

Life Sunday 2014 – L.I.F.E – Living In Faith Everyday

Sermon Title: Fear and Mercy for Generations

Based on Luke 1:50

Author: Rev. Thomas Ogilvie, Faith Lutheran Church, Austin, Minnesota

She was a young girl who received news that would change her life—and she wasn't exactly sure how those changes would affect her at this point. She received unexpected news: she was pregnant. How would she tell her parents? This was not in line with how she was raised. How would she tell her fiancé? Especially since the child wasn't fathered by her fiancé. This was going to be a scandal that would not be well received by many people.

Sexual scandals have been around for centuries. People's careers have been ruined because of the exposure of sexual indiscretions. From politicians, to celebrities, to the boy or girl in the school hallway, once their sexual misdeeds have come to light, they have been the subject of public scorn and ridicule, let alone the implications of standing before God who designed sexuality to be used in a certain way.

This young girl, however, had a certain twist to her story. Her child was not conceived in the usual way. This young girl was Mary, the mother of our Lord. Although—and because—she was a virgin—a pure, innocent, faithful child of God—the Lord chose her to be the bearer of the Savior of all humanity. But who would believe her story? Would her betrothed, Joseph? Would her family? Would her friends? It could likely be that even those close to her would shun and reject her because of what they saw as evidence of her sexual sin. The Scriptures even tell us that Joseph was intent upon divorcing her, although he would do it quietly and discreetly. He was **“unwilling to put her to shame”** (Matthew 1:19). Apparently, he thought she had been scandalized enough. Being a righteous man, he did not want to further her disgrace in the eyes of anyone else. Yet through it all, the Holy Spirit worked in Mary to the point that, even in the midst of all of this, she could declare with confidence, **“And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation”** (Luke 1:50). It isn't likely that Mary just defiantly decided to disregard how she would be viewed due to her condition, but she trusted in the Lord who for generation upon generation had proven Himself faithful. She would bear the scandal because that is what God had asked of her.

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There is an unfortunate shift that happens with scandals as we are confronted with them. We tend to “descandalize” them. We normalize them. We might still gossip and snicker about those wrapped up in the midst of disgrace and scandal, but we’ve lost the sense of shame that really should accompany them.

This virgin conception is quite scandalous in itself. Of course, the prophet Isaiah foretold the events of Mary’s life. **“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”** (Isaiah 7:14). However, we’ve heard the story so often, we do not often consider the full brunt of what Mary was asked to do and what she would face through what the Lord would work in her life.

The Lord is very clear that sexual sins are a serious matter. The people of faith who surrounded Mary would have been well aware of that. Through Moses, the Lord declared, **“If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones”** (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). By today’s standards, that seems quite harsh, to put it mildly. Being put to death for pre-marital sex is a strong sentence. How many of us would impose that today? In all reality, we, as a society and, sadly, even within the Church, have largely “descandalized” sexual sins. Our cultural attitudes toward sexual activity in relationships have shifted so that the loss of sexual purity has become a rite of passage, of sorts, not necessarily associated with marriage. Sexual relations are viewed as a step in the natural progression of a relationship leading up to marriage—or at least *maybe* leading up to marriage. In our culture, we have grown accustomed to hearing about couples who start families and then get married. It has been normalized, and the “scandal” no longer exists. Our cultural role models are those who celebrated their love for each other by bringing a new life into the world and may possibly get married some day.

God, in His rich mercy, however, does not just sit and remain silent. He has spoken so you know what His desire is in terms of how you live and conduct yourselves in regard to your sexuality. There are many warnings in God’s Word about the misuse and abuse of our sexuality. The apostle Paul, using the example of having sex with a prostitute, equates that with the marriage vow. Sexual activity is to be

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conducted within the framework of married life. Paul’s admonition against sexual impurity, against the misuse of our sexuality, is quite strong. It cannot be “just sex,” for “[e]very other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18).

That body, Paul goes on to say, is a temple of the Holy Spirit—a temple that was bought with a price, so that you are not your own. This is where you find the true resolution to the scandal. You find the resolution in the purity of Jesus Christ.

God, in His great mercy, sent His Son to be born of a virgin, born in purity in order to restore purity. Your heavenly Father took the steps necessary to bring back a purity for His people—for you—through the forgiveness of sins because He wants none to perish (2 Peter 3:9), but to have full life, a life that is lived everyday in faith and trust in Him who is the Author of life.

The Father in heaven never wants destruction of His people. Remember how graciously He dealt with Abraham as Abraham pled for any righteous people of God, for those who feared and loved God, who might be living in Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities noted for their wickedness. Abraham entreated the Lord to spare the cities if as few as ten people who feared the Lord were found there, and the Lord consented. For the Lord is merciful, showing His grace and mercy, preserving life for His people (Genesis 18).

For generations, the Lord helped and preserved His people until the time was right for Him to bring about the full salvation of His people. At that time, the Father chose a sexually pure, chaste vessel to carry His Son through a miraculous conception so that the Son was born in purity in order to restore purity among His people. The pure, sinless Son of God then carried upon Himself your sin, your impurity—and that of the whole world—all the way to the cross where once and for all He bore it all in order to remove it from you. Through the cross, He brings purity among us. And through His Holy Spirit, He strengthens us to live in that purity, in the fear and love of the Lord.

You are not able to change your past, but Jesus, through redeeming you with His blood that was shed upon the cross, removes the scandal of your sin, or any impurity that may be there from your past.

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He removes the guilt completely in order for you to go forward in the new life that He gives you to live everyday in relationship with Him. As Lot and his family were delivered from Sodom and all the sin and wickedness that existed there, He delivers you, leading you out, giving you strength to withstand the temptations around you. The Lord shows you His mercy that you may remember Him and His Word for life day in and day out. He shows you what a pure and decent life is and gives you strength so you may live it. And there is a place of welcome among God's people, for **“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:23), and all **“are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 3:24). All are in the mercy of God, acceptable through Jesus Christ.

Getting back to Mary, the Lord didn't taint her reputation. He didn't allow that. Through the Lord's work in her life **“all generations call [her] blessed”** (Luke 1:48). We don't call her blessed because she was especially virtuous, but because of the work the Lord brought about in her life. He mercifully chose her to be His vessel through whom His work was carried out and His promises to the world fulfilled.

That same mercy is given to you. The same blessing is there for you. The Lord has done great things for you, as well. The mercy of Jesus has been flowing for generations, the forgiveness of sins bestowed through His Word and Sacraments. The pure, sinless Son of God has mercifully worked to restore you, and now you, too, are God's vessel through whom His work is done. You are brought into the purity of Jesus to live it out.

It is in this purity that you are shown the true beauty of the gift of sexuality. It is a gift that God has given, and when cherished and put into practice in accordance with His good and gracious will, that it is used without shame or regret. Instead, it brings the fulfillment of not just a healthy use of your sexuality, but a deepening of your relation with the Lord, and then with the people around you. That is what it all comes down to: how do you live with the Lord, and how do you live with the people around you? The Lord gives you wholeness, completeness, and purity in which to live.

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You are brought to a point where, with Mary, you can declare, “**And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation**” (Luke 1:50). What a joy it is to know that mercy of God so that you live in that saving faith in Jesus every day, and that His baptismal grace strengthens you day by day! What a privilege to live in purity through Jesus Christ and to be the bearer of that wonderful Word of life to generations to come! Amen.