

Luminous Life – Sermon by The Rev. Ethan Magness – October 8th, 2017

Note: This is transcription from the sermon preached at Grace Anglican Church

We're in the midst of our sermon series entitled "Christ in Culture," and today we turn to the subject of human life, or specifically the intrinsic worth of human life. I think it's an especially pertinent subject given the horror show that we've all experienced, at least on the news. Or maybe you know somebody who was killed, or maybe you have a connection with somebody who knows somebody that was killed in Las Vegas. I think it's 58, the number is 58 souls that perished in that horrific attack. I've been thinking a lot about that lately. How many fathers and mothers and sons and daughters were muzzled by death, who will never be able to speak to their loved ones again, who will never be able to embrace anyone again, at least not on this side of the Jordan. And I've also been thinking a lot about my own losses, the grieving that I've had to do recently over a friend. And maybe you've had a loss recently; somebody died, somebody you love that you won't be able to embrace again this side of the Jordan. Maybe you recently marked the anniversary of someone's death.

I find that life is so transient, you know, and so fragile that it's very easy to slip into cynicism. Very easy to slip into cynicism, concluding that life is cheap and maybe meaningless. Maybe. Maybe the nihilists have it right. But we have been invaded, we've been invaded by these three lessons that speak to us about the nature of life and the dignity and worth of life so that we would *not* grow cold and cynical.

I actually had a dream about this sermon, I kid you not. That shows you how much I'm thinking about it. I really dreamt about it. And the dream was that I was in this post-apocalyptic landscape, dead serious. But I was in this grey city-scape, this abandoned city, and we were around this barrel fire. I was there with Moses and David and Jesus, and we were talking. And it's because our readings today come from Moses and David and Jesus. And so they've been in my head all week. And so now they're in a post-apocalyptic scenario, and you can join me there and we'll talk and we'll have an encounter there, I think, with these three figures. And I do want to say that today, I want to listen to them around the barrel fire and I want to hear them and what they have to say about the nature of life's dignity, because I think they'll give us some steadying wisdom. We need some steadying wisdom today. And so what do they say to us? What does Moses have to say to us? Moses – this primary source or the origin story from Genesis – what does he say? Well, Moses would say to you that life is exceptional, that human life is exceptional, and that *you* are exceptional. Because he wrote, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him. Male and female, He created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and have dominion.'" (Genesis 1:27-28)

So God has placed into matter and time and inertia a looking glass, and you are the looking glass. Because when people see you, they are designed by Heaven to see something that is more than you. You're terrific. But there is a reflective capacity that you have that is shared by nothing else in the whole world. And so you're a looking glass, a living monument to God's own nature.

Within Genesis, we get two hints of how that nature shows itself through our own reflective capacity. The first is authority – that human beings are set apart from the rest of the created order and all of the beautiful patterns because we were given, in a sense, stewardship and authority and

prominence over everything else that was made. So far in the Genesis account, the only one who has that is God. Now God has gifted human beings, not with ultimate sovereignty, but with miniature sovereignty over little realms within His created space. And in the first instance, over a garden. So you're given some authority. Not just authority, but creativity. Creativity that men and women - made in the image and likeness of God, made to reflect their Creator - reflect, in fact, this creative capacity. Creative capacity - the ability to create life. "*Be fruitful and multiply.*"

Now, in a sense, every creature was given that command in the Holy Scripture, to be fruitful and multiply, but not in the same way because human beings multiply the image of God, those divine monuments now filling the world. And so part of the glory of God that covers the earth as the waters cover the sea is *you*. This is hugely divergent to other world-metanarrative because we believe that the infinite is disclosed principally in people, and that there is more of God in you than there is in the Himalayas. Really, there's more creative capacity in one person in this church than in a symphony. Nature is not all on equal footing, you know? Not everything created in nature is equal or has an equal contribution. Everything has a contribution and dignity and a Heavenly orientation, in a sense, but you're the best. "You are simply the best," to quote Tina Turner. [*laughter*] You're so young, you don't even get how profound that was, I'm just saying. It's so tragic. [*laughter*]

