

In the Beginning

Life and the Imago Dei (Genesis 1:26-27; Proverbs 24:11-12)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 23, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ I want to start by acknowledging that we're going to address an emotionally difficult issue. Yesterday was January 22nd, and on that day in 1973, the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the case known as *Roe v. Wade*. In a 7-2 ruling, the Court invalidated all existing state laws prohibiting or restricting abortion in the first six months of pregnancy.
 - **That means, for almost fifty years in this country, as long as you're within the first two trimesters of pregnancy, you can get an abortion for any given reason or without giving a reason at all.** The legal rationale for this hinges on the determined point of fetal viability – that point in human development where the fetus has the ability to survive independent of the mother's womb.
 - In their majority opinion, the Court artificially divided the nine-month period of pregnancy into three different trimesters and decided that the point of viability starts at the third trimester. Only then do states have a “*compelling interest*” to protect fetal life through laws and restrictions.

- ❖ Now, at that time, it was widely believed that the Supreme Court had settled the issue. That there would be no further litigation. That popular opinion would continue to shift and be decidedly on the side of unrestricted abortion rights. **Those justices in the majority could not have fathomed that, fifty years later, we would still be talking about *Roe v. Wade*, and that their decision has a likelihood of being overturned as early as this summer.**
 - Back on December 1st, the current Supreme Court heard oral arguments on a case known as *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. It's about a state law passed in Mississippi three years ago that restricted abortion after the 15th week of pregnancy. It's set up to be a direct challenge to the constitutionality of *Roe v. Wade* and its successor decision in 1992 known as *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*.
 - Now when you consider the court's conservative majority and what observers can extrapolate from oral arguments, this is the closest the Pro-Life movement has ever gotten to reversing *Roe v. Wade*. So this could be a huge, monumental decision. We definitely should keep it in our prayers.

- ❖ But let's not act as if this is the most important step in defending the sanctity of every human life. **Like *Roe*, *Dobbs* won't solve the issue or end the debate.** Rather, it means the debate can now begin in earnest in all fifty states and on a more localized level.
 - **Do you realize that even if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned this summer – abortion would still be legal in most states?** We would revert back to a pre-*Roe* state of affairs where abortion was more accessible in some states and more restricted in others. That's why those who care about the unborn need to be focused – not on the legality of abortion – but on its plausibility in the mind of your average American.
 - **The goal is not just to make abortion illegal but to make it unthinkable.** We can't rest until the killing of unborn humans is one day viewed by the general public with the same kind of moral revulsion as the enslavement of black people or the legally-sanctioned segregation of public spaces. If that's ever going to happen that would mean changing hearts as well as minds.

- ❖ This is going to be far more difficult than reversing 50 years of legal precedent. **We're talking about reshaping what philosopher Charles Taylor calls the social imaginary.** That's a society's collective understanding about how the world should be and how we ought to live in it. So just as we have a hard time imagining how a past generation of Americans, including professing Christians, could justify owning slaves, we hope that a future generation of Americans will feel the same about our generation's attempts to justify killing the unborn.
 - But for that to happen – for us to reshape the social imaginary – we need to lay a strong foundation. A theological foundation based in the *imago dei*. That's Latin for the image of God. We've been discussing the *imago dei* a lot lately. At the start of the new year, we started a new series in Genesis 1-11. Last week, we used the occasion of MLK Day to pause in Genesis 1 to reflect on the significance of the *imago dei* in relation to race and racism.

- ❖ **Today, we want to use the occasion of the 49th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* to draw out further implications of the *imago dei* as it relates to life and abortion.** I have three implications for your consideration. Because of the *imago dei*, (1) every human life should be regarded as sacred, (2) every human life should be protected as a matter of justice, and (3) every human mother should be supported with compassion.

