

YOU CAN'T LOOK AWAY

By Pastor Will Chester

Genesis 1-3; Psalm 8

If you haven't had the chance yet, I highly recommend the Netflix documentary titled, *My Octopus Teacher*. Yes, you heard that right: My octopus teacher! It's a beautiful film about a documentarian who finds himself burned out and exhausted. In an effort to regain a sense of direction and purpose, he begins each day by swimming in the ocean like he did as a child. One day, he spots an octopus doing something unusual. It's curled into a ball, clutching hundreds of pieces of shells in its suction cups, attempting to camouflage from predators. It's marvelous to watch, and had never been observed before. So, each day, he sets out to look for this octopus, taking note of her behaviors, and seeing the world through her eyes. It's called *My Octopus Teacher* because, gradually, though this practice, his burnout goes away and he regains a sense of his place in the world and the inter-connectedness of all living creatures.

Well, this morning is *Sanctity of Life Sunday* where, every year, we turn our attention to the issue of abortion. And it's a heavy thing to do, especially in a year like this (or even a *month* like this) that has been filled with intense political rhetoric, and concerning a topic that is so fraught with tension, fear, and anxiety. Like the filmmaker, we're all a bit burned out.

So what I want to do this morning is to step back for a minute from the way the abortion conversation usually goes and immerse ourselves in the familiar waters of the Bible. My hope is that when we return to the conversation about abortion, we'll have deeper clarity. I want us to look at the issue of abortion, not through the lens of politicians, and Republicans, and Democrats, but through the familiar lens of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. What I think we'll find is that there's something so compelling in that Storyline, that—like the octopus in South Africa—you just can't look away. Let's start at the beginning, with Creation.

1. You Can't Look Away from Creation

Most conversations about abortion begin in the wrong place. They often begin with attacks, like, "*You just want to control someone else's body.*" When the conversation is more civil, they start with questions about rights: *What right does a mother have over her body? Does the government have a right to say what she can or can't do? Does a fetus have any rights?* These are good questions, but again, they're not the best place to start. The place to start is actually much more basic—and it's something that concerns the fetus just as much as his or her mother, and the mother just as much as the father, and the grandparents, and the politicians, and even you and me. The place to begin is with the question: *what does it mean to be human?* And when we look at Scripture, we see that to be human is to be *the most glorious, most wonderful, most beautiful, most awe-inspiring creature in all of creation.* Please turn to Psalm 8.

King David, the writer of this psalm, begins with an exclamation of praise: "Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" And as he ponders the majesty of his

Creator, his mind naturally goes to the wonder of the skies: “You have set your glory above the heavens.”

Have you ever had the chance to look at the Milky Way? My wife and I used to work at a very remote camp in Maine, far from any artificial light and we could see the Milky Way on a clear night, a beautiful belt of light through the center of the sky, and those memories fill me even now with a sense of awe. And yet, for all that glory, God’s glory is even greater: “You have set your glory *above* the heavens.”

Now, notice where David’s attention moves next: from the glory of God above the heavens to the babbles, and coos, and cries—of babies. “Out of the mouths of children and infants you have established praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.” It’s a surprising turn, even bewildering. Why is he talking about babies and what do they have to do with the “foe and the avenger”? David is drawing a connection between the glory of God revealed in the natural world and new life in the city of God that scares would-be enemies.

Throughout the Psalm, there’s a back and forth between the great and the small, the weak and wondrous. He continues, “When I look at your heavens, the moon and the stars that you have set in place... What is mankind that you are mindful of them? Human beings that you care for them?” He’s asking, in light of this immense beautiful universe, what place do I have? What place does anyone have?

