

Sanctity of Life Sunday

By Rev. John A. Fale
Associate Executive Director, Mercy Operations Group
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Mark 1:14-20

(The Pastor may begin singing or saying) ***“Hark! The herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild. . .’*** (Pause for a moment) You know how this Christmas hymn continues, don’t you? ***“God and sinners reconciled.”*** That is the story of Christmas. That is the core of the Gospel. That is why Jesus came to us. In Jesus, God has reconciled sinners to himself. With good reason, then, God sent the angels to announce this Good News to the shepherds. With good reason the shepherds dropped everything and ran to see the Savior, as Luke records in his gospel, because they knew that God revealed this Good News to them. The Messiah had come! With good reason the shepherds spread the news about what was told to them by the angels, by Mary, and by Joseph.

The Christian Church basked in this wonderful story of reconciliation during the season of Christmas, and has now moved into the season of Epiphany, which continues to tell the story of God—that the Savior of Jew and Gentile, free and slave, men and women is Jesus — Joshua — Yeshua — “because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). That is what the Gospel is — God’s message of Good News that our sins are not counted against us because of Jesus.

St. Mark reminds us in our text that the Gospel is the message of Jesus, Immanuel, God clothed in the flesh of humanity. When Jesus announced that ***“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand”***, those who heard him knew what he was saying. All of Israel knew that the prophets testified that the Messiah would announce that the fullness of time had come for God to establish his everlasting kingdom. Furthermore, none of the prophets invited people to follow them. Rather, they pointed people to God. And John the Baptist pointed people to Jesus. Now this Jesus of Nazareth stands before them, announcing the kingdom of God and calling people to repent of their sins, to believe this Good News of salvation arriving, and to follow him.

This morning, God is calling you through the power of this same message, for it is God’s message that he has revealed through his Only-begotten and through his written word. The Holy Spirit is calling you to repent, confessing your sin, and believe the message of the Gospel, that your sins are forgiven because Jesus has saved you through his perfect

obedience under the Law in your place, through his shed blood and agony as he suffered the wrath of God for your sins, and through his resurrection, which brought life and immortality to life for you. There is no other way out of eternal darkness and death.

And just as Simon and Andrew, James and John heard the message of Jesus, confessed their sin, believed the Gospel, and then followed Jesus because of the Word he spoke to them, the Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with the saving knowledge of Jesus, and created faith in your heart, so you may belong to Jesus and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

What a marvelous gift from God, purely out of his love and mercy for you. He did it because he declared through Moses and Jeremiah, he wishes you to have life and not death.

As you live under Christ Jesus in his kingdom of grace, serving him in the vocations of life he has called you to, you are called by him to reflect the love and respect for life that he has. Because you have been called by the Gospel and received life from Him, you support the proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament so those who live in darkness may see this Star of David. Because you have been personally invited in Baptism to live in His kingdom and have been kept in His kingdom by his grace, you pray that God will use you to personally invite others to worship with you so they too may hear the voice of Jesus. Because you have been shown mercy as Jesus has carried your burdens and continues to carry them, the Gospel enables you to not turn your back on others, but to help carry their burdens as well, thus fulfilling the law of Christ. Because Jesus, the Bread from Heaven, unites you with himself in the Lord's Supper, giving you his love and support, "you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones" (LW 35:54). Please listen to how Dr. Luther describes the effect that this sacrament of love, as he calls it, has upon you:

You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor to Christ in his holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and—if you cannot do more—have heartfelt sympathy. See, this is what it means to bear in your turn the misfortune and adversity of Christ and his saints. (LW 35:54)

On this Sunday, which is designated as Sanctity of Life Sunday, we are sadly reminded that life is not often cherished, respected, and held as sacred. Rather, human life is too often disregarded, disrespected, discounted, and desecrated. Not many would listen to the prophetic voice of the Christian Church 40 years ago that warned the United States Supreme Court and those who supported abortion, that if abortion were legalized we would descend upon the slippery slope of dispensable people. Yet we don't hear much about abortion today because it is accepted nearly world-wide and there seem to be bigger fish to fry. We have graduated from abortion to physician assisted suicide and euthanasia, which affect the most helpless and vulnerable in our world: the young, the elderly, and the disabled. You don't hear too much about those practices either. Now we

are engaged in ethical debates about cloning, embryonic stem-cell research, and genetically altering human life.

The arguments that are most often used are based upon our reason, not God's Word. Those arguments are cloaked in the sheep's skin of love for life and the desire to improve life. But the animal still smells and acts like a vicious wolf. Our world wants life, but on its terms — not God's. For too long Christians have had the wool pulled over their eyes. Using our reason and logic in biomedical ethics and science seems harmless. After all, isn't that why God gave us our intellect and reason—to use them?

Because of our sinful nature, whether Christian or non-Christian, we never can fully know and understand God and his will by our own reason or intellect. Our study of science, ethics, and theology can never be complete by using our intellect and reason alone, because our reason and intellect are always tainted by sin and remain under the power of the devil. Our study of ethics and science must be grounded in Scripture. Any conversation about ethics cannot simply “include” Scripture, but must begin there, for the revealed Word is the only place where God has fully revealed Himself and His will for life. Specifically, our exploration of ethics as Lutherans stands and falls with the wonderful doctrine of justification, because we cannot even fully know ourselves apart from the Gospel.

There are people who are looking to us for support and guidance. They are open to us bearing their burdens. They are Christians and non-Christians who struggle with making decisions about the life of a loved one while under horrible and often unexpected circumstances. They are pastors who do not feel equipped or competent to lead and guide them through those decisions. They are faithful chaplains and pastoral counselors who are often called upon to speak up for justice in the midst of self-serving personal and corporate interests. They are health care professionals and researchers who agonize over doing the right thing, and the lives of those, created in the image of God, that are cut short in the interest of science. God has placed them into your life to fight, work, and pray for them. Christ has shown you mercy so you may show mercy to them. God has richly blessed the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with very compassionate, capable and competent people to assist us in bringing the gifts He has given to us to a world that desperately needs to hear a word of life. Life Ministries of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and Lutherans for Life have provided numerous materials for pastors, health care professionals, and lay members to use in their understanding and response to these important issues.

More importantly, we have Jesus, who continues to come to us in his Word and Sacrament, and He prays for us. The message of the Church at this time must be the message of Jesus, the very message He brought to our world. By God's grace, may His Word flourish so that all will repent, believe the Gospel, follow Jesus, and embrace life.

I pray that you will continue to hear the voice of Jesus in the Gospel. I pray that you will support the work of our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as we bring a word of life

and hope in the midst of darkness. I pray that you will become advocates for those who do not yet have a voice and for those whose voice has been silenced and stymied. I pray that you will carry the burden of others as priests of Christ.

Amen.