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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/3/2013, The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30
In Praise of Life, Also in the Womb

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening verse is from our First Lesson, from Jeremiah 1:

⁴Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁵“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” (Jeremiah 1:4-5, RSV)

PSALM 136

Earlier this past week, Carol and I slipped away for an annual retreat. We are members of what is called “The St. Gregory of Nazianzus Society.” It is mostly old friends, going back to seminary days, though we have welcomed younger members too over the years. Our retreat is built around the daily celebration of the Holy Communion and the singing of the liturgical hours Matins, Vespers, and Compline. Besides that, we sit around and discuss theology and ministry and find out how our families are doing, go for walks and so forth. Carol and I love this retreat. Our little society has been gathering for more than a quarter-of-a century now.

One of the Psalms during Vespers was Psalm 136. It is a litany, in which the second half of the verse goes like this way: “for his mercy endures forever.” So, it is a rhythmic Psalm, always coming back to the idea of the enduring mercy of our Lord. For example, the last few verse of the Psalm 136 go this way:

²³ who remembered us in our | low estate,*
for his mercy en- | dures forever;
²⁴ and delivered us | from our enemies,*
for his mercy en- | dures forever;
²⁵ who gives food | to all creatures,*
for his mercy en- | dures forever.
²⁶ Give thanks to the | God of heaven,*
for his mercy en- | dures forever. (Psalm 136, LBW)

I am not sure why it is, but that verse about God giving food to his creatures caught my heart and my imagination:

²⁵ who gives food | to all creatures,*
for his mercy en- | dures forever.

Maybe it was just the joy of taking wing in the car and driving through the rolling hills of Pennsylvania that put in mind of the beauties of nature. When I sang that verse about the Lord feeding all his creatures, I thought of the deer in the wintertime forests nearby, and of the rabbits, and the hawks, and the mice of the meadows. It really pleased me to think that the Lord never forgets his creatures. He doesn't lose track of them. He never becomes so preoccupied with other things that he forgets them. They are his own creatures, given *life* by him, and he delights in their life.

PASSING ON THE TRADITION

So, this is a sermon along those lines. It is a sermon in praise of life. Especially I am thinking of human life, including life in the womb. I am glad to try my hand at passing on the traditional teaching of the church because I love life, I love babies, I love grown-ups, I love human life, and I bet you do too. Questions about pregnancy and abortion and rape and incest and risk to the life of the mother and genetic deformity in the fetus so extreme as to be incompatible with life: such questions are complex and heartrending and decisions made yesterday or today might be decisions we regret someday down the road. Yet, we all make our decisions as best we can and live with them as best we can. The Bible loves life and protects it with the Fifth Commandment. But the *application* of the Commandment in particular circumstances can be hard. What I am aiming at in this sermon is to faithfully pass on the traditional teaching of the church in favor of life, as a foundation for our moral thinking. In all of life's tough decisions, we seek the very mind of Christ. We would be glad to be led by our Savior Jesus. I think the traditional teaching of the church in favor of life is part of the shepherding of Jesus through this life of ours. So, here we go: a sermon in praise of life.

THIS MORNING'S GOSPEL STORY

Let's begin with this morning's Gospel story from Luke Chapter 4. That story nearly ends in a catastrophe. Somewhere along the line the preaching of Jesus has offended his hometown neighbors there in Nazareth. They become so wrathful that they resolve to kill the man, which is a lot of wrath indeed. St. Luke tells the incident this way:

²⁹And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong. ³⁰But passing through the midst of them he went away. (Luke 4:29-30, RSV)

I picture them shoving Jesus along toward the cliff. With rough hands and maybe with blows upon his body, they direct him toward destruction.

Glad to say, they did not succeed. Later, another band of people—men and officers with lanterns and torches and weapons—will succeed in shoving Jesus along toward destruction on the old rugged cross. But not now. This band of angry people does not succeed in throwing Jesus off the cliff. Somehow, he simply passes through the midst of them and went away.

The reason I am glad that the crowds in this story do not succeed in tossing Jesus from the cliff is that there is much good work, good preaching, and good teaching for Jesus to do between now and the great climax of his life on Golgotha. In this year's Gospel, St. Luke, for example, Jesus still must preach his beautiful sermon beginning with the Beatitudes:

²⁰And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh. (Luke 6:20-21, RSV)

The widow's son is still waiting to be raised from the dead (Luke 7:11ff). A woman of the city still needs to wash the feet of Jesus with her tears, anoint them with alabaster ointment and dry them with her hair, so grateful is she to him (Luke 7:37ff). There are sinners and tax collectors to befriend, raging storms on the sea to be calmed, devils to be cast out, and parables to be preached, like the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30ff) and the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11ff). All these good things would have been lost if those townsfolk had succeeded in tossing Jesus off the cliff at this early stage in his ministry.

