

17 January 2016
Epiphany 2 - Sanctity of Life Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Hope and Life in a World of Sorrow and Death”
Text: Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

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

2015 was a mixed-year for the sanctity of life.

Planned Parenthood’s cruel and grisly practice of selling baby body parts was exposed. That the practice and the market were even there in the first place is evidence of a continuing and spectacular disregard for the sanctity of life. The outcry raised and the number of demonstrators who turned out to speak up for life, though, was a good and positive sign.

The number of surgical abortions is down, but that may only be because of abortion pills, now so widely and easily available.

The practices of euthanasia and assisted suicide continue to expand and grow, with younger and younger people now choosing death and some now advocating for the ability to end the lives of some people against their will.

Terrorists and savages continued to place not little value, but NO value on life, beheading and murdering people at will.

Divisions to continue to grow in our country and in the world, as people increasingly look at one another not as people created in the image of God, whose life has value and sanctity, but as inconveniences to avoid at best, and opponents to overcome at worst.

In such a culture, standing up for and speaking for life seems as difficult and exhausting as trying to run up the down escalator. And maybe it is . . . but run we must. For a world that turns to death as an answer, as a friend, does so because it has lost all other hope; because it sees no other way; because they have no other answers.

But we do. We have a Saviour who gives hope. Who gives forgiveness of sin when we have messed up life. Who gives strength when we are weak, when life beats us down. Who gives the promise of life when we’re surrounded by death. Who came to provide an answer and another way, a better way. A way of hope.

Israel needed that hope. When God sent Isaiah to speak to them, things were not good. The kingdom was divided, idolatry was rampant, and foreign nations and their armies were threatening. It is not unlike how our country and our world seems today. Yet Isaiah says: ***For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet.*** He's going to keep running up that down escalator. Because, he says, there's hope. The time is coming when ***you shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate.*** Such words were living water to people thirsting for hope, and manna to people hungering for relief. A time of rejoicing, a time of glory, was coming.

And while life continued to be difficult after Isaiah preached those words - and maybe you could even say things got worse! - still there was hope. Something to believe in, something to cling to. And not just pipe-dream hope, but Word of God hope. Real hope. That God does not forsake His people. That He is *with* us and *for* us, even in the dark and difficult times.

Which is exactly the promise and assurance and hope we need today. It is easy - *too* easy - to just criticize and condemn those who turn to death for an answer, for relief. Yes, sometimes such criticism and condemnation is necessary - for the Law must still be preached; there is still right and wrong. But maybe sometimes we run there *too quickly*, when instead a word of hope is needed. A word of hope when someone's world seems to be crumbling all around them. When life is so messy and hard and frightening that death - be it suicide, euthanasia, or abortion - in comparison, *looks good, like a friend.*

But death is no friend. In some cases, maybe there is some temporary relief when a frightening and unexpected pregnancy ends, when a disease-ridden body struggles no more, when a caregiver has time to rest and not be on edge all the time, when loneliness and despair come to an end - but what about the next struggle, the guilt, the regrets that often come. What then? *More death?*

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet. No, in the face of death, the Church speaks a message of hope.

It is the message of Mary, actually, that we heard in the Holy Gospel today. For she knew where to turn for help, for hope. When the wedding they were attending at Cana ran out of wine, she turns *to Jesus*. Now, compared to all the life issues we're facing today, all those things I listed at the beginning of the sermon, and more, running out of wine . . . may not seem like much of a problem at all. And maybe by comparison, it isn't - even if it would have been a bigger deal than for us today. But though, perhaps, not a crisis, not an issue of life and death, Jesus helps. ***He manifested His glory***, John says. He is *epiphanied* - revealed - as the Lord of creation, who has come not just to help the really important people and with the really big problems, but provides even this - joy at a wedding feast. And He who does that has come to bring hope and joy into our lives as well.

