

In the Image of God

A legend tells of a merchant in Baghdad who one day sent his servant to the market. Before very long the servant came back, white and trembling, and in great agitation he said to his master:

“Down at the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd, and when I turned around I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture. Master, please lend me your horse, for I must hasten away to avoid her. I will ride to Samarra and there I will hide, and Death will not find me.”

The merchant lent him his horse and the servant galloped away in great haste. Later the merchant went down to the marketplace and saw Death standing in the crowd. He went over to her and asked, “Why did you frighten my servant this morning? Why did you make a threatening gesture?”

“That was not a threatening gesture,” said Death. “It was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.”

Death stalks us all. You can run, but you cannot hide.

For longer than I’ve been around, our bishops in the Reformed Episcopal Church have mandated that each parish hear a sermon on the sanctity of life each year, keyed either to the Feast of the Holy Innocents or the anniversary of Roe v. Wade. The date of the latter, January 22, has just passed, and I am only too eager to comply with our bishop’s instruction.

The Supreme Court’s ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson* in 2022 was an important victory for the right to life, but, beloved, be not deceived. *Dobbs* did not make abortion illegal; it merely ruled that the matter is one for the individual states to decide.

Warfare rages still in the heavenly places. Abortion in 2024 accounted for 33 percent of deaths in the U.S. and 42 percent worldwide. It continues as the leading cause of death by a whopping margin.

It is not, however, the only life-and-death issue confronting Christ’s church. A trend that took shape ages ago goes on: A society that accepts and endorses abortion will soon show a correlation between it and assisted suicide. This is the culture of death.

The overriding issue is this: What is the value of a human life?

Christina Werner, a retired operating-room nurse, lives in the San Francisco Bay area. When she lost her mother unexpectedly to a massive stroke in 2022, she found that many friends found it awkward to console her and couldn’t grasp “how horrible it was for me.”

She sought comfort elsewhere and discovered “the death café was perfect for me.”

Originating in London in 2011, the death café movement now boasts 19,000 venues in 90 countries in Europe, North America, Australia and Asia. Some of them have conducted multi-day “death salons” hosted by a non-profit called The Order of the Good Death, discussing topics including human composting.

A doula – from the Greek word for female “slave” or “servant” – long has been one who assists a woman through the birthing process. The “death positivity” movement has given rise now to the end-of-life doula. Some fulfill both roles and there is also a full-spectrum doula who assists in suicides, abortions and deaths from other causes.

One doula, Anthea Grimason, lamented people’s reluctance to deal with death. She said, “We are a death-avoiding, death-denying culture.”

Some run, and *try* to hide. Death will seek them out, in Samarra.

And what of you, Christian? When the black death swept through Europe and parts of Asia and Africa in the 14th century, killing millions, the people suffered disease soaked in despair. And they were sore afraid. Without hope and without faith in their pagan deities, they turned to Christian missionaries who followed in the wake of the plague, at great peril to themselves.

They could not hold out a promise of healing bodies but they could offer the hope of a blissful life in eternity to those who placed their trust in Christ Jesus. Many desperate souls responded.

I will not trivialize the trial of suffering and death. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that death is the “last enemy” that will be destroyed. I would, however, insist on our hope of glory. The apostle addressed this matter as well: “O death, where *is* thy sting? O grave, where *is* thy victory?”

Life after death? Science says dead is dead. But what occurs *after* death is beyond the province of science.

Our Lord Christ has put eternal life on offer to those made in the image of God – to one and all.

So, this image of God . . . how shall we define it? We shall not. The creature does not define the Creator. But we can describe it.

Three times in its first nine chapters, our holy writ addresses the matter. In the very first chapter we find that God made man on the sixth day as the crowning achievement of His creative labors. He created man – male and female He created them – in the image of God.

In chapter 5, after the fall, after Cain had slain Abel, God has begun anew. Adam begat righteous Seth, through whom the genealogy of man is reckoned. We’re told that man is made in the likeness of God.

In chapter 9, God again begins anew following the great flood, commissioning Noah and his sons, as He had commissioned Adam, to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. And He proscribes murder, saying, “Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made He man.”

So at these three critical moments in salvation history, we see that the Bible paints in huge, pulsating letters the gospel truth that man bears the image of God.

This is an epiphany. In the theologies of the ancient world the gods made man to serve them, to do their scut work. Now comes Yahweh to proclaim that He has placed the stamp of His own image on His creature and commanded him to serve as God's sub-regent on earth.

The New Testament shows us Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son, as the perfect representation of the Father. From Hebrews 1: "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature . . ."

Those image-bearers who are "in Christ" comprise His church. You were called and you were purchased at a price. But all are equally created in God's image. To make one life less valuable than another, because of defect or disease, is to cheapen the image in all. God's image in man is sacrosanct.

Be not in doubt about our Lord's identification with His people. That deadly enemy of the church, who would become the apostle Paul, encountered Jesus on the Damascus road in a vision. Jesus said to him as he lay prostrate in the dust, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?"

To attack the body is to attack our Head. The early church understood. The fourth-century church father Jerome excoriated the Christians in Rome for their wasteful use of resources: "Parchments are dyed purple, gold is melted into lettering, manuscripts are decked with jewels, while Christ lies at the door naked and dying."

In the kingdom of man, meanwhile, some are finding that trifling with God's order can generate distressing outcomes, unintended consequences. In Canada, a civil liberties association filed suit in 2011 to legalize physician-assisted suicide in British Columbia. When it succeeded, the resulting law became the model for legislation at the national level for the Medical Assistance in Dying regime.

The same group – the very same group -- has now begun agitating for more stringent regulation. The National Post reported, "Of particular alarm to the staff members were reports of MAID being used in prisons while incarcerated people were shackled to their beds, the program's lack of legal oversight, disproportionate representation of impoverished people receiving assisted suicide, and health-care practitioners offering assisted suicide when patients asked for support for living."

This is the culture of death.

Death will follow each of us to our own Samarra, but because of what God has done in Christ, you and I will know the true life – communion with God – for all time. We must give thanks that in the first century, a poor, unmarried girl from the backwater of Galilee did not seek an abortion.

The Bible tells of Christ's baptism as the beginning of His earthly ministry. But could we not say His saving work began much earlier, even at the point of conception? In that instant, in that womb, Christ was created by one He created, the Creator of all that is became part of His creation.

The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. As some sages have said, "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become Sons of God."

It is good that God was born. Amen.

The Rev. Edward W. Fowler

St. Paul's Anglican Church (REC)

Houston