

Sanctity of Human Life Sunday

A Sermon Suggestion

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3rd Sunday After the Epiphany — Matt. 4:12-23, Is. 9:1-4

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.... And the Word became flesh.” (John 1:1-2, 14). Yes, yes, we know all that. We heard it all-over-again not long ago: Christmas-time. Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is God. He came to be where all that flesh is, came to us, flesh. Yahweh, God Almighty (*Him!*) now stands among us, in His own human flesh. The One who created “secondticking” time put Himself *in* that time, *in* history, *in* place.

And He entered ... the way you did: He came as an infinitely small cell, the fullness of the infinite God and the fullness of finite man all in one divinely fertilized ovum. Behold, God has come out from darkness, from behind the Temple veil — and yet you *still* can't see Him. He remains hidden for a time, for nine months behind the veil of Mary's flesh — the Child, not yet born, called Holy, the Son of God, Son of the Most High (Luke 1:31-35). No one could see Him, but God was in His “temple,” “tabernacling” with His people (John 1:14).

Take your time moving through this great mystery of the Christian faith. God at work, but hidden-ly. You can't *see* Him within His mother there. God being found in appearance as a man — taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7-8) ... and it begins in the womb. Oh, this is God so weak! An embryo so fragile that, to say it in the clinical language of bio-technicians: to take His ‘stem cells’ would destroy Him ... just as King Herod would try to destroy Him when He was a bit older. Mighty God ... guarded by nothing stronger than the flesh and tissue of His mother's womb. Hidden in the darkness, but coming. You've seen pregnant women before, you know all about that. But here is God's ‘new and unique’ Man for us, His Son for us, God-flesh for us.

A culture that determines even a two- or three-day old zygote to be an ‘insignificant life’ that must surrender to a human desire to snuff it out, or just to be another unwitting donor who gets to give up life in the latest guess of a premeditated lab experiment, is a culture that must also say that our Lord Jesus Christ — who for nine months lived within His mother's womb, from fertilized cell to birthday — is also insignificant. That is a culture without hope and without salvation. The bright flashing neon lights don't fool anyone: it is darkness.

We've covered absolutely no new ground here but it's worth getting into even elementary biology just to take in as much as we can of all the mercy and mystery that there is in all this: Jesus, true God, begotten from eternity, once a zygote Himself, and then, later, in the wonder of life and human birth, born of the Virgin Mary. The eternal and omnipotent Son from heaven ... an embryo ... cared for in the mercy of His mother's womb, truly springing up from the earth (Is. 62:11). So we become accustomed to the strange sound — but the Biblical truth — of saying things like: *God* cuddled by His mother Mary; *God* playing in the wood shavings of a Nazareth carpenter's shop; *God* learning to walk. The One who created the heavens and the earth ... became flesh, blood and bone like that. Look at any newborn to get a sense of what your God was like, and what He did to save you. The One who has no beginning, sent by the Father, knit together in the dark “protection” of the human womb, born of Mary Virgin Mother. A God who comes so weak, little baby-weak. But that's precisely how your God works. He has begun this marvelous thing ... and to the whole world it looks like nothing of any benefit will come of it.

Now move ahead, three decades later, His cousin John publicly worshipping Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes sin away” (John 1:29). John preaches and points to grown-up Jesus, although John (who also once was umbilically fed and nourished by his mother — like all of us once were) had already worshipped Him once before from the womb of his own mother. That was the same John, the yet unborn boy, “*leaping for joy*” in the presence of His Creator God (so Luke has it, Luke 2:41-44). Thirty years later at the river John still worships Jesus. There is Jesus, there goes God, into Jordan-water where John's message has been “Repent! Heaven is near!” And the Father puts His emphatic stamp on Baptism forever with that brief sermon about His beloved Son, as heaven opens and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove (Matt. 3:16-17) — but don't miss *God* Himself standing in the middle-eastern water ... where the sinners are. Looking just like us. And then the Spirit leading Jesus out to the desert to do 40 days of skirmish with Satan. Where Jesus, a true Man, the second and greatest Adam of all, says, “Away from Me, Satan!” and Satan must obey, just like at your Baptism.

All that brings us to right where we are. In just a few minutes we've traveled from God's eternity ... through a Merry Christmas with the science and biology of babies ... by way of Baptism and Temptation ... to this Epiphany season ... to this day ... with Jesus. Where things are serious. Indeed, John, that baptizing cousin, is now in prison for his preaching—it will go worse for him because of Jesus. But Jesus is into His everyday schedule of fulfilling the words of Isaiah, pulling His flesh out of the Old Testament. So as the Gospel narrative begins, we know what *really* is happening behind His weak appearance. Jesus is *God* ... departing to Galilee. *God* leaving Nazareth. *God* living in Capernaum.

“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.” Such mundane locations: land, sea, Jordan, Zebulun and Naphtali. We stifle yawns. All so ordinary when Isaiah first spoke of them hundreds of years before. And just as ordinary sounding as St. Matthew reports Jesus on the move this morning. But these are mundane, earthy places ... visited by Yahweh Himself. It is where

God is. God takes such deep interest in places *we* find boring and insignificant: first the womb, then the manger, then the Jordan, then Zebulun and Naphtali and now *this* place and *this* altar, from where He speaks and eats with you. Bringing “heaven near” (!) because heaven is wherever Jesus is. The One who was “incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary” then ... is still and ever incarnate: Word incarnate. Body incarnate. Blood incarnate. “For you.” For forgiving you.