Every Human Life Should Be Regarded As Sacred

- ❖ Our first implication of the *imago dei* is that every human life should be regarded as sacred. Before we dive into that, let's recall what we've already learned about the *imago dei*. **We saw how, in the Genesis 1 creation account, the *imago dei* is what sets human beings apart from other creatures.** Now we have a lot in common with all other living organisms. We're all created by the Word of God. He speaks and we come into existence. And we're made on the same day as other land animals. God speaks livestock, creeping things, and beasts of the earth into existence, and later that day he does the same to us. He speaks us into existence.
 - But the difference is found in what he says about us. In v26, God says, "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.*" **So the key difference between human beings and all other creatures is the *imago dei*.** The fact that we bear the divine image of God. Now last week, we emphasized that that does not imply a physical resemblance. **The image of God is not found in our outward appearance.** So though we humans may differ from each other in skin tone, hair color or texture, facial features, age, and size (some of us may be as small as a blueberry or invisible to the naked eye) – but what we all share in common is the *imago dei*.

- ❖ **Now because of the *imago dei*, what do we humans possess that the animals do not?** We said, last week, that the *imago dei* would include our rational and moral sensibilities, our spiritual capacity to relate to God and praise him, and our responsibility to exercise dominion (or benevolent rule) over all the earth. Those characteristics and responsibilities set us humans apart from animals. **And we also said how the curse of sin has not erased the image of God from us.** It's definitely marred and blurred. But it's still there. No matter how sinful people can get – they have not and cannot lose the image of God.

- ❖ So those are some conclusions we drew regarding what it means to be an image bearer of God. And we can agree that if you do bear the *imago dei*, then you should be treated as a full-fledged human being deserving of all human dignity and human rights.
 - But today we're asking the question is: **When does a human being come into possession of the *imago dei*?** Or in other words, when does human life become sacred – as in set apart from the animal world and now deserving of human dignity and rights?

- ❖ **Now some people would draw that line at birth.** The simplest solution is to consider life sacred at the moment of birth. This line of thinking is revealed in our vocabulary. Some are resistant to calling the child in the womb a child or a baby. They would insist that that is only a fetus. And only at the moment of birth would they speak of he or she being a baby or infant – now a full-fledged member of the human race.
 - **But birth is such an arbitrary line of distinction.** Since many of us know, from experience, that children can be born prematurely and survive. Which means they possessed, in the womb, the same human features and abilities as any other child who is born full term. I think, if we're honest, the only reason to draw the line at birth is because it's more bearable to abort the child you cannot see than the one whom you can see with your own eyes and hold in your own hands.
 - **Passing through a birth canal does nothing to change the existential nature of a child.** The only thing that changes is our experience or perception of the child. That's why drawing the line at birth is highly suspect.

- ❖ **Which is why it's more common in our day – as we saw in the *Roe* decision – to draw the line at fetal viability.** But the obvious problem with this solution is that the point of viability is always changing. *Roe* set it between 26-27 weeks, but now, fifty years later, viability is generally considered to begin at 24 weeks or even earlier. **Viability is an elastic category subject to the availability of medical science and technology.**
 - Do we really believe that a viable fetus in the 21st-century is somehow more sacred and deserving of life than a fetus in the 16th-century that would not have been viable at the same stage of development? Is a viable fetus in Manhattan more sacred and deserving of life than a fetus of the same age in Mogadishu? **Is the morality behind abortion negotiable based on the where and the when this particular woman conceived the child?**

- ❖ If that's how human worth is determined, then that would be a cruel and cold calculus. And it only gets worse if you extend the logic. **Fetal viability is rooted in the assumption that you are not yet a full-fledged human if you are utterly dependent on your mother for survival.** But couldn't that argument be logically extended to a one-month-old? Or any child on life support? Or children who are severely impaired, mentally or physically, who could not survive without constant care from their parents or other caregivers? Are they still worthy of human dignity and human rights? Or is that negotiable as well? Do you see how fetal viability is not a legitimate moral category?

