

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
August 29, 2010
Psalm 139, (Daniel 1:1-17)
“Living By The Word: Veganism and Abortion”

Our focus today is on the bible, so let's begin with a short bible quiz. How many gospels are there in the New Testament? (Four: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). How many books are there in the bible? (66: 39 in the Old Testament; 27 in the New Testament). Are the following books in the Old or New Testament: Ruth? (Old Testament). Jonah? (Old Testament). Titus? (New Testament). Jude? (New Testament). Hezekiah? (That's a trick question; there is no book of Hezekiah.)

Without making any negative assumptions about your bible knowledge, let's just say that for most Christians, the bible is an unread classic. We say people of faith are to be guided by God's word, that public policy and social action are to be shaped by the priorities outlined in the scriptures – but how does this happen? How is this even possible when most Americans are illiterate about what is contained in the bible? The short answer is that people should re-learn the discipline of reading scripture, and churches should be better about offering and encouraging regular bible study. Psalm 119, verse 105 says: [God's] *word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*. Only through reading and study can that light shine around us and guide where we are going.

Having said that, it is important to admit that being guided by scripture can be difficult, given its occasionally contradictory message. Let's look at an example. Tuesday of this week, August 31, marks the official end of U.S. combat in Iraq. As of September 1, the 50,000 troops who remain in Iraq will be part of six brigades organized as “trainers,” as opposed to the prior level of 140,000 troops with explicit combat instructions.¹ Christians may celebrate this as a movement away from war and toward peace, as they flip through the Old Testament to Micah 4:3 and read: *They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*” But if they had stopped a bit earlier in the Old Testament, they might have read Joel 3:10, which says: *Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say, “I am a warrior.”* Which verse then should guide public policy?

Scripture was never meant for our modern, sound-bite age; it was never intended to be reduced to short slogans designed to solve complicated problems. The three general rules are this: Read verses in light of the chapter they're in; read chapters in light of the book they're in; and read books in light of the message of the entire bible. You read scripture in light of its own context first and then apply its message to our modern context. By reading verses in light of chapters, chapters in light of books, and books in light of the entire bible, God's word can be a lamp and bright light for our life journey, and not just a puny flashlight we only flick on in case of emergency.

Now let's look at two case studies on how to live by God's word, using the scriptures read in today's service. The story described in Daniel 1 is a fascinating tale. As you heard, Daniel and his three friends were brought into the king's household but they refused to eat the rations of royal food and wine provided for them, and instead asked to be fed a vegetarian diet. That's a superficial summary of the story. Read the passage a bit more carefully. Daniel and his friends were taken into exile by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar after he had destroyed the city of Jerusalem. They were to serve in the king's palace and learn the language and customs of the Babylonians, which, in effect, meant they were being forced to reject their Jewish heritage. To disobey Nebuchadnezzar meant they would be killed, so Daniel sought out a middle option. He requested a different diet, one that would set him apart from the others in the royal household, even as he obeyed the orders to serve the new king.

If anyone thought that vegan diets were some modern fad, here's biblical proof that vegetarianism has a long history. Verses 12 and 13: *Test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe.* Read the verses in light of the chapter. This passage and chapter can lead to fascinating discussions about how our dietary choices affect not only our health, but also touch on aspects of our faith lives. It can prompt us to see similarities with other world religions, like Hinduism, that encourage their believers to be vegetarians.

Read the chapter in light of the book. The book of Daniel contains several stories about how God protected the prophet and gave him great wisdom. He was preserved after being thrown in the lion's den, just as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were not harmed despite being thrown into the blazing fire. The message of the vegetarian victory in Daniel 1, the safety of Daniel in the lion's den in Daniel 6, or the apocalyptic visions that comprise the last chapters in Daniel all point to the same theme: God will protect God's people, especially those oppressed and suffering under injustice. The entire book is a message of hope for the Jewish communities living under foreign rule or in exile in foreign lands.

Read the book in light of the whole bible. The vegetarianism of Daniel 1 reminds us of all the food restrictions and kosher requirements found in the Old Testament. Rather than dismissing them as some unusual practice of Orthodox Jews, we should see it as one way to remain dedicated to God in a world dominated by unholy habits and false gods. We should see how the simple act of putting food on the table can be a type of prayer to God, an expression of what we value and whom we serve, in the best sense of the Hebrew scriptures. And then we go farther, into the New Testament, and know that being set apart to serve God includes not only what we eat but how we live, and especially how we care for those around us. Putting food on a plate that honors God is one thing; sharing that food so all are fed is even more important. Through this type of in-depth reading of scripture, it becomes a light that shines on all aspects of our life and nourishes us deeply and profoundly.