This is why acrimony, human acrimony, with which we all live. Remember, acrimony is a leak that's in our boat. We all have that leak, by the way. Acrimony can leak into anybody's life, but it always comes because we don't recognize the image of God in somebody else. We don't recognize that they're more important than the Himalayas because we really don't believe that. But God does, and Moses did, and so they're trying to speak to us in this way. Acrimony always dismisses the looking-glass-quality of another person or diminishes it in some way. Maybe it's because of their appearance, because they have too much melanin or not enough. Maybe it's the contours of their face. Maybe it's their race. Maybe it's their age, because they're too young to be taken seriously or too old to be worth our time. Or maybe it's intelligence, because we think like Aristotle, that intelligence equals virtue and ignorance equals vice. Or we think that it's about morality, they don't have such a great track record compared to mine. Or maybe it's utility. Some people are more useful to me than others, so I treat them with special deference. Or maybe it's emotionally stable people, they're better. This is the idea, that every person is a looking glass and through us, even through our shards and smudges, we can see something of the infinite. God's glory, His creative glory, is detectable through the eyes of everybody in this room and everybody on the outside and everybody in this town who's never entered the door of a church.

CS Lewis put it like this in his famous sermon entitled, "The Weight of Glory": "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously - no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption."

Moses teaches us an unchanging, primeval truth: that your life is luminously special. And that's a fact, even if you can't see it right now - maybe we will someday - but it's true, because the word of

God expresses it. And the word of God is always steadier than our internal life. And so, friends, you are not a Hyundai, you know. You're a Rolls-Royce. You're not prison graffiti, you're a Rembrandt. And you are not Salieri, you are Mozart. By the way, let me just take a turn and say that this is why loss hurts so terribly. Because, when you lose somebody, you lose not just them but you lose a reflection of the infinite. It's a much more substantial loss when just the arms that used to hold you, something of God came through this person and it's not coming through the same way anymore. I think that's what Moses has to teach us, that human life is exceptional and *you* are exceptional.

And then David, around the barrel fire, speaks to us, and David says to us this profound and sadly somewhat controversial statement. He says, "Human life begins in utero." In Psalm 139, it's fascinating, right? He reflects upon his preconscious state. This is what it says in Psalm 139, I'll read a portion of it: "You knit me together in my mother's womb, and I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (Psalm 139:13-14) And then verse 16, "Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be." (Psalm 139:16)

So, a few things. Notice first, womb-life is supra biological. Yes, it's biological, but it's supra biological – beyond biological. But womb-life isn't merely the intimate labors of a man and a woman. Behind all of that is God, who set the system up. God, who is the Author of life. God, who created life and then created men and women to create life as part of image bearing. And so really, the author of your life isn't just your parents, but God. God is your source. Even if it was accidental, from the human perspective. Even if your parents regretted having you. I've talked with three students in the last two years who have said that their parents, at one point in a fit of rage, said, "I wish that you were never born." Can you imagine living with that on your head? That they said that to you, that's abusive and that's garbage. God does not think that way.

Also, womb-life is artistic. Notice the language of craftsmanship, of non-accidental nature. That you are knit together. That you are fearfully – fearfully means that you are cautious, to the point of terror. Fearfully and wonderfully and beautifully made. And, just as the material world is created and noticed and revealed in, you are created and noticed and revealed in, fearfully and wonderfully made. But also, womb-life is rich with potential. The future is stored up in the preconscious state of a child. "All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be." This suggests that your story isn't just your story, but involves a loving sovereignty and a gracious, scarred hand on your shoulder at all times and places.

So the will of God is at work in all of this, and therefore, because it's supra biological, artistic, and rich potential, we can conclude a few things. First, personhood is not conferred through a birth canal. This is the current legislative understanding of when human life begins. It is *not* God's understanding of when life begins. It exists before birth. Or, to put it another way, worth precedes birth.

Secondly, personhood of a fetal child is, in fact, dependent upon the mother and her wellbeing but it is also *distinguishable* from the mother. Sometimes in current reproductive debates, you hear the language, “I don’t want anyone telling me what to do with *my* body.” Not that simple. There is another body who is resident in your body, and so it’s not just you. This is why Christianity, time and time again, dignifies the unborn. Or, better, recognizes that dignity that is already implicit in the unborn. This is in complete contrast, by the way, to Roman high society, where babies were thought to be expendable and even life in the womb was thought to be expendable. You may know that lots of babies were abandoned in Roman cities, especially at bath houses. They were abandoned there and they were often abandoned at garbage dumps. And what Christians would do in the early days is they would look in those places for children and adopt them, take them in. We have always recognized the dignity of an unborn child, and I wish I could say that a culture of expendability was a thing of the past and no longer part of our moral currency, or lack thereof; but that, of course, is not true. We know this. Since *Roe v. Wade*, 60 million children have been aborted. 60 million. Just to give you a comparison, that’s like the equivalent of California and Texas today being entirely destroyed. Everybody. Massive, massive casualties. Lots of little hearts and brain waves stopped because they’ve been injected with poison. It a horrific and Mengelian act.