- ❖ Now some would seek to bypass all of these arguments by arguing that this question – of when does human life become sacred – is not a question for the general public to ask or answer. **That question, they’d argue, is a question every woman must answer for herself since the fetus is part of her body.** Her body; her choice.
 - But that kind of response is bypassing or avoiding the very terms of the debate. When you boil it all down, the abortion debate hinges on the status of the occupant in the womb and whether that fetus is a human person. Proponents of abortion are confounded by why the other side has such a hard time accepting the arguments of bodily autonomy. “Her body; her choice. How hard is that to grasp?”
 - My response would be: Yes, I fully agree. Her body; her choice. So if the question is whether to remove her appendix, then it’s her body; her choice. **But in this case, if there is even a remote possibility we’re dealing with another human life, then we need to pause and have this debate.** Because if it is another person in the womb, then what about that person’s body and his or her choice of whether to be killed by chemical or surgical means?

- ❖ That’s why these questions are important. Now note that, so far, I have yet to appeal to the Bible or theology. You don’t need to be religious to make these arguments. And that’s why someone like **Peter Singer**, the Princeton professor of bioethics, would actually agree that most of the arguments for abortion fall flat for much the same reasons. But Peter Singer is no pro-lifer. He’s not only pro-abortion. He’s on record as justifying some forms of infanticide.
 - On one hand, he would agree that human life begins at (or at least very close to) conception. But he doesn’t think that’s enough to make abortion wrong. He would argue that while the fetus is a human being, it is *not* a human person. **Personhood, according to Singer, is a matter of consciousness – something both a fetus and a newborn lack.** So ending their lives is not the same as killing a person – someone who consciously wants to go on living. You can see how that logic could be extended to the elderly woman whose mind has been ravaged by late-stage Alzheimers.

- ❖ It’s a deadly but frighteningly consistent logic. So if someone like Singer can agree with our pro-life arguments and yet land in such deadly conclusions – then it’s clear that arguments rooted in logic and natural law only get you so far. **In the end, we need to make theological arguments. We must appeal to the *imago dei*.** That’s what the Bible does.
 - Listen to **Genesis 9:6** and how it condemns homicide by appealing to the *imago dei*. “*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.*” Notice how the value of human life is rooted in the image it bears. To murder another human is a grave offense against that person and against God.

- ❖ So with abortion, the point is that the fetus already possesses the image of God. **The *imago dei* is an intrinsic quality in humanity.** It’s not extrinsic or acquired once the human being achieves self-consciousness, thereby becoming a full-fledged human person. No, the child in the womb is already a human person who bears the divine image of God and therefore his or her life should be regarded as sacred and defended at every stage of development.

- ❖ So that's the first implication of the *imago dei* as it relates to abortion. **It has persuasive power because an appeal to the sacredness of that life in the womb is consonant with our experience.** Especially those of us who have been expecting parents. It's commonplace for expecting parents to give their baby a nickname. We sing to them while in utero; read them stories; play them Mozart so they come out smarter. We stick ultrasound pictures on the fridge and tell our other children that that's your little brother or sister in mommy's belly.
 - **Our instinct is to treat the unborn as a sacred human person.** Only if unwanted do we begin to dehumanize the baby. Only then do reasons and justifications for abortion start to make sense. But in our gut we can't shake the feeling that Scripture is right. That every human life should be regarded as sacred.

