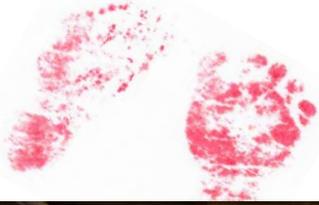


St. Luke's Episcopal Church

Observes . . .
**Pregnancy and Infant Loss
Awareness Day**

Sunday, October 15th, 2006











Sermon for Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day, October 15, 2006

Gracious God, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O God our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

"Jesus took her by the hand and called out, 'Child, get up!' Her spirit returned, and she got up at once" (Luke 8:54-55).

God is the God of life, and healing comes from God. That is the message that St. Luke the Healer sets out in his Gospel. We endure suffering, pain, and death, but none of these are the last word. The last word is life, and life is with God.

In honor of our patron saint, St. Luke, whose feast we celebrate today, we are participating in a special national observance called Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day. This special observance was voted in by the US House of Representatives only last month. The Congress set aside a special day to remember infants lost in pregnancy or early life, as a way to alert families to the dangers of infant death and to comfort those who have lost a child. Two years ago, one of our families, the Mathias family, lost an infant, Abigail Lynn, and Jen Mathias was a part of lobbying for this special day. This is a tragedy which has struck our own congregation, and there are many others who have experienced a similar loss. There are close to one million infants lost in pregnancy due to miscarriage and stillbirth every year in the United States. That adds up to 16% of all pregnancies! Many more children die immediately after birth or in early infancy of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. There are various medical causes for these tragedies, and the best prevention is to have good and early prenatal care. But even with the best prenatal care, there is no guarantee of a healthy birth.

The loss of an infant in pregnancy is just as devastating to the parents as any other loss of a child. A baby becomes real to its parents long before it is actually born. Parents plan for the pregnancy and look forward to having a child. They prepare a room, collect baby clothes, maybe register at the baby store, perhaps someone gives them a baby shower. On a website where parents express their grief for their lost infants, one mother, Teresa, said, "I already loved someone I hadn't even seen yet. This baby was my dream since I was a little girl. In my mind, I already saw him/her growing up, playing, talking." The parents eagerly anticipate the new arrival - and then something goes wrong with the pregnancy. The sonograms that were so exciting at first, with the baby's tiny movements, now show only stillness. It's a devastating loss for the parents as well as for their other children, anticipating a new brother or sister. Everyone plans for a healthy pregnancy, and it's a terrible shock when the baby is lost. The shock is only compounded by the joy of other new parents in the hospital, celebrating their tiny child, showing off the baby to visiting relatives and friends, arranging for the new baby car seat for the ride home. In the midst of these celebrations, families who have lost a child are in a state of total shock.

It helps mothers and fathers to be able to hold their still baby after the birth. One mother, Lisa, remembered that her baby was as beautiful as she had imagined, so tiny, without a single hair on his little head. She hummed her baby a lullaby, held his tiny fingers in hers, and cradled him in her lap. Still born children often are just as beautiful and perfect-looking as healthy children. They have all their fingers and all their tiny toes. When mothers and fathers can hold their baby, even if stillborn, it helps them to acknowledge the reality of their child. It validates their love for the baby they have been carrying. It helps them begin the long grieving process.

Typically, mothers feel guilty about the loss. What did they do wrong, they ask themselves. How did my body fail me? Since the mother is the one carrying the baby, she often feels to blame. But doctors reassure young mothers that short of using illegal drugs, their lost baby had nothing to do with their own behavior. One doctor noted, "There are a lot of scientific reasons [for a miscarriage or stillbirth], and it has nothing to do with her going out, taking care of the kids at home, not taking a prenatal vitamin or having an extra cup of coffee."

A complication for families grieving the loss of an infant is that others may not acknowledge the immensity of their loss. The child is not nearly as real to others as it is to the families. They haven't shared the parents' hopes and dreams, and they often just don't know what to say about the loss. People will try to offer comfort in ways that make things worse. They will say, "You weren't really pregnant ... It wasn't really a baby ... You can always have another child ... It was probably for the best ... It just wasn't God's will." Their intention is to comfort. But the effect is to deny the parents' very real feelings that they have lost a child. And they are devastated.

Another complication is that some states do not allow the parents to register the birth of a stillborn child. Without a registered birth, the parents can't get a birth certificate. It further denies the reality of their loss. One mother, Clair, was totally shocked when she learned she wouldn't be able to get a birth certificate for her lost infant. She remembered how she could feel the baby moving, and how the baby would respond to her voice and her husband's voice. Another mother, JoAnn, stifled her feelings about her miscarriages for thirty years until her own father died. Then she realized that all those decades later, she still was grieving her two lost infants. As part of her healing, thirty years after her miscarriages, she gave her babies names. It helped her acknowledge the pain of her loss and those many years later, she began to heal from her grief.