The answer of Psalm 8 is the same answer as Genesis 1 and 2: human beings are at the center of it all. We are the pinnacle of creation, inserted into this world on the Sixth Day only after everything else is in place. Look at verse 5: “You made us a little lower than the heavenly beings”—only a little lower than God and the angels. Humans and humans alone in all of creation are made in God’s image, made to rule with him and have dominion over the earth. So, in a universe 93 billion light years wide, you are the most glorious creature—so glorious that God himself was not ashamed to become like you, did not wish to exist without you, was not willing to keep his glory to himself but desires to share it with you. There is simply no religion or philosophy that has or could ever have a higher understanding of the human person than Christianity. None. “Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth... what is man that you are mindful of him, human beings that you care for them?”

That’s where the conversation about abortion begins. The glory of mankind is so wonderful, you can’t look away. It’s a reality that our founding fathers recognized as “self-evident”: “All men are created equal... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Humans—all humans—have a fundamental dignity that cannot be given by any other person and cannot be taken away. Human dignity can only be honored or dishonored; respected or violated.

So from there, the critical question is to look finally at the unborn fetus and ask, “Is this human? Is this fetus human?” And science tell us unequivocally: the answer is yes. From the moment of conception, the fertilized egg is human. What else can we call it? If it’s simply tissue, then it is unlike anything else we call tissue because “tissue” doesn’t turn into distinct human beings. If the fetus is simply part of his or her mother’s body, then it is different than every part because that fertilized egg already has the DNA of someone else. We have to call

that single cell human, not because it looks human right now, but because left to its own, its cells will multiply and develop organs and a heartbeat and hiccups and the capacity to sense and know his or her mother's voice before ever leaving her body. The fact that life starts as a clump of cells is insignificant. Remember, in Psalm 8, it's the *smallness* of mankind in light of our surroundings that make our significance shine all the brighter—the same is true for that single celled organism growing in her mother's body.

So if we turn back to the abortion conversation, notice the clarity that this perspective offers. The argument against abortion is really quite simple: All humans have fundamental human dignity which includes the right to life; Unborn children are human beings; Therefore, unborn children have the right to life. So, any conversation about rights has to include the rights of the unborn child. Any conversation about difficult cases has to ask: does this circumstance, however tragic, merit the taking of human life? And any conversation about whether government should get involved has to reckon with the responsibility of government to protect the basic rights of those living in her borders. When you see the glory of the human person, you just can't look away.

2. You can't look away from the Fall

Let's move now from Creation to Fall. What does the Fall mean for our conversations about abortion? To start, I know that for many of you, even now you might be looking at me, a man, and asking, "What do you know about hard circumstances for a woman? What *could* you know?" And of course, as a man I don't know fully—but I do know *something*. I was born to a single mom living in poverty who didn't know how she could possibly take care of me and my sister, and I often reflect on her courage in the face of so much uncertainty. So I want to say that I know *something*, but more than that, I want to say that I'm so, so sorry. I repent. I am sorry for every evil, for every sin both personal and structural, that has ever been committed against any woman that caused her to consider abortion as her only option. This morning, I invite all of us into that repentance because we all have a part to play.

No abortion happens in a vacuum. No abortion is simply the choice of one person to end another's life because every abortion occurs within a system of millions of choices and decisions that dishonor the dignity of human life. In the Bible, that system is called sin and we repent because we are implicated. This is also why abortion is not the only important issue. Racism, poverty, education, healthcare, prison reform, COVID, housing equity, immigration, the environment, welcoming refugees and asylum seekers—all of these concern the sanctity of human life. And one of the most common questions you or I will hear from our neighbors is, *Do Christians actually care about human suffering or do they just care about what happens before you're born?*

That's a good question and we should have an answer. People are right to ask where our priorities lie and we should be ready to say, "We absolutely care about these issues. They concern the dignity of every human life."

This way of thinking has been called the "seamless garment" or "consistent life ethic." It's a way of talking about justice without picking and choosing which issues are important along party lines. We might have different issues that we are *personally* passionate about, but we are

called as a church to stand against every injustice that dishonors human dignity. So the root of our response to abortion is the same as our response to the unjust killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and others. We stand for the sanctity of life.

