

23 January 2011  
Epiphany 3  
Sanctity of Life Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Unwrapping Jesus as the Life of the World”  
Text: Matthew 4:12-25 (Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Cor 1:10-18)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Light and life go together. In the beginning, God said “Let there be light” and there was. And then life was created. Without light, creation dies. Without light, we die.

And so it should not surprise us that the people walking in the darkness of sin walk also in death. And not only walk in death, but embrace death. Seeing death as an answer. Seeing death as a solution. Seeing life as a threat.

This is true, we remember this weekend, especially with the holocaust of abortion and the extermination of so many small lives. But it is not only abortion. It is also manifested in suicide and assisted suicide, mercy killing, war, and other life-ending violence. And it is manifested not only in literal death, but also in figurative death - like divorce, family divisions, church divisions (like Paul talked about today), and other ways in which we see those around us not as lives for whom Jesus died, but as the enemy. Seeing them not an opportunity to serve, but someone in my way. Seeing them not as a gift, but as a threat.

It is really the ultimate selfishness, and of this we are all guilty in one way or another. Of the thinking, or living, or acting, that nothing matters more than me. What is good is what is good for me.

That is the darkness with which our world has been enshrouded since the sin of Adam and Eve. The darkness that has caused untold numbers of wars, holocausts, genocides, infanticides, fratricides, and other forms of death in so many shapes and sizes that ours has been recently labeled *a culture of death*.

But the great news that we heard today is this: That ***the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.*** For Jesus has come. Jesus in whom there is no darkness. Jesus, who is the Light of the world. Jesus, who is the Life of the world.

For where Jesus comes with His Light, there is life. He scatters the darkness of sin

and death with the light of His forgiveness and life. And so where He is, there is life. Simon and Andrew and James and John are given a new life. Those with diseases and afflictions are given a new life. Those oppressed by demons and sins are given a new life.

Yet as great as all that sounds, that was just *the dawning* of the light. That was just the first rays of the light, like early in the morning when the sun is just beginning to peak above the horizon and the world rises from the darkness of night to a new day. The full brilliance of Jesus' light and life would come some years later, with the glory of His resurrection. At that time when it seemed like the darkness had won; when it seemed as if our sins had extinguished the light; when Jesus' lifeless body was sealed in the tomb.

But when Jesus rose from the dead, that was the light of life that changed everything! For the darkness of sin and death and their emperor, Satan, were defeated. Once and for all. The prophet Isaiah likened this victory of Jesus to God's defeat of Midian, after they had oppressed and burdened Israel so powerfully for so long. At that time, all seemed hopeless for Israel. Midian was too powerful, too numerous, too entrenched, and too well armed. There was nothing Israel could do. But there was much that God could do, and that He did.

And so it is for us. The sin and death around us, and even *in* us, may seem too powerful, too numerous, too entrenched, and too well armed. It seems hopeless, and perhaps useless, even to fight it. There is nothing we can do. But what we cannot do, God can. And make no mistake about it - there is much that He is now doing.

For notice when Matthew tells us Jesus began this work: it was again when the darkness asserted itself; when the great John, who had baptized Jesus, was thrown in prison. But it is precisely when the darkness seems the darkest, that the light shines the brightest. And Jesus goes about the region preaching, calling, healing, raising, scattering the darkness of sin and death.

But really what He is doing, is not scattering the darkness at all, but *gathering* it - gathering it into Himself, and onto Himself. Gathering all our sins and diseases and putting them on Himself, to take them to the cross and be (as we heard last week) *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). And it is on the cross that we see this utterly unfathomable, mysterious, and wonderful truth: **that your life matters more to Jesus than His own.** And so He dies that you might live.

That's really what this Sunday, Life Sunday, is all about. Life is not just, or not really, a political issue - pro-life vs. pro-choice, or democrat vs. republican, or left-wing vs. right-wing. **It's a Jesus issue.** He has come that you may have life. That all

people may have life. For every life is a life for whom Jesus died. No matter how old or young, in the womb or out of the womb, no matter how educated, how useful or able, whether in jail or in a mansion, whether a CEO or homeless, whether they can vote or not. Every life, precious to Him. Every life worth His own. *And that includes you.*

Sadly, as St. Paul said, there are those for whom ***this message of the cross is folly.*** Who see Jesus not as a life-giver, but as a life-taker. As a threat to the life they want to live; a threat to their happiness and freedom. Perhaps you even feel that way from time to time, when doing what is right seems so hard and sin looks so good.

But the truth is: *sin is imitation life.* Sin is not freedom, but slavery. Sin doesn't give you what you want, it, in fact, *takes away* what you want - your life. And so Jesus has not come as a threat, but as a Saviour, who has come to give you life. The life no darkness can overcome, no sin can crush, and no death can end. His Life. Life as a child of God.

And as we heard today in Matthew, Jesus gives that life through His Word, for through His Word comes His Spirit, who (as we just confessed in the Nicene Creed) is *the Lord and Giver of Life.* It is His Spirit-filled Word that enables fishermen to leave their nets and follow Jesus. It is His powerful Word that heals the sick and drives out demons. And it is His living Word **that works in us** repentance for our sin and unbelief, gives us the forgiveness Jesus won for us on the cross, and raises us to new life in Holy Baptism. In all these ways, ***the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*** for in all these ways, the King is doing his kingly work.

*So what do we do?* Jesus said that when the kingdom of heaven is at hand, when the King is doing His kingly work, ***repent.***

Repent of when you should have spoken, but remained silent.

Repent of when you should have acted, but minded your own business.

Repent of when you should have helped, but didn't.

Repent of when you, too, have looked to death as the answer to your problems.

Repent of your failure to fear love and trust God above all things, and your failure to love our neighbor as yourself.

But that is only the first part of repentance. The second part is to receive the work of the King for you. To hear those utterly unfathomable, mysterious, and wonderful words: ***I forgive you.*** And know that those are not just words, but words that give life to you. Spirit-filled, powerful, and living words that raise you once again from the death of your sin to a new life in your Saviour, Jesus. Those are the words that Jesus spoke from the cross, that bring the power of His death and resurrection here to you today. ***Behold the Lamb of God,*** who takes away . . . *your sin.*

Behold Him also now as this very same Lamb of God comes to you in His Body and Blood, that He not only come and enter your ears and minds, but also your mouths and hearts, *filling all of you* with His forgiveness and life. Take and eat; Take and drink. ***Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.***

And where sin is taken away, death is defeated. And where death is defeated, there is life. The life of Christ. The life given in the beginning, restored with the empty tomb, and that will be lived forever. That is the life you have begun to live, even now, in Christ Jesus. A new life in a old world filled with the same old problems. When you walk out those doors today, they'll still be there. Unwanted pregnancies, elderly parents who are a burden, life and death issues, temptations, hurts and pains, problems of every sort. They're still there; they haven't changed. *But you have.* For you have been given the Spirit and life of Christ in the forgiveness of your sins. You go out not alone, but with the powerful, Spirit-filled, life-giving Word of God in you. You go out, and ***the kingdom of heaven is at hand.***

That is the gift of Jesus unwrapped for you today. That in Him, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. That in Him, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. That in Him, there is hope. For He is the death of death, the forgiveness of sin, and the Life of the world. Come to give life to you, and to all.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.