I don't believe that it is God's will that women lose their babies in pregnancy. God wants every pregnancy to culminate in a healthy birth. We heard in the lessons today about two instances of God's messengers bringing a child back to life. In the first lesson, the prophet Elijah prays for the lost son of a widow and asks God to return the boy's life. The boy revives and Elijah carries him to his elated mother. In the Gospel lesson, the grieving father comes to Jesus to plead for his help. Everyone is already in mourning, and they just laugh at Jesus when he tells them that the girl is only sleeping. When Jesus takes her by the hand and calls her by name, the girl's life returns to her and she stands up.

In both these stories, God intervenes to return life to the lifeless child. Ordinary life doesn't always work out like that. Much as we wish and hope and pray, sometimes we have to deal with death and accept that our lost child will not return. But I think we can carry away from these Bible lessons that God's intention is for life. Even if we do not have our small one with us, here on this earth, we can trust that our baby has gone to heaven with God and there has eternal life. We are not the ones to cradle and love and cherish our children. But that doesn't mean that our children have no one to cradle them. The image over our altar, of Jesus the Good Shepherd, shows Jesus cradling a small lamb. We can think of Jesus cradling these lost children, holding them safe in heaven, taking care of them for us until our turn comes to join them. "Suffer the little children to come unto me," Jesus said. We let go of our children only to release them to God who loves them far more than we can imagine. With God, they are safe. With God, they are happy. There no hurt can come, no sorrow, no pain. God the heavenly Father and Mother watches over them for ever.

And for us, life goes on. God has other work for us. God has other children for us to love, other people who need our care and attention. A writer once said, "Life is goodbye, life is hello." It hurts terribly when we have to say goodbye to those we love, and sometimes we fight against it and complain bitterly. But God wants us to work through our grief, because God needs our love for other people still here on earth. A favorite blessing of mine includes the phrase, "Be strong and of good courage." God wants us to be strong and of good courage to carry on with the life that we are still blessed to have. God is life, and to live life as best we can is a holy calling. As the 23rd psalm reassures us, God will lead us to green pastures, beside peaceful waters. Even though we must walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we need not fear evil, for God will be with us. God's goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life, and in the end, we will dwell in God's house, together with all those we love.

Let us bow our heads in prayer.

Gracious Lord, you have blessed us with life and we belong to you. Have mercy on us as we struggle with the loss of those we have loved. Overshadow our pain with your healing. Help us to trust you with our lost children and to surrender them to your loving care. Give us grace to be thankful for each day and to walk in your ways of love and peace. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



Jennifer Mathias' Message

When Rev. Sue asked me to talk about my loss I didn't know what to say. Or even if I could talk about it. But when I talked to others about this they said to talk from my heart. So here goes. 2 1/2 years ago I gave birth to my daughter Abigail Lynn and she was stillborn. She was so tiny only 10 1/2 inches and 11 ounces She was beautiful. It was the hardest thing I ever had to face. People don't understand what a loss like this is like unless they have been there. This loss is something I live with every day. Thankfully grief has a way of getting easier to deal with as time goes by. But a loss of a baby will stay with you the rest of your life. You will always grieve for that child. Most people don't

like to talk about this. They change the subject when you try to talk about your baby. They get uncomfortable.

What does October 15th mean to me? Well, its will hopefully get some understanding out there that even if a baby dies in the womb or shortly after birth its still a loss of a child. The parents still grieve for that baby. They bonded with that baby. That unless you lost a baby you don't understand how devastating it is. They still go through all the same emotions that a parent who loses and older child. But they get less understanding from others. For example my boss expected me back to work the week after I delivered Abigail. That is unreasonable. She didn't understand physically or emotionally I wasn't ready. I did end up quitting that job. October 15th is a way to honor all the babies who have died too soon. To celebrate them.

People think just because you have other children you shouldn't grieve so long or you should just forget. But if I lost one of my other children no one would say well you have 2 others at home. Or just because we now have Samantha she doesn't replace Abigail. She is different child. I still mourn that I will never get to watch Abby grow. I still have that missing spot in my life where Abigail should be.

I lost a child. I like many others are parents who had to do something no parent should do I outlived my child. I buried my child. I visit a grave site regularly. I only have her birth/death date to celebrate and Yes I do celebrate my baby Abigail. I do thank God for her. She changed me in ways I didn't think would happen. I pray that I am a better person because of her. She lived such a short time but she touched so many lives.

