

"Locating Life"

Isaiah 49¹⁻⁷

January 19, 2014

2nd Sunday After The Epiphany (Life Sunday)

Today, our congregation, along with many other Christian congregations across the land, observes Life Sunday. It recalls the Roe vs. Wade decision of the Supreme Court of the United States of America on abortion which was handed down on January 22, 1973 and dramatically altered or attempted to alter the view of life held by many Americans.

Typically, especially at this time of year, much time is spent debating great questions about life. When does life begin? How should it end? When does life have purpose? When does life have no more value? These questions are debated scientifically, medically, philosophically, and emotionally. There seems to be the notion that if we can answer these questions and locate life, we could easily resolve all the controversial issues related to life: abortion, euthanasia, in vitro fertilization, human cloning, and so on.

However, many would have us believe that there are no clear cut answers to the difficult questions. We can't really tell when life begins. Everyone has their own opinion. Even when scientific and medical evidence answers the question clearly, people then change the question. It's not a matter of when life begins but which life has value. Some life evidently has more value than other life. Some will say that, under certain difficult circumstances, life can lose its purpose and value.

The theme for the Life Sunday materials from Lutherans For Life has a very interesting acronym: L.I.F.E – Living In Faith Everyday. Some might misunderstand this and think it is a very passive reaction to the controversies at hand. – almost a copout. People say that Christians shouldn't get involved in so-called "political issues" like the ones mentioned before. We should just bury our heads in the sand, trust in Jesus, and everything will be okay in the end.

It's not difficult to understand why people would advocate such a passive response. Over 40 years of claiming there is murkiness in life issues have taken quite a toll on our society. Many are living under a different meaning for the acronym of L.I.F.E. – living in freedom everyday. It seems anything goes in our society now. Every thing has been reduced to a matter of personal choice or preference without having to suffer any consequences for those choices.

The message we constantly hear is that we are free to have sex whenever we want and with whomever we want: gay or straight, young or old, married or single. If an illness results, don't worry. There's treatment for that. If an unwanted pregnancy results, don't worry. There's legalized abortion to terminate such a pregnancy.

However, let's say you WANT a pregnancy. The message in society today is that you have a right to have a child. If you cannot have a child in the natural way, then there is a technology such as in vitro fertilization and, perhaps in the future, cloning, that can not only help you have a child but to have the kind of child you desire in terms of gender, body type, skills, and so on. The inconvenient truth that there are a multitude of living embryos that either fail in producing a child or are left over after a successful procedure need not worry you. Those can be frozen or disposed of without interfering with your choice.

Another message we get is that we have the right control life at the opposite end of the spectrum. If you are getting old or have a relative getting old, it does not have to be a problem. You are free to determine that such a life has no meaning or purpose and simply end it – in a kind and gentle way, of course. States, including Montana, are rushing to enact assisted suicide laws and physician assisted suicide laws to make such practices legal and free us from having to suffer the consequences of getting old.

What does God have to say about all of this? Our Old Testament reading for the 2nd Sunday After the Epiphany about the Servant of the Lord surprisingly addresses the issue. In the beginning, the Servant says, "The Lord called me from the womb; from the body of my mother he named my

name.” Life does not begin with viability or birth. Life begins in a fertilized egg in a womb. Not only does the Lord create that life, but He recognizes that life by name, as well.

But life is more than a biological existence. The Servant goes on to say later in the passage, “And now the Lord says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him.” Life has meaning and purpose. That meaning and purpose is determined by God and not us. Like in the case of the Servant here, such meaning, purpose, and value begin in the womb even before birth.

People can ignore the Word of God or reject the Word of God, but they cannot change the Word of God. It is the Lord who creates life and not us. He determines when life begins and when it should end, not us. He determines meaning, value, and purpose for life, not us. When we try to take over life – its beginnings, its continuations, and its endings, we not only violate the 5th Commandment, but the 1st Commandment as well.

