

“Christmas Past, Christmas Present, Christmas Future”

A sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Douglas E. Nagel

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Texts: Luke 2:22-40, Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord" [1]), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." [2]

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss [3] your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. [4] She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.

Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

Galatians 4:4-7

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, <"Abba", [1] Father."

So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

A farm boy accidentally overturned his wagonload of corn in the road. The farmer who lived nearby came to investigate. "Hey, Willis," he called out, "forget your troubles for a spell and come on in and have dinner with us. Then I'll help you get the wagon up." "That's mighty nice of you," Willis answered, "But I don't think Pa would like me to." "Aw, come on, son!" the farmer insisted. "Well, okay," the boy finally agreed. "But Pa won't like it." After a hearty dinner, Willis thanked his host. "I feel a lot better now, but I just know Pa is going to be real upset." "Don't be foolish!" exclaimed the neighbor. "By the way, where is your Pa?"

"Well, he's under the wagon."

We all know what deadlines are. And all of us have to work toward fulfilling those deadlines, especially when some important event hangs in the balance. We know what the "right time" can mean. We know when something happens at the right time. We know when something fails to happen at the right time. We have all heard and used expressions like "in the nick of time," and "just in time."

Timing is important!

We operate according to a timetable. God also has a timetable. Sometimes they are not the same. Many times, we want God to act, and act right now. In God's wisdom, He chooses to delay for our good.

It has been famously said that God is not always on time, but He is never late. He who created this universe from nothing, who sees the end from the beginning, who is, within Himself, all wisdom and knowledge, works all things out perfectly at the right time. It may not be "in our time," but it is always "in His time."

Christmas reminds us of the fact that Jesus came to this Earth at just the right time. In our text today, we are told that when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son.

Isn't that an amazing statement? Have you ever thought that there was a right time when Jesus should come? It is an incredible statement. Does this mean to say that there was one time in all of history when all things were perfectly in line for the first coming of Jesus; and that there was no other time when Christ could have come? I believe that is precisely what it is saying. It is saying that Jesus came just at the right time. Christmas reveals the perfect timing of His coming.

Now that should be important to you because just as Christ came at the perfect time, so God still continues to work in our lives at the right time. In fact, perhaps today is the perfect time in your life for God to move in a special way. Perhaps the problem you are facing today, God desires to solve for you. Perhaps the answers you have been seeking, Christ desires to give you today. Perhaps God is telling you that now is the time for you to commit your life to Him. If so, let me encourage you to respond to Him today. He will meet you, just in time. In fact the Apostle Paul writes, *"For he says, 'In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."* (2 Corinthians 6:2)

Our text today will help us to see just how perfectly God works out His plan in history. It will also reveal, by implication, just how perfectly He works His plan in our lives. His timing is perfect, and His plan for your life is wonderful indeed.

Preparation

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law. (4:4)

We are told that the first Advent, or coming of Christ, happened in the fullness of time. Throughout the Old Testament there were numerous prophecies given concerning the coming of the Messiah. There were prophecies concerning the manner of His birth, that He would be born of a virgin. There were prophecies concerning the place of His birth, that He would be born in Bethlehem. We see these prophecies being fulfilled as Jesus was born that glorious night. But just as there will be a perfect time for His second advent, when Jesus returns as promised, there was a perfect time for His first advent. God pulled all things together to prepare for the first coming of Christ and for the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel.

There was a religious preparation for His coming. Throughout the Old Testament, God had been dealing with His chosen people, Israel. It would be through them that the Messiah would come. But Israel was always straying from God. They refused to simply worship Him alone and were always following after the gods of the peoples around them. Over and over, God judged Israel for this idolatry. Finally, we see the culmination of judgment in what is known as the Babylonian captivity. God allowed the entire nation to be conquered by Babylon and taken from their homeland into that country.

One of the interesting effects of Babylonian exile was that after the captivity, the Jewish people were always exclusively monotheistic. They always believed in one God after this time. During the captivity, the Jews came in contact with the Persians. Now, the Persians were Zoroastrians, or monotheists. As a matter of fact, some feel that the Magi were Zoroastrian priests, but we have no way to confirm this. In any event, it seems that the Jews were delivered from following after the idols of the pagan nations around them.

A second important effect of the captivity upon the Jewish nation was that the canon of Old Testament Scripture was assembled under Ezra. For the first time, the body of Old Testament literature known now as the Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament, was pulled together in a single volume; thus, paving the way for the preaching of the Gospel of Christ.

A third major effect of the Babylonian captivity was that the Jewish synagogue came into being. Until the time that the Jews were displaced from their homeland, they had worshipped at the Temple in Jerusalem. Now, there was no longer a temple. So, the Jews developed a method of assembly we now know as the synagogue.

The synagogue, incidentally, is the pattern on which the Christian Church is fashioned. We can see from all these events, the religious preparation for the coming of Christ.

But there was also a cultural preparation for His coming. In 350 B.C., there arose a man by the name of Alexander. He was the son of the Macedonian King, Philip. We know him as Alexander the Great.

Alexander conquered the entire known world in twelve years. And because of Alexander's influence, the world became Greek in culture, philosophy, institutions, art, drama, literature, architecture, thought and language. Greek was spread to such an extent that the ordinary people become very familiar with a style of Greek known as koine, or common Greek. This, of course, is very important because in 280 B.C., the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. We call that volume the Septuagint. And so, we see that the stage was set for the preaching of the Gospel. Religiously, the Old Testament Scriptures were gathered; linguistically and culturally, the lines of communication were opened. The time was right.