I just recently heard this – in Iceland, they’re in some ways boasting about how Down Syndrome is down 100% in Iceland. There’s a reason that Down Syndrome is down 100%: it’s because all the babies with Down Syndrome are aborted. I find today that we engage in a chilling degree of linguistic justification for abortion, labeling the savagery of it as “reproductive rights.” Moreover, it’s linguistic “novation.” It’s a way to not feel guilt. If we just label something differently, it’ll be true. Remember, Stalin said – I’m going to quote Stalin from the pulpit – Stalin said, “If I say something once, it can be a lie. But if I say it 64,000 times, it becomes true.”

CS Lewis put it this way, in a letter that he wrote, “The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid ‘dens of crime’... or in labour camps... It is conceived and ordered in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voices.”

I have sat with the pain of abortion for a long time, because many, many women have come to me and told me through tears about their own experiences of having an abortion. Abortion injects pain, not only into the unborn, but into women - and men, by extension. I remember seeing one of these young women with a t-shirt on that said, “I do not regret my abortion.” By the way, when anybody protests like that, it’s always a lie because they’re overcompensating. And I said, “I saw you wearing that t-shirt. I mean, really?” and she said, “Well, it’s just a t-shirt.” You know that’s not the whole story. That’s never the whole story. The pain and the regret in such a decision can be catastrophically harmful to all the women that I care about who have had abortions, and all the men by extension who have been affected by it.

But I think David would say to us, “I know this is a hard word for your culture, but I need you to know that your worth, *your worth*, and the worth of every other person, begins before you take a

breath, before you accomplish one thing in your life. Worth precedes birth.” I think that’s what Moses would say, “Your life is exceptional,” and David would say, “Your worth precedes your birth.”

And then Jesus comes along, and Jesus would say, “Human life must be honored by the community that bears my name.” He said this to His irritated and irritable disciples, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for such belongs to the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” The disciples are terribly angry because all of these screaming children and soccer moms are surrounding Jesus with their babies, and they think, “Really?! He was just saying something! The man is profound, and he’s busy and a lot of people want to see him and his secretary is going crazy trying to schedule all the appointments!” [laughter] And notice how Jesus responds to these people who are bringing *brepbos*. That’s the Greek word, it means “little baby” or “infant.” That’s why He can hold them in His arms, they’re little. [laughter] So they’re bringing these babies and what does He do? Jesus gets indignant, the text says. Sometimes He’s annoyed with the disciples, sometimes He questions the strength of their faith. But He’s not annoyed here. He’s indignant. It’s a very, very strong word. He’s really angry because, here are the disciples who are supposed to be tearing down walls so that people get to Jesus. They’re building walls to keep people out and away. So this is a teaching moment, not for the babies and not for the moms, but for the disciples. He said, “Look at these kids because they’re going to teach you something about the character of the Kingdom of Heaven. You can’t understand the Kingdom of Heaven without understanding them. Why? Because they, as children, as nursing infants, bring nothing. They don’t even, at this point, bring repentance or... They don’t know the Creed. They can’t define the Hypostatic Union. They don’t know how many books are in the Canon. They haven’t memorized John 3:16 cause it wasn’t written. They don’t know justification by grace. Now, they will, hopefully, someday.... Become good proto-protestants.” [laughter] He’s using this opportunity to say, “These children that bring nothing, that is how you come to the Kingdom, you know.”

Augustus Toplady – he’s the guy who wrote “Rock of Ages” – he wrote like 18 other hymns, but nobody knows those ones. [laughter] “Nothing in my hand I bring, only to Thy cross, I cling.” We don’t bring *anything*. I’m going to say it today before we take Communion. We don’t presume to come to this, Your table, trusting in our own righteousness. Give me a break! No, I don’t think that anything but the righteousness of Jesus saves. That’s all I’ve got and that’s all I need; and that’s all you need, too. He likes to be surrounded by these babies and these moms. These are icons of Kingdom membership and Kingdom entrance, regardless of what His indignant disciples think.