This would change our little acronym of L.I.F.E. – living in freedom everyday – to living in fear everyday and, ultimately, in failure everyday. No one is foolish enough to think that ending lives is something only “those people out there” do. Decisions to abort, euthanize, and so on have been made and will be made by Christians. Situations where these choices have to be made may have been faced by you or may yet be faced by you. When the Law does its work in knocking us down, the fear of God’s judgment against the taking of innocent life can paralyze us with fear. Guilt and shame can make the lives of those who have chosen to end a life which God has given miserable. We can feel like failures for things we have done years ago.

What is the solution? It is not to bury our heads in the sand and try to ignore the problem. It is not to give in to society’s pressure and pretend that life does not exist in the womb or that life can be determined to be meaningless or a burden outside of the womb. The solution is to be found in the Servant of the Lord.

The text for today is not simply a collection of proof texts for us to grab and use on Life Sunday. They are not just a commentary about our lives (although they do apply to our lives). Here, Isaiah is talking about a very specific Servant of the Lord. This text, and the chapters that follow, speak of one often referred to as the Suffering Servant. This is our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we confess in the Nicene Creed, He “was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary.” Jesus took on flesh and life. He was alive and named before birth with a name that described the task to which the Father had called him. The angel said to Joseph, “you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” “In him was life”, the apostle John wrote for He came to bring life to a world dead in sin. In fact, Jesus IS life. He said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” (John 11:25-26)

He brought life in a very unusual way. He was born to an unmarried mother, ending a very unexpected pregnancy. He would bring Israel, the people of God, back to God by standing in for Israel under the Law of God, as our text says. He would keep every last commandment of God’s Law, no matter how difficult or inconvenient they were to Him. He would take every last sin committed by humanity on Himself – not just the accidental and seemingly trivial sins which we commit every day, but the big sins, the ugly sins – the sins involving the taking of a life, sometimes done just to make our lives easier. He took all of those sins to the cross where He endured the wrath of God which we deserved and underwent the punishment – separation from God and death itself – which we had earned. It was as Isaiah had prophesied of the Servant

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5)

We now locate life in a place of death. The cross, a horrible instrument of death for the Roman empire, now becomes a wonderful instrument of healing and life for all who believe. Life is found in Jesus' death on the cross because there He earned forgiveness for any sin, no matter how horrible, and for every sin, no matter who committed it. By earning our forgiveness, we no longer have what consigns us to eternal death. We are right with God and, although we die, yet shall we live. By living and believing in Him, we never die. Jesus showed that and proclaimed that by Himself rising from the grave to life again three days later. In His death, we have forgiveness for everything and life. In His resurrection, we have the guarantee of passage through this life to life eternal with Him.

That brings us back to our acronym L.I.F.E. which reverts to its original meaning: Living In Faith Every Day. It does not say "Living In Sight Everyday." The Christian life is not free from difficult choices or horrible sins. Living in faith means trusting that the Lord will lead us in making decisions about life and that He will give us strength to make the decisions which preserve, protect, and affirm life. Living in faith means knowing and trusting that, even when we err in matters of life and make a wrong decision or have to choose between two wrong decisions, there is always full and complete forgiveness for all and for every sin.

Life Sunday is ultimately not a political issue or even a remembrance of a decision about abortion. It's all about life. It is about affirming, celebrating, and protecting life. As good as this sounds, it is not easy. The culture has changed into a culture of death. There is great opposition to life, sometimes even within the church. Nevertheless, we press on, living in faith every day. Dr. James Lamb, executive director for Lutherans For Life put it this way, "We are not "For Life" because it's the politically advantageous thing to do, or because it is the economically logical thing to do or the socially smart thing to do. We are not "For Life" because it is the right thing to do or the ethical thing to do or the moral thing to do. We are "For Life" because it's the "God thing" to do. We are "For Life" because God is." Amen.