If I can just speak bluntly for a moment, that challenge was primarily for our conservative members. And I want to commend those members for staying in conversation with us and being willing to be challenged. But regarding abortion, I'd like to speak primarily to our younger and some of our more progressive members and offer a challenge to you. It is far, far, far easier in GenZ and Millennial culture to speak out about the evils of racism than it is to speak out about the evils of abortion. If you want to ruin Thanksgiving dinner with your Boomer and GenX relatives, then bring up "white supremacy." But if you want to ruin happy hour with your Millennial and GenZ colleagues, bring up "state-sanctioned abortion." It's true that justice is about *more* than just abortion; but it's certainly not about *less*. Many in my generation have not given abortion the weight it deserves.

And for what it's worth, I'm telling my own story here. I have always been against abortion, but I have to admit, when I first came back to this church six years ago, I kind of thought we talked about it too much. I was more personally invested in racial justice. I was ambivalent about our ability to overturn *Roe v. Wade* or if that would even do any good. When our Senior Pastor invited us to go to the March for Life, I was not excited. I didn't want to put myself in the middle of a culture war.

But still, I went out—even if just out of obedience. And since that march, I've gone every year since. Over time, I began to realize that my reasons for downplaying the importance of the issue of abortion were not good reasons. I'll give you three and they all start with the letter "s": its severity, scope, and scale. It's severity because abortion *always* involves the direct killing of another life. Issues like poverty are important because poverty often leads to poor life outcomes, but abortion *always* takes another human life. It's scope because the unborn are an entire class of human beings whose rights to life are expressly not protected by law. And it's scale, because while COVID took over 400,000 lives in one year, over twice that many were killed by abortion the year before—and that tragedy is repeated year after year after year.

Now, some will say, *if we really cared about reducing abortion, wouldn't we focus on healthcare and eliminating poverty?* And the answer is yes, we should focus on those issues. But let me pushback on the idea that this means we should *not* focus on abortion: first, while it's true that financial strain is usually the most common reason given for having an abortion, almost just as often are reasons of convenience: that it's not just not the right time. ⁴ Secondly, even countries with highly-developed welfare systems, like Sweden or Norway, have abortion rates that are not far from the United States.⁵ It's simply not true that by eliminating poverty, we will eliminate abortions (though doing so may certainly decrease their number.)

So, to anyone who feels defensive right now, I understand and I know there's much more to say about all these things than I have time to say here. I'm not trying to shame you. I'm simply trying to do for you what we challenged many of our people to do in the past with regard to racism: can you see the evil of abortion it and name it? Can you not be ashamed because of the way it sounds to others' ears when you speak up? Because when it comes to looking at the effects of the fall, the one thing you cannot do is look away.

Transition: This is heavy stuff. When you look closely at any justice issue, it's difficult to not fall into despair. And that's why we need the third part of the biblical story: the story of redemption. In the redemption of our world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we recognize that at the end of the day, we don't have to win. We don't have to win because he has already won and he will win. Sometimes we get to be part of those victories in this life and we rejoice in that. But our primary job right now is not winning, but witnessing to the story of redemption in Jesus.

So what does this commitment to life look like in practice?

3. When you Jesus standing in victory, you can't look away

I've tried to answer that question alongside our students. For the last two years, I've brought high school students to the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C. alongside tens of thousands of others, mostly young people. We march in a joyful procession celebrating human life and lamenting abortion. But on another day of that trip, we worship at a historically black Church and spend the afternoon at the Museum of African-American history and culture. I do this because I am trying to disciple our students to witness to the dignity of human life wherever it is dishonored and regardless of whether they find themselves on the political Left or on the Right. I marched with students last January in DC and I marched with some of them again this summer at peaceful protests in support of police accountability and reform. We do these things in hope that the victory of Jesus will get the last word.