Finally, there was a political preparation for His coming. In Italy there is a city called Rome. By the time Christ had come, the Romans had conquered all the nations around them. In doing so, they built roads that would link the entire Roman empire. They suppressed open criminal acts, created a fine postal system, and instituted the "Pax Romana," or universal Roman peace. God even had a hand in those who would ascend to power in the Roman Empire. At the coming of Christ, Caesar Augustus was in the seat of power. Little did he know that when he called for a census, he was in fact doing God's will. Because of his edict requiring all the people to return to their place of origin and be counted, a pregnant woman and her husband would make an historic journey to Bethlehem. Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, was guided by the sovereignty of God to the place prophesied in the Old Testament where Christ would be born.

Our Scripture tells us that He came, born of a woman, at just the right time. In the fullness of time, God sent Jesus into this world. Look at the wisdom of God in sending Jesus just at the right time. If God would do that for the world, He would certainly do that for you. He will work in your life at just the right time. Trust Him in your situation. Rest in His timing. Know that He does all things well.

Purpose

In order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.
(4:5)

There was more to that night in Bethlehem almost 2,000 years ago than merely a babe in a manger. Jesus had more in mind in His coming to this Earth than giving us a holiday. God had a great purpose for Christ's coming. God had planned this event before the Earth was formed. Now the time was right. And Christ came.

He came, first of all, to redeem us. We have heard it so much that we have lost the true power of hearing it. But the Bible clearly teaches it. We were under the Law. But we could not keep the Law. So we

stood condemned by our own inadequacy. Our own works testify to the fact that we cannot be righteous in ourselves.

So, Jesus came. He bore our humanity. He bore our iniquity. He died on the Cross in our stead. Because of his death, God made a way for us to be forgiven. By faith in Jesus' death and resurrection God has made a way for us to be free from the penalty of sin and the law of sin and death. Jesus came to redeem us, to buy us back, and to make us His own.

And the offer still stands. It seems that we have one of two choices: either we can choose to live our lives in our own strength and power, taking our chances that we can live righteously enough to earn our way to heaven; or we can accept God's offer of salvation by faith in the finished work of His Son, Jesus Christ. The only problem is, the Scripture itself teaches that unless our righteousness is perfect righteousness, we have no hope of inheriting the Kingdom of God. If we keep the whole Law and stumble in one point, the Scripture teaches that we become a lawbreaker. It only takes one rotten egg to spoil the whole omelet. It only takes a little sin to make us a sinner. God is holy, and as the holy God of the universe, any sin is abhorrent to Him. If we reject the way of Christ, we will be condemned. It will be a condemnation we deserve. For as we stand before an all-holy God, we, along with the whole universe, will have to proclaim, "We are guilty as judged." But the other gives us the privilege to stand before God, holy and righteous and justified; not because of anything we did, but because of the perfect work of Christ. Our sin is placed to His account, and we stand in His righteousness. He came to redeem us.

But He also came to adopt us. The good news is we become His sons. The word "adopt" in Greek (*huiothesia*) comes from two Greek words, "thesia," which means "placing," and "huios," which means "son." By that we understand that when we come to Christ, a child has been placed into the family of God by the act of Christ. He came not only to forgive us of our sins, but to place us into His family. That is something else indeed.

He did not merely forgive us and send us on our way. He received us to Himself and made us His son, his daughter.

God's plan for us all along has been to adopt us into His family. Now, we who have believed in Christ, have been made His children. And we can hold our heads up high because of who our Father is. There is great dignity in being a child of God. We need to see the dignity of the believer in the doctrine of adoption.

Privileges

And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore, you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (4:6-7)

Christ came to fulfill His plan for the world and for us. His plan is to redeem us and to adopt us. And through that adoption we gain certain privileges - the privileges of sonship. Here in our text, it says that we are no longer slaves, but sons. We have been taken from this orphaned condition and placed into His family. We no longer must serve the lusts of the flesh, the whims of the devil, or the pressures of our peers. We have been set free from slavery.

It is a terrible thing to be in bondage. But that is precisely the condition of all of us without Jesus Christ. We're in bondage to our own desires; we're in bondage to the habit-patterns of the past; we're in bondage to the devil himself. But the sovereign work of God has done away with all of that. Now we are set free because of the work of Christ on the Cross. We have received the Holy Spirit into our hearts. It is that Spirit who cries within us, Abba! Father! The Holy Spirit of God communes with our spirit and testifies that we are God's children.

That would be enough. But wait, there's more!

Not only are we sons, we are heirs of God. Through Christ we become heirs of the Kingdom. We now have an inheritance. The riches of the Kingdom of God are ours through Christ. Again, look at your dignity as a Christian. You are a son, a daughter, a child of the King. You are a recipient of the Holy Spirit. You are an

heir of the Kingdom. You are not a slave but are born again to reign and rule with Christ. And this reign begins now.

Our reign with Christ is not just a future event, though it is that. It begins in the here and now. As Romans 5:17 says, "For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ." We are indeed heirs of the abundant life in Christ.

These are the privileges we have as a child of God. This is what the first coming of Christ provided for us. At the right time, God sent forth His Son, and He can be trusted to do things in our lives at the right time, as well. We are His children, His heirs. And He is leading us to reign with Him in eternity. But also to rule in victory in this life. This is what Christmas has done for us.

Almost 2,000 years ago, there came a night when the fullness of time had come. The angels appeared over the portals of heaven in expectancy. The plan of God through the ages was beginning to unfold. It would be only moments before they announced to the shepherds, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be the sign unto you, ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." (Luke 2:11-12) Thus, when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law. Unable to contain heaven's joy any longer, the angels would explode with the cry of jubilation, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men.

The fullness of time had come.

It will come again. This is the promise of God.

SOLI DEO GLORIA. TO GOD ALONE BE THE GLORY. AMEN.