

## **“Life Daily Laid Down”**

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**St Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage KY**

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We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. When we in our culture talk about someone who has laid down their life for another, we speak of heroism, of martyrdom, of an unjust death in the pursuit of justice and peace. We often envision soldiers and servicemen and women of all kinds, of healthcare workers who serve in dangerous underserved places and activists who protest peacefully against tyranny. Teachers make the news for being killed while protecting their students during a school shooting, firefighters make the news when they die in the line of duty. Why is it that all our ideas of laying down our lives involve violence?

When we talk about laying down life, what we mean is extraordinary self-sacrifice. We hope that, were we to find ourselves in the same set of circumstances, we too would make the necessary sacrifices for our loved ones, for our cause, for our neighbor. We also hope, and often even pray, that we might never find ourselves in such a situation. We describe the act of laying down our lives as extraordinary, and we mean for it to stay that way. We relegate self-sacrifice to acts of extreme courage and impossible choices, absolving ourselves of the opportunity in our ordinary lives. However, were we to choose this luxury, we would be choosing not to fulfill our baptismal promises. To be Christians who claim the name of Jesus, laying down our lives is not optional, it is who we are.

Jesus did, of course, lose his life in an act of state-sanctioned violence. The authorities felt rightfully threatened by the kingdom he proclaimed and the freedom he preached to the persecuted and the oppressed, and executed him as an example to all those who had been drawn to his message. But when we say that Jesus laid down his life for us, we do not only mean that fateful morning at Golgotha, or at his trial before Pilate, or even on the night when he was handed over while his friends fled and denied him. When we step out from the limited scope of our violent understanding of self-sacrifice, we can see that the Son of God laid down his life for us much earlier.

The story of Christmas is the story of life laid down. By choosing to enter into the world in a new way, in mortal and vulnerable flesh, God laid down God's own self for us. By submitting to be born of a human mother, to be raised and taught and protected by a human family, to be dependent on others for love and care and sustenance, God chose the kind of life that can be laid down in death, the kind of life that risks loss and separation and forsakenness. When we recognize ourselves and those we love in the eyes of the infant Jesus, we can see that laying down our lives requires of us more than just the singular ultimate sacrifice. To allow ourselves to be loved, to have needs that can only be met in community, to lay down the illusion of our individualism and self-sufficiency, is to lay down our lives like Jesus.

The story of the Baptism of our Lord is the story of life laid down. By choosing to wade in the water with John, by kneeling sinless at the feet of the prophet alongside countless penitent sinners, God laid down his life to the vulnerability of aligning himself with those deemed undesirable. By taking on the baptism for the forgiveness of sins as one who would face temptation and never sin, Christ laid down his reputation, his respectability, his safety from ridicule. By aligning himself with us in a baptism like ours, Christ holds up for us a mirror, a

hard look at the ways we see ourselves as exceptional, superior, sinless. When we summon the courage to look in that mirror, we see the ways we have not yet laid down ourselves in order to take up our baptismal promises. When we choose to lay down our attachment to appearance and the opinions of others, we choose to join Jesus and John at the riverbank, laying down our sin as we are named Beloved in Jesus.

The many stories of healing, teaching, and preaching of Jesus are stories of a life daily laid down. By choosing to speak of the kingdom of God within the hearing of the princes and principalities of this world, God laid down the mantle of earthly rule, refusing to claim a throne built on suffering and oppression. By choosing to touch the untouchable, to restore the outcast and grant wholeness and belonging to the lost and abandoned, Jesus laid low the divisions between the sacred and the profane. By being with us every day, Christ has taught us that there is no corner of our lives that is too dark for his light or too broken for his saving grace. Jesus lay down before us his own heart, his way, his truth, his life, so that we might see ourselves in the forgiven sinner, the restored enemy, and the lifted lowly. And in that new and truer vision, we become capable of being the hands that work God's miracles of healing and forgiveness in a world as broken as we are.

Our Good Shepherd told us that those who lose their life for his sake will find it, and perhaps this is what he meant. Not just laying down our lives in death, but also laying down our lives in life. Not sacrificing ourselves on the altars of violence, capitalism, and self-made martyrdom. But laying down our sense of ownership over our lives. Laying down our sense of individual importance, our self-definition as the heroes in our own story, giving up our illusions of grandeur that tell us we need no one, not one another, not even God. Laying down what binds us to sin frees us to pick one another up when we fall. Laying down what comes between us and our

neighbors, whether it be our wealth or our worries or our prejudices or our respectability, frees our hands to reach out for one another, frees our arms to open wide in an embrace of God's beloved creation. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. God has never stopped showing us how to love, in extraordinary and ordinary ways. But most days our arms are too full. Laying down our life frees us to carry the cross. What will you lay down today? What, in your newfound freedom, will God ask you to pick up?