I've asked one of our students who's gone on these trips to share a story from her first semester at a college in Wisconsin because I think it illustrates what it looks like when our witness is characterized by hope. Elisabeth, come on up:

My name is Elisabeth and I am a freshman at a local university. I have been going to this Church for most of my life. In my first college English class, I was surprised to find how little my fellow classmates knew about the abortion issue, especially in regards to the pro-life stance. Most of them seemed to be pro-choice, including a new friend of mine. We got dinner together, and the subject came up. In high school, I might not have shared my own views, but I have grown since then, and chose not to hide them. She seemed genuinely curious (surprised?) to discover my pro-life views, and asked me if I would be willing to have a conversation with her about why I believe what I do. I was taken aback, but agreed happily. So she began asking me questions: Do you believe all abortions should be illegal? What about in cases of rape? I took a moment to answer, gathering my thoughts for this unexpected turn of conversation, and said, "In order to have a conversation about the morality of abortion, let's first take a look at the base level of the argument, the core of where pro-life and pro-choice beliefs differ. As someone who is pro-life, I believe that life begins at the moment of conception." Then I asked, "As someone who is pro-choice, what do you believe?" She admitted her beliefs were different, that a fetus only a few weeks old is just a clump of cells in her eyes. I nodded, expecting as much, but she acknowledged that if life really does begin at conception, then it would make sense for abortion to be illegal.

She couldn't bring herself to believe that, but she understood where I was coming from.

The conversation continued, but at a certain point, I noticed that she was becoming uncomfortable. She was struggling to find her words, and I could sense her growing distress. I stopped the conversation and looked at her, telling her that if the conversation was making her uncomfortable in any way, to tell me, and we could talk about something else. She gave me a surprised look, not expecting me to say what I had, before nodding to me with gratitude. She told me that it meant a lot for me to take her feelings into consideration like that. I allowed her to be the next to speak, giving her the opportunity to choose where to lead the conversation next. Our conversation eventually faded to a different subject for the rest of the night, but my friend seemed more comfortable around me now. Trust was established between us; I hadn't crossed her boundaries and she hadn't crossed mine. I wanted to continue sharing because I had a lot to say on the subject. But I am glad that we chose to stop where we did. Although we have not furthered our discussion on the subject since, she has continued to be my friend, and we have grown closer. She has even expressed interest in attending a church event with me in the future, although she is agnostic. I am glad to say that I may not have won the argument completely, but I had succeeded in earning her trust, and her friendship.

What I love about Elisabeth's story is that her approach has all the marks of hope. She overcame her fears about sharing her beliefs because she knew it wasn't her job to win the argument. It was simply her job to witness to the dignity of every human life. And later, when her friend started shying away from the conversation, Elisabeth didn't try to force a win. Instead, she honored her friend by empowering conversation—a dialogue—one that continues today because of that act of hospitality. That's what it looks like when hope characterizes our witness.

And this year, we've got reasons for hope. This church is raising up scores of others like Elisabeth whose pro-life views go hand-in-hand with their advocacy for people of color, immigrants, refugees, and anyone experiencing oppression. But there's more reasons than that: our beloved sanctity of life team started a baby bank serving scores of families and reminding them that we are here for them before, during, and after their pregnancy. As you'll see in a few moments, we've even helped start a baby bank at our partner church in Chicago. Lastly, after years and years of praying—with some of our families showing up in-person week after week—the Anchor Abortion Clinic on Roosevelt Road in Lombard finally closed its doors. This is what hopeful witness looks like.

I don't know what the next four years will hold. But I do know this: one day, abortion will be no more. That's our hope. And let me tell you what happens when you fix your eyes on that kind of hope: you can't look away. You can't look away from the heavenly city descending to earth because it's everything you've longed for in every moment of your life. Every unjust stone will be overturned, every sin will be redeemed, every tear will be wiped from our eyes.

God is on the move and he's inviting you to partner with him in his story of redemption: a vision so captivating, once you see it, you just can't look away.

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⁵ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/abortion-rates-by-country>