Every Human Life Should Be Protected As A Matter Of Justice

- ❖ But like I said earlier, for real change to occur, we need to change the social imaginary. We need arguments that speak to the heart. That will, Lord-willing, reshape the social imaginary to the point that abortion is one day viewed with the same moral repugnance as we view chattel slavery in the 19th-century or human sex trafficking in our day.
 - We need to shine a light on the great injustice being committed against the most marginalized, most victimized, most oppressed minority group in our society – unborn children. Here's the second implication to consider: **Because of the *imago dei*, every human life should be protected as a matter of justice.**
- ❖ The passage of Scripture that I find most convicting – that lays out in no uncertain terms our duty to defend the powerless – would be **Proverbs 24:11-12**. Let me read v11. *“Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter.”*
 - Now admittedly this command is general in nature. We're not given a specific context. Are we talking about rescuing victims from their attackers? Innocent people wrongly sentenced to die? Children being sacrificed to pagan gods? In the context of the OT, any of these scenarios could have applied. **So this verse is not directly addressing the issue of abortion.**
 - But that's to be expected when you're in Proverbs. You're expected to rely on God for the spiritual wisdom you'll need to apply the generalized principle in the proverb to your specific circumstances.
- ❖ *So what is the generalized principle being taught in v11? Essentially, it's teaching that if a particular group of human beings are being wrongly taken away to death, then those who fear God ought to do whatever they can to rescue them.* This is a generalized command that stresses the duty to rescue the oppressed – to intervene in some way when we become aware that they are being wrongly killed.
 - But then in v12, a potential objection is raised by those who have neglected this duty. What if I didn't know? Look at v12. *“If you say, “Behold, we did not know this,” does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work?”*

- ❖ **So the writer is acknowledging the possibility that the particular “slaughter” in view might be hidden, undercover, perpetrated out of sight.** And therefore, some may try to excuse themselves from responsibility by pleading ignorance.
 - But notice the response. Notice how this kind of excuse doesn’t hold up before an all-knowing God. **The One who formed your heart in your mother’s womb knows your heart and perceives its motives.** God knows why you don't want to know about the injustices taking place. Why you want to remain in ignorance. So we can't escape our duty to defend the powerless.

- ❖ Now let's apply these general principles to abortion. **Abortion is an example of a slaughter being perpetrated out of sight, and there are plenty of rationalizations.** But whatever camouflage is used to cover up or dress up abortion, this passage calls the bluff. Not only does God know what we really know inside our hearts, he also knows what we willfully neglect to know or try to rationalize away.
 - So the most important thing we can do is to speak the truth about abortion and to shine a light on the gross injustice being done. **Abortion is one of the greatest affronts to human rights taking place in our day.** As appalled as we are at the human rights violations being committed against the ethnic Uyghur people in China, we should be equally appalled by the genocide of another people group in the womb.

- ❖ **A seriously horrific aspect of abortion that you don’t hear about is the injustice of sex-selection abortion.** We’re talking about little girls being targeted in the womb. Now we know this is a massive problem globally. Research is showing that there are 23 million missing girls around the world today, killed because of sex discrimination in the womb.
 - It's a global problem. But we’d be naive to think it doesn’t happen here. **Do you realize that there is no federal law prohibiting sex-selection abortion?** And only eleven states have enacted laws prohibiting the practice. This unjust discrimination against girls needs to stop. And we need to speak up for them.

- ❖ **There’s also a disturbing racial disparity with an imbalance of abortions occurring in minority communities.** We just celebrated MLK Day and all the progress we've seen in the struggle for ethnic harmony, and yet the sad reality is that the womb is a more dangerous place for a black baby today than the inner city projects. In New York City, more black babies are aborted each year than are born. While representing only about a third of women of child-bearing age, African American and Hispanic American women account for over half of all abortions performed annually in the U.S. How is this *not* a civil rights issue?
 - Now I'm aware that there are socioeconomic factors contributing to those statistics. And that's why we need solutions both in these underserved communities working with families and in politics working to solve systemic disparities. It's hard work but noble work. **Abortion, on the other hand, is the quick and easy solution.** Not easy for the desperate mother. But easy for elected officials and community leaders who are responsible to find workable solutions for these struggling families. **We need better solutions that don't perpetuate racial disparities in our society.**

- ❖ **And I think one of the saddest results of abortion is the silent genocide of down syndrome children.** You'll read headlines praising the supposed eradication of Down Syndrome. You're thinking researchers must have pioneered a cure for the genetic condition. When in reality it's because, in our nation, 67% of pregnancies that carry an indication of Down syndrome are aborted (and those are low estimates). **We haven't been curing genetic disorders. We've been weeding out the unfit.**
- ❖ **As a society, we have stripped away the humanity of certain marginalized and oppressed minority groups.** That's why I don't see it as an exaggeration to call abortion one of the greatest affronts to human rights in our day. The victims in this case are baby girls, minority children, and people with genetic disorders. This is a matter of justice.