JESUS AT AGE TWELVE

Likewise, I am glad that when Jesus was but a twelve-year-old boy and got separated from his parents on their way back from Jerusalem, he had not gotten lost and perished in the wilderness, but was safe and sound back in Jerusalem talking with the rabbis. Tragedies can happen: a twelve-year-old separated from his parents might have gotten lost in the wilderness and perished, but glad to

say, Jesus did not. If he had, then Mary and Joseph would have lost the comfort of their good son, who grew up obedient to them and in favor with God and his neighbors. What a heartbreaking loss it would have been to have lost the boy Jesus.

CRUEL KING HEROD

Again, I am awfully glad that King Herod did not succeed in killing the Christ Child. In a ruthless way, he tried. He ordered what is called “The Massacre of the Innocents,” instructing that all the little boys of Bethlehem two years old or younger should be killed:

¹⁶Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.
(Matthew 2:16, KJV)

What a heartless man Herod was! Such wickedness is not going to stand. Those little boys are not forgotten by God. He made them. They are precious to him. Herod cannot keep our God from letting them grow up to full maturity in the kingdom to come. In any case, I am awfully glad that Jesus escaped that Massacre of the Innocents. He lived to full manhood. And when he was dying, he still took care of his mother, entrusting her over to John at the foot of the cross. If Jesus had perished in Herod’s campaign against the children, Mary would have been deprived of a good son. We all would have been deprived of that good Son.

MARY’S SAFE DELIVERY

Going back one step farther, I am glad that Mary did not lose her baby. She was heavy with child by the time she and Joseph reached Bethlehem. She had journeyed from Galilee in the north all the way down to Jerusalem and beyond in the south. There could have been trouble along the way: robbers or wild animals attacking or accidents, tripping or falling that could have hurt both Mary and her baby. We read nothing of a physician or a midwife to help her with this birth, but glad to say, baby Jesus was born okay.

MARY’S “FIAT MIHI.” LET IT BE

And going back on more step, I am glad that Mary did not refuse this pregnancy when it was first announced to her. It was a strange pregnancy,

beyond anything Mary could have expected growing up. It was a pregnancy that might well have been a social and romantic disaster, but somehow Mary and Joseph pulled it together and had this baby—this baby who turned out to be the Saviour of the world. I am grateful that they loved and protected Jesus from the very beginning.

JEREMIAH

In similar fashion, I am glad that Jeremiah's mother did not lose her baby in the womb. Our brother Jeremiah grew up to become one of our favorite prophets. His career is a model of a long and faithful ministry in trying circumstances. Though Israel was too often unfaithful to the LORD, the LORD remained faithful to Israel, and so did his prophet Jeremiah. The LORD loved Jeremiah while he was yet in the womb and had important work for him to do. In this morning's First Lesson, we read of the LORD's love for Jeremiah even before he was a helpless fetus in his mother's womb:

⁴Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁵"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." (Jeremiah 1:4-5, RSV)

TODAY'S PSALM 71

Next, let us extend this divine love to other babies too by way of this morning's beautiful Psalm reading, Psalm 71. There we read that it not just Jesus and Jeremiah who were beloved of the LORD while yet in the womb, but all of Israel and all of the church are invited to sing this song and to make it our own:

⁵For you are my hope, | O Lord God,*
my confidence since | I was young.
⁶I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have | been my strength;*
my praise shall be al- | ways of you. (Psalm 71:5-6, LBW)

THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

By way of refining things, let me speak of one other person who was dear to the Lord, from conception to the very end. This time I point to the thief on the cross—the one on the right. What a sorrow this man's life brought to the world. I think there can be no denying that. He was not being crucified for being a saint, but rather for being a thief. St. Luke called him a "criminal." He might

have been akin to another criminal who happened to be released – Barabbas – who was clearly a bad man:

And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. (Mark 15:7, RSV)

Whether the thief on the cross was as bad as that, we do not know. But we do have the man's own testimony concerning himself:

⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?

⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." (Luke 23:40-41, RSV)

That is quite a confession, for a man to admit that the terrible death he is even then suffering is one that he in fact deserves.

Yet at least this much can be said about that bad man: he lived long enough to hear some good words at the end:

⁴³And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:43, KJV)

When we have a baby, we have no guarantee that that baby will grow up to be a good person. But the teaching of the church is that we should give them their chance, and in the end, they will deal with Jesus, and he will deal with them according to his wisdom. The Bible's love of life is not meant just for the saints, which is good, since not many of us are saints.

LOVE BEARS ALL THINGS

Finally, let us lift up and admire one line from this morning's Epistle Lesson, from the famous and romantic Chapter 13 in First Corinthians. St. Paul is praising love. Among his words of praise is this:

⁷Love bears all things... (1 Corinthians 13:7, RSV)

All of Paul's praise of love, in the end, is love as we find it displayed in the God of Israel and of the Church. God loves *this* way: he "bears all things." He bears with Israel, though Israel often strayed from him. He bears with the Twelve Disciples, though they were often thick-headed and fickle, promising good

things, but unwilling to carry them out. He bears with you and he bears with me, though I fear we too often disappoint him and go our own way. His everlasting arms are bearing us up even this moment. And when it comes to life, even life in the womb, he asks us to do some bearing too, after the pattern of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.