Second case study: Psalm 139. I'm going to focus on two verses in the middle of the psalm in light of the larger issue of abortion. Abortion is a thorny topic to discuss, if we dare speak of it at all. By definition, abortion is the termination of a pregnancy by the removal from the woman's uterus of an embryo or fetus. This can occur spontaneously, as in a miscarriage, or it can be induced by medical procedures, whether through the taking of pills that cause the embryo to abort, or by suction-aspiration or by dilation and curettage procedures.

Now imagine two sets of information – a scriptural perspective and a scientific, secular perspective. Psalm 139 verses 13 and 15 say: *For it was you (God) who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.* These verses describe how God's awareness of us includes not only our life from birth onward, but also a time prior to our birth, when we were being "knit together in our mothers' wombs." Thus, our faith includes not only the seasons of life and death, but also the period prior to life, with its mysteries of conception, pregnancy and birth.

But the verses from Psalm 139 are not scientific words; they are poetic and theological. They are not about us, or about abortion policy; they are about God – describing how God's knowledge far exceeds our own; how there is no place we can go and be separate from God's awareness or love for us. This knowledge extends beyond the boundaries of knowledge that we normally associate with human life; and affirming this quality of God is meant to offer us comfort, giving us hope despite the troubles that mark so many moments between our conception and our final breath.

Now here's a sampling of data from a more secular perspective. Abortion remains one of the most common surgical procedures for American women. It is estimated that up to one-third of all women will have one by the age of 45.² Worldwide, about 42 million abortions take place each year, with about half of them estimated to be done by unsafe practices. According to a recent Canadian medical journal, these unsafe practices lead to at least 70,000 deaths and 5 million disabilities a year.³ The majority of abortions occur within the first nine weeks of pregnancy, with almost 90% occurring by the twelfth week of pregnancy; only 1.4% occur very late term, after the 21st week of pregnancy. What struck me was the fact that after all the fervor around abortion during the past thirty years, the number of abortions performed annually in the United States has roughly held steady: 1.3 million in 1977 and 1.2 million in 2007.⁴ All the energy, expense, and political heat on this issue have not seemed to affect the fundamental reality of abortion here or around the world. How can faith help navigate a different path for this discussion?

In this case, I am proud of our denomination. As Presbyterians we insist that scripture calls us to respect women and children, and this respect extends to both of them during all the seasons of pregnancy. There is a holy mystery at work here – a mystery of life and spirit and consciousness coming together in ways we do not fully understand. So our denomination's position on abortion is that the decision to artificially terminate a

pregnancy is an intense, ethical decision to be reached by a mother in consultation with doctors, and with sincere times of prayer and reflection, and not something to be predetermined by national law.⁵

Rather than using abortion positions as litmus tests for political orthodoxy, we are challenged as Christians to take a step back – to be concerned about and address the circumstances that bring women to consider abortion as the best available option. And we are to do so knowing that poverty, domestic abuse, racism, and unjust social situations may make it impossible for women to freely choose the best option for themselves and the unborn child within.⁶

Based on what is read in scripture, sincere people of faith can draw different conclusions on the topic of abortion. The Creator of Psalm 139 is the Lord of life, all life – human and non-human; and the Lord of all stages of life, pre-birth, healthy born, infirm born, infirm aged, and the stage with God after the end of earthly life. There is a mystery at work here that compels us not to narrow our focus too sharply. The frustrated potentials of life are many – yet somehow all incompleteness in life finds its completion in God, in God’s time, God’s realm, God’s love.

Psalm 119, verse 105: *God’s word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.* Read God’s word in light of the words, the story, the promise around it. Read each word in light of the Word made Flesh, Jesus, the incarnate Word of God; Christ, the resurrected, living Word. For He is the lamp illuminating our lives. He is the light of the world. Thanks be to God for God’s Son and God’s Word.

AMEN

¹ Steven Lee Myers, “Exit Strategy, Meet Your Challenge: Iraq”, *New York Times*, August 8, 2010, 4 WK.

² Emily Bazelon, “The New Abortion Providers,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 10, 2010, p. 46.

³ *Journal Obstetrics Gynaecology Canada* (December 2009); cited “Abortion”, Wikipedia.

⁴ Bazelon, p. 46.

⁵ Minutes of 182nd General Assembly (1970), United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., p. 891.

⁶ Minutes of 204th General Assembly (1992), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), pp. 367-8, 372-4.