Which is what Jesus is speaking of when He tells His mother: *My hour has not yet come*. It seems strange that He says that one moment and then the next is doing what she wanted . . . unless He's talking about something else, something greater, something that would also happen *on the third day*, as John began his report. And indeed He is. He is talking about *His own wedding feast*, when He would be the one Isaiah spoke of, *the bridegroom rejoicing over [His] Bride*, the Church. The rejoicing that would come when He defeats death in His resurrection from the dead, and takes home His Bride to the Feast that will have no end. Just as He provided for this wedding feast, so He will provide what is needed for His own - the forgiveness and cleansing of His Bride, and the joy of a life free from sin, death, and evil.

And so with Jesus there is hope - not just for the future, but for *our* "Canas" now. When we're hoping for joy but get only sorrow. When we're looking for wine but get only water. Jesus is here. It is not yet His hour to return and take home His Bride, but He is still here to help in our problems big or small. When life becomes an issue and each day a struggle. Death is not the answer - the One who defeated death *is*. The One who forgives *is*. The One who holds all power over creation in His hands *is*. And so to Him we turn.

And that is the message we proclaim to those with life issues. There's another way. They may not know that. They might never have been told that. They maybe once knew but have been so beat down and beat up that they no longer believe it. Maybe fear and despair have blinded their faith and hope. Whatever the reason, whoever the person, Isaiah's message of hope is just as true today as it was so many years ago. **For the God of life has entered our life to give us who are under the curse of sin and death life again.** New life in the water of the Font, the living water of the Word, and the wine made His Blood in the Supper. That we put our faith not in death but in His life.

Which doesn't mean an end to all our troubles. As long as we live in a sinful world, there are going to be troubles and death. But it means that He is with us in them, as He was at Cana, and that there is hope. For He who turned water into wine can turn the water that flows as tears from our eyes and as sorrow from our hearts into blessing as well.

And He'll use you, too. St. Paul told the Corinthians that *there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* That Spirit was given to you in your baptism, and by the same Spirit you confessed again today that *Jesus is Lord*. But that is not the end of it. That Spirit has gifted you *for the common good*; to be a blessing of God to others. Maybe not with the extraordinary gifts that are often focused on - healing and tongues and prophecy and things that were common at the time of the apostles, but not so much today. But that doesn't mean the Spirit is not working. He is. And through you. And as is our focus today, to be His blessing and hope

to those with life issues. To speak and not keep silent. To point people to the hope we have of life. To help those in need. To provide for the needy. To speak a word of forgiveness to those wracked with guilt. To love the unloved, hold the hand of the unwanted, to be the strength of the weak.

But really, there is nothing ordinary about doing those things. They are extraordinary, too, in their own way. And life-giving, hope-giving, things. To people in need of life and hope. People you know. People like you and me.

So what will 2016 hold for the sanctity of life? No one knows but One - the One who holds all things in His hands, including you. The One who never changes; who is steadfast and reliable.

But this we know: in 2016 He will continue to give life, though people continue to destroy what He has given. He will continue to redeem life through His Word and Sacraments, though people turn away from these, too. And He will continue to bless your life, as He did that day at Cana. As only He can. And as He promised to do.

So we do not despair; we do not lose hope. Life won, when Jesus came into this world and life to be our Saviour. Life won, when Jesus rose from the dead. Life won, when you were baptized into Jesus and His victory over death. And life will win, when He returns on that Last Day, and you rise to life again. This we know.

So we do not despair; we do not lose hope. Whatever your burden - be it struggle or sorrow or guilt - Jesus wants it, to carry it for you, and set you free. To give you life, and hope, and maybe even joy. A joy greater than the pain, greater than the fears. The joy of knowing you are not alone. Ever. The joy of knowing that your life, however it is, is precious and valuable and meaningful and useful, though we may not understand how. The joy of knowing the One who can change water into wine, who can change despair into hope, bring light into the darkness, and bring good even from evil - even from the cross. The joy of knowing that as Jesus showed us at Cana, the best is yet to come.

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