Every Human Mother Should Be Supported With Compassion

- ❖ And that would include justice for vulnerable women who are facing the fears and uncertainties of an unplanned pregnancy. **Just as we should hope for better laws to protect the unborn, we should hope for better laws to defend the cause of mothers** – especially those abandoned by the father of the child or ostracized by her family or community. We need better laws to enforce child support and better programs to assist single mothers. But more importantly, we need Christians – in churches and ministries – to step up and support these women with the love of Christ. This leads to our third implication: **Because of the *imago dei*, every human mother should be supported with compassion.**
- ❖ You might find it difficult to relate to a woman who is considering to get an abortion or who already has in the past. **But because we all share the *imago dei*, we share far more in common with fellow human beings than we might assume.** She might have a different attitude toward religion, different approach to politics, different views about the sacredness of sex, and different views on the sacredness of the child in the womb.
 - **But what you share in common is the image of God and that alone calls for compassion and sympathy – appealing to the second greatest commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.** And who is your neighbor? Any human being in distress – both the child and the mother. Love them both as you would love yourself.
- ❖ What that looks like, in our case, is showing compassion and trying to understand her dilemma. Giving her all the facts about the uniqueness and sacredness of the human person growing within her is important. **But we have to recognize that most women who get an abortion know that it involves taking a human life.** They don't do so carelessly or callously. It's an excruciating difficult decision. But they find themselves abandoned, without a support network, completely overwhelmed, and feeling that their own life is on the line. In her mind, she's thinking, “By having this baby, my life will be over.” **In her mind, it's a choice between me or the baby.** Somebody's life will be over. That's her dilemma.

- ❖ **Which should engender greater sympathy and support on her behalf – not judgment and condemnation.** As sinners who have been saved by grace, let's show that same grace. And proclaim a gospel of grace. Reminding women (and men) who have made the tragic choice of sacrificing their sons and daughters that forgiveness can be found in the Son of God who sacrificed himself on the cross for us and for our salvation.
- ❖ **I realize that for some of you here the topic of abortion gets very personal.** There may well be women among us who have had an abortion. As well as parents or fathers who have encouraged a woman to get one.
 - I know this sermon may have unearthed emotions that have been buried away deep in the past. And suddenly you may be feeling, once again, a heavy burden of guilt and shame because of abortion. **This morning you need to hear about the grace of God through Jesus the Son of God – who can forgive you for your role in that abortion.** Who can make you clean and make you a new creation. That's the good news of the gospel.
- ❖ **Church, let me conclude by suggesting a practical way to show compassionate support to the unborn and their mothers.** Consider volunteering at a pregnancy center. I've told you in the past about the women's health clinic called **The Source**, which is located in that medical plaza up the street, directly north of us.
 - The women who come into these centers are filled with fear, shame, and confusion. **And so by listening, loving, and speaking truth – you are compassionately supporting both mother and unborn child.** Now there are ways for both women and men to volunteer. We asked representatives of The Source to come and set up a booth in the lobby, so you can talk to them right after to find out more about the services they provide and how you could get involved.
- ❖ We also want you to know about **Little Footprints Children's Ministry** and their partner organization **Loving Houston Adoption Agency**. The goal of Little Footprints is to help at-risk families care for their own children, and Loving Houston is there to provide foster care and adoption options for those who need a deeper level of support and a Christian family to care for their children when they can't, either short term or long term. They'll come and share later in February, but we have brochures available in the lobby today.
 - Church, let us not just love in word and talk but in deed and truth (1 Jn 3:18). For religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (Jas 1:27).