I was listening to Christian radio a few years ago. I don’t know, I don’t know... It’s a mixed bag. [laughter] But it was a call-in show, and it was this hospitality coordinator who worked for a church who sounded very, very sweet and had a very high voice. And she called in to ask a question about their church’s policy regarding having baby showers. Her church, evidently, hosts a lot of baby showers in their building. But there was a situation where a teenager became pregnant and wouldn’t divulge information about the father, so he was unknown, and the question was, “Should we host a

baby shower for the girl that got pregnant?” And the host said, “No, you shouldn’t. You don’t want to set a pattern which would reward bad behavior, which would encourage other teenagers to be promiscuous and have children out of wedlock, and which would denigrate the virtue of those women who have gotten pregnant properly. They are the ones that deserve to be celebrated.” Yeast of the Pharisees, in that comment. That teenager in that church needs *more* support, not less. More support, double the party, double the food budget – please, no rigatoni. Bring out the steak for this poor girl. Give her more presents, more grace. Are you kidding me? Are we some cult of perfection? She needs help and her baby needs that kind of help. May we never be a community that ever resembles that comment. Jesus said that these people, these children, are icons of what it means to belong to the Kingdom, and He took down the walls that would have prevented their access to Him, and may we have that same impulse.

Here we are in our post-apocalyptic campfire mode with Moses, and with David, and with Jesus, and we give ear to them because they speak to us about the dignity, the undimmed dignity, of human life. Can you hear Moses today? Can you hear him say that you’re exceptional? Can you hear him say that human life is uniquely sacred and reflects the genius of God? And can you hear David who talks about your exceptional quality and how it began in utero? This is why, by the way, pre-birth losses are, in fact, very grievous. I’m referring, first, to miscarriages. I remember when Monique and I suffered through a miscarriage and whenever we let people know, and most people were great. But some people said some of the dumbest things that I think we’ve ever heard. I think they were really well intentioned. But here’s the kind of advice that you should give somebody who goes through a miscarriage, you ready? [*silence*] *Please don’t say anything.* Be present, show tokens of love, listen a lot. All the good advice in the world, even if it is right, is not going to bring a baby back. Don’t say, “God needed His little angel.” Please don’t say what was said to us, “This is good for your discipleship.” I’m not even sure what that means. Please do not say, as was written to us, “God disciplines those who He loves.” That passage from Hebrews is true, but does not apply in such a situation and even if it did, wait 20 years and then say it. Don’t say it a week after the fact.

But also, losses to abortion. The Church has historically been opposed to almost all cases of abortion and for good reason. But we also believe, even more, in the power of forgiveness. The power of forgiveness that is unrestrained to all of us, including to mothers who have had abortions and fathers that urged them toward it. Be careful, Christian, of your need for judgement. As you urge on justice, be assured, you shall have justice more than you desire. We regard abortion as a grievous thing, and we regard the mercy of God as invasive and reconstructive. And there’s hope for everybody, regardless of our paths.

Also, I think David would say, “Life begins in utero, but it does not, in most cases, end with birth, that we should be fully pro-life, not merely pro-birth.” Meaning that we care about the condition of life that a newborn is born into. We care about elements that can cheapen life, like torture, war, abuse, euthanasia, along with various negligences which increase the likelihood of abortion.

Can you hear Moses, can you hear David, and can you hear Jesus say that life is to be honored within His community? That Jesus accepts children, babies, mothers, and sees those children as a model of the Kingdom. And can we cultivate, here, a community in which we are similarly receptive to people that would otherwise be dismissed? I hope so. Because the moment we start disqualifying people, it won't be long before someone disqualifies us, too. We have a Christ in all of us, you know. All of us. We have been marked by squalid choices and failed dreams. Human life is so worthwhile that Christ came to salvage this death-ridden project, so that we might, in fact, become cynics. Not of life, but of death, mocking the last enemy with a holy derision. So death: where is your victory? Where is your sting? The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Because we know that Jesus will bring back Moses and Jesus will bring back David and Jesus will bring back every child that we've lost. And then He'll come for you, too.

"I am the resurrection, I am the life." This is the ivory ribbon that ties up the world and makes it live again. In the name of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.