compassion for the vulnerable by remembering those times when we were vulnerable, just as, in Deuteronomy, God asks the Israelites to remember their enslavement in Egypt and to use that memory of their lived experience as a motive for their

compassion for others. Empathy can be learned and our own lives are often the best teacher.

For to *Such as These*—the *Vulnerable*—does the kingdom of heaven belong.

Well, if that is true then here’s the Good News: *We are, ALL of us, vulnerable. Which means to the kingdom of heaven belongs to ALL of us.* None of us excluded from the kingdom of heaven, and none of us is excluded from the reality of vulnerability.

We are ALL fragile and in need and dependent on one another at some point in our lives, or if we are honest, at ALL times in our lives.

Some vulnerabilities are manmade, and those are the ones we are trying to protect from and prevent—vulnerabilities due to poverty, war, violence, racism, injustice and the like.

But other Vulnerabilities are just a result of us being human and living in aging or hurting bodies or living in a world where hard stuff happens beyond our control. A world where people we love die and dreams we long for never come true. A world

where relationships are broken and faith is rattled or shattered. None of us is born into this world with all the answers or with the key to a perfect life.

We all struggle, and it's our struggles that draw us closer to God and one another.

I think so much of the pain and violence in the world is due to the fact that we cannot accept that as a human beings on this earth, we are vulnerable.

Because we can't accept this we focus so much on policing and warfare to "protect ourselves"—but many times that protection is an illusion or an attempt as a human race to not grapple with the fact that we are mortal. We are vulnerable. We will die. We don't actually 'own' anything. We don't get to take any money or stuff or land with us when we die. Yet, here on earth, we fight for this stuff while we are living as if the stuff or the power or the status is what will save us. It won't. What saves us is recognizing Whose we are and Who we Belong to. We are God's beloved children, all of us. And we belong to each other. And if we truly believed this, we would care for one another and protect each other and become—as Jonathan Sacks

says—*invulnerable*. Because finally, maybe, we'd stop fighting and killing and stealing and covering up and start forgiving and caring and advocating and protecting.

The truth is, like orphans, we will all lose our parents one day. Like widows, we will all lose our spouse or partner one day. Like immigrants, we will all move and leave our home one day or be in situations where we don't know the language or are not accepted or where everything feels familiar. Like refugees, we will all have to flee a dangerous or uncomfortable situation of some varying degree one day, and seek safety. Like children, if we are lucky enough to live long enough, we will all get to a point where we need the care of others, to feed us, bath us, manage our financial affairs, drive us places, help us remember things.

In the end, we are all vulnerable. And that is Good News. Because that means the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to ALL of us.

The question is not whether we are vulnerable or not...we are. The question is—what do we learn from our own vulnerability that might help us empathize

with others who are vulnerable? Because when we empathize with others, we will naturally care for them and protect them.

I was without money, ID, shelter, and food for about 36 hours once when I was traveling in Italy in my 20s. My passport and money was stolen. I had nothing that would get me into any hotel. It was the weekend and the embassy was closed. It took me a while to even get some coins to call my parents collect to see if they could wire me some money. I made that call because of the generosity of a stranger giving me some coins as I sat on the steps of the train station in Florence. Ultimately an Italian family ended up taking me into their place for several days, housing me before I ever had money to pay them. It was complete and utter dependence on others. Because of that experience, where I felt vulnerable and was in fact vulnerable, I will never look at someone asking for change in the same way again. I know what a difference a few coins can make. I don't need to know the backstory on someone to know that protection and care can happen even through spare change.

I was also vulnerable when a tree limb fell on me in college and broke my neck. It was a long, hard recovery. I had to ring a bell to have my parents put their hands on my body brace and pull me up to sit in bed, and help direct a straw to my mouth, or brush my teeth. Once I could go back to college, I had to have friends, professors, strangers...open doors for me, carry my tray in the cafeteria, watch me as I slept to make sure I didn't try to turn on my side. My roommate had to help me get into my temporary neck brace to take a shower and time me to make sure I was only out of my big brace for 5 minutes. It was an ordeal. I was behind in class. I had headaches. I had pain medication to manage. I got stuck in an elevator once in the brace because I couldn't take stairs. Vulnerability on top of vulnerability. All of which allows me to have compassion for those in the hospital or those who are dependent on others for basic functions each day.