This place has plenty in common with the ancient lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, which is why Jesus comes here. It is because of the darkness — or what God calls darkness (and you really only know for sure what a thing is when God tells you what it is). Matthew (NT) and Isaiah (OT) both say, and it is in your ears this morning just as God gives it: People sitting, just *sitting* there in darkness. Suffering in darkness. Crying in darkness. Mourning in darkness. You have darkness even if you’ve got artificial light to guide your stumbling. We are only separated by little things like ‘time’ and ‘geography’ from old Bible places like Zebulun and Naphtali. In all the ways that count, we are like them. They are “living (if you want to call it that) in the land of the shadow of *death*” which is to say, they are sitting where death has been and always comes again. Death in you. Death around you. Another funeral this week. When is yours? Have you driven by a cemetery lately? Do you know what’s there, lying only six feet below the surface? Or a Planned Parenthood clinic—do you know what’s *there*? The great Abortion “Law of the Land” is at work. The much desired “woman’s absolute right over her body” coming in at more than 50,000,000 dead since 1973 ... is at work. Though it’s not *her* body or *your* body or *my* body, but after the cross, after Christ’s dead-for-all-body, *all* bodies are bought by Jesus. Redeemed. You, and every child conceived and foreknown by God before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), bought with blood, not with silver or gold, or credit or by a generous health plan.

But still, this is America, and still I am sinning, and so still, darkness. Maybe it is the long silent darkness of a pressured mother weeping because her child never has a birthday, and she wishes now it was otherwise. Or the sadness of a young Christian man who looks back and cries, “I’m not even the kind of person who would ever think abortion is okay”— a young man who will always be a father to a child that will never sit at his kitchen table. When darkness seemed like a good alternative for a difficult situation — a quick treatment for an “unfortunate” or “unplanned” pregnancy that only *God* saw and found fortunate. Your wife, your daughter, your friend, someone in the family — indeed, *Christians* having abortions in the same number as unbelievers — there is no difference in finding abortion, finding darkness, an appealing idol, a helpful “cure.” But how does that person, how do I, get out of that darkness or any other darkness?

I don’t. I can’t claw myself out. There is only the Light that breaks in from the outside, outside me. The Light that dawns. Fulfilling exactly what the prophet Isaiah says. Jesus is the only Light for my darkness. And He brings nothing but mercy.

It’s practically automatic for Christians to say, “Jesus died for the sins of the whole world,” but when it comes to those certain sins — whatever *you* have in the dark — from the past, we torment ourselves as if “that is certainly the only one that Christ *won’t*

forgive, *can't* forgive”: my abortion, my acquiescence to an abortion, my adultery, my silence, my lies, or whatever my evil day was, or is. But God will have none of that. He says this: “The people who walked in darkness ... see a great Light. Those who dwelt in the shadow land of death — upon them a Light has shined.” Isaiah can't say enough about it, this bright Light who shatters darkness. It is Jesus. Forgiveness. Salvation. My sin undone.

What is it like? Isaiah says it like this: that the yoke, the burden crushing you has been broken off. The Law you have *not* kept, always coming up behind you and requiring even more that you cannot do, has now been kept. The stick of the slave-driver driving your slavery to your sin and death and the devil has been shattered over God's knee. For God has a face and knee (!), flesh and blood. It is *Jesus* for you, shattering the yoke of the Law by wearing it Himself, and breaking the rod that beats your back by letting it beat Him in your place. Satan did his worst, but Christ arose as the Victor.

Then Isaiah preaches us back to a Sunday School story, to the Book of Judges ... to Prince Gideon over the Midianites in the famous (or not so famous?) “Day of Midian” (Judges 7). But Gideon beat Midian not with a mighty army, but in the most ridiculous way. Remember the 300 (there were *only* 300!) who got picked to fight the Midianites who numbered as many as “sand on the seashore” — an army too large to count? Three hundred with Gideon who got down on their knees to drink water, lapped it up with hand to mouth.

In or out of context, it will always sound silly for your God to say to Gideon like He did in that day, that, “By the three hundred men who lapped [!] *I* will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand” (Judges 7:7). He did. On the Day of Midian. Are you embarrassed by a God who says a silly thing like that? But then ... trumpets blaring, and empty, upside down jugs with torches inside smashed open ... torches of Light ... in the darkness. With that Light God gave victory on that “Day of Midian”. His weak little Gideon destroyed the mighty Midianites—not with might, but with men who lapped water by the hand (!!), and with the Lord's promise ... with Light.

And so it is with this Jesus, God's Son — one greater than Gideon — given to fight your enemies. All the sin and death and the accusing power of the Law (your real enemies) sticking to you, were instead attached to Jesus — and did their best on Him. And in putting Christ to death on a cross, sin and death and the devil just finished themselves and put themselves to death. Like in the “Day of Midian” with Gideon's foolish jugs and torches. A God so weak. But God's “foolishness” — His Way — is wisdom after all. Because your sin is paid for by Jesus' dying. Your death is undone by that dying for you. And death has been swallowed up altogether by His rising. Only this time not with Gideon's torches and jugs and trumpets, but with fonts and altars and pulpits — with blood and water springing forth from the punctured side of the very human body that God knit together inside the womb of Mary.

Mary's body does not belong to her after all. Her womb and every mother's womb is the Holy Spirit's workshop — where He knits you a body in which to live with God the

Father forever. What a marvelous work He does in darkness: in the darkness of Mary's womb, in the darkness of every mother's womb, and even still for those "sitting in darkness": Jesus, great Light. Amen