My husband, Damon, lost his parents when he was young. He had a grandmother who raised him and his brothers, but he was an orphan, by definition. I've learned through listening to his stories how even with a community of care around you,

there is a difference when you do not grow up knowing the sound of your parents' voice or what they were like or what they would think of you now. It's a vulnerability of identity.

These are fairly big things. But little experiences can create empathy and greater awareness about what others are going through as well.

If you've ever had your luggage lost by an airline, and frustrated that you don't have your belongings, maybe that creates some empathy for how it must feel when a person experience homelessness has their stuff moved, or trashed, or stolen. For them, that's all they own. For you it was a suitcase; but the frustration and panic-y feeling of lost luggage can create empathy for how vulnerable others are when they lose all that they have.

If you've ever had your flight cancelled and your stranded in an odd place you weren't expecting, maybe even a place where you don't speak the language, you know the frustration of wanting to be 'home' and not being 'home.' Not being able to be where you thought you were going to be. It's vulnerable to have your

plans changed by someone else or some 'thing' else beyond your control. Imagine then, how it feels to be a refugee, an immigrant. Most people never leave their homes or homelands willingly...their families and friends...their children even. If someone is going somewhere else, it's because the situation is desperate where they are and the vulnerability of going somewhere new is less than the vulnerability of staying where you are. And for many refugees and immigrants, they may never be able to return home. There is no plane ticket to book the next day to get back home.

If you've ever had to skip a couple of meals or have found yourself dehydrated, and you know what that does to your stress and energy and ability to think straight...imagine then, what it must be like to be hungry? To be a child who is hungry in school trying to focus on math or reading or being kind to their classmate.

Do you see how your own experiences and vulnerabilities can help you tap into empathy for others who are vulnerable around you?

It's so easy to get overwhelmed by all the people in the world

who are vulnerable and in need, but the Good News is who is vulnerable can shift. Just as you may have been in a vulnerable situation at one point in your life, you may not still be in that place today. The same is true for the biggest issues and tragedies in our world. We cannot settle on just accepting the state of war and poverty and famine and abuse and violence that creates so much vulnerability in our world. We can shift those realities to reduce the most serious forms of vulnerability, and in the process, we can care for one another whenever we find ourselves vulnerable or see another person in need.

Perhaps in realizing that we are all vulnerable, we can see those who are vulnerable around us in a new light. Perhaps we can see that their need is not burden for us to meet, but their need is an opportunity for us to provide care. To live into our calling as ones who are to care for and protect the vulnerable.

And perhaps when we ourselves are vulnerable, we can see our need not as a burden for someone else, but as an opportunity we are giving them to care for us. And an

opportunity for us to be humbly reminded that we are human. We all have need. And we need each other.

**We may not think that being in a vulnerable state is “good,” but while the situation or circumstance itself may not be good, what happens in those moments of connection and care between people is, indeed, good. It illuminates the heart of the gospel: to care for and protect the vulnerable. Which is, to care for and protect one another.**

In her poem called *Sacred Wound* Laura Weaver writes:

*In every being there is a wound-  
a fissure where sacred longing  
is born  
so our gifts can be revealed,  
so our gifts can be given.<sup>17</sup>*

Each of us knowing our need, each of us knowing our gifts, allows us to connect those gift and needs together to create the kingdom of heaven where we all belong. Jesus modeled this for us in and through the most vulnerable parts of his identity and life.

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<sup>17</sup>Accessed on March 15, 2026 at <https://www.blog.terrasimpla.com/post/sacred-wound>.

*“Let the little children come to me and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”*

We might as well get used to this. Helping one another. Healing one another. Caring for one another. Protecting one another. For these are the actions of a people who understand what it means for *“thy kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.”*

For it is to the Vulnerable, to ***Such as These*** (you and me and everyone) that the kingdom of heaven belongs.

Who do you need to see and welcome as part of the ***Such as These?***

If you don't know...start with yourself. For when we can see our own need and let others help us, then we will begin to see the power of transformation for how our actions really can care for and protect the Vulnerable, until that day when our world really is invulnerable.

Amen.

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## **Tell Me Something Good Moment**

As has been our practice the last couple of weeks, we're going to tell each other something good.

As the music plays, find some folks near you to share with. The prompt for this week is:

***Share a time when you were in a vulnerable situation and experienced care or protection from others. What did that feel like?***

Also, during this time, you can share something good with all of us by coming forward if you would like to make a profession of faith, or join or church, and we'll affirm you in that decision.

When the music stops make your way back to your seats and we'll prepare for our benediction.

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