



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual*

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## **“The First Day of the Rest of Your Life” Luke 2:21-40; Galatians 4:4-7**

Welcome to the SEASON of Christmas! These 12 crazy days are a nice excuse to take things easy, string out those parties, write thank-you cards. For some of us, we go to the stores and get Christmas cards at ‘way reduced prices, and send them out now—they’ll still get there “during the Season of Christmas”, for those who observe the calendar of the Church Year. Or, they make nice “Epiphany cards”, which is the date on which our Eastern Orthodox Christian friends observe the birth of Christ, and when we note the stop of the Wise Men at The Manger.

Our Bible text about Jesus today comes just a bit after his birth, when his parents took the child to the Temple in Jerusalem. This is found in Luke’s gospel, chapter 2, starting at verse 22. Please open your Bibles to Luke 2. What happens here seems “cut from the same cloth” as many of the incidents surrounding the baby’s birth. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. [*Luke 2:22-40*]

What stands out to you in this text? There is a lot here. For example, we learn that Joseph and Mary were pretty orthodox parents. They want to follow the Old Testament Law which God gave Moses, telling how His Chosen People are to live. So eight days after his birth, on the day of the ceremony when a boy child is supposed to be circumcised, the parents sponsor that ceremony with a rabbi, and that’s when he gets the name Jesus officially, in front of everyone. The circumcision, or “bris” as it is called by your Jewish friends today, is the first of three observances of the Law here. The text on circumcision on the eighth day is Genesis 17:12, and is repeated in other places.

The second observance of the Mosaic Law here is Luke’s mention of the ritual of purification that all women had to perform any time there was a flow of blood, for a release of blood made any Israelite ritually unclean and unable to enter the Temple. For men, blood might come from a wound. For women, blood was produced during most monthly periods, but there was a lot of blood when a baby was born. This purification required a ceremonial bathing described in Leviticus 12, and because our Mary gave birth to a boy, there was a thirty-three day waiting period before she could do her ritual bath and soon thereafter bring an offering to the priest as a testimony to her return to the people of God. This cleansing ritual was the second example of Jesus’ parents’ piety.

The third faithful obedience to God’s Law was the application of Exodus 13, where it is recorded how God killed the firstborn children of the Egyptians, the final attack on Pharaoh that caused him to let the Hebrew slaves leave. Forever after, when the Israelites dedicated their firstborn children to the Lord, they were keeping alive the memory of this most important event in Jewish history.

For this third faithful observance of the Law, the family chose to make the trip to the Temple in Jerusalem so that Jesus can be dedicated to God's service. Part of this first-child dedication was a "redeeming" of their child. Let me explain.

When God was preparing to play his trump card against Pharaoh to redeem the slaves from Egyptian captivity, he told Moses what to do so that God's angel would "pass over" the homes of the Hebrews, and thus spare their children. Each household was to slaughter a lamb and apply blood from the lamb onto the door frame of every Hebrew house. The idea was, God's death angel would see the blood, know the sacrifice had been paid for with blood, and move on.

Forever after, for a firstborn Jewish child to have a place with God's Redeemed People, a price in blood would have to be paid for that child, too. The Law of Moses specified a lamb, like the lambs killed back in Egypt at the Exodus. However, if a family was too poor to provide a lamb, they could bring as little as two doves or pigeons, which would be sacrificed instead. The price in blood would be paid, and this child could join with God's Redeemed People.

Of course, we who know the rest of the story, we know more than Mary and Joseph knew then about what kind of dedicated service to God this child would give. "There will be blood"! The Lamb of God was to be sacrificed, that WE might be redeemed from our slavery to sin.

With all this detail here, Luke demonstrates the faithful piety of this family. Mary and Joseph really want to please God, perhaps especially because of all the extraordinary events that happened around their baby's birth, as we've read in recent weeks. And this text concludes by saying, "The child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him." To me, that says that his parents were raising him to be an observant child. They want him to love God, too.

But our account today does not stop with Joseph and Mary. As they are in the Temple area during the dedication of their son, they meet two strange characters whom we might find alarming.

First is Simeon. We know virtually nothing about him other than his vital connection with God. The Holy Spirit is all over this guy—three times in three verses! His role is as a witness and a watchman, awaiting the Anointed One of God who will bring fulfillment of God's will for Israel—her consolation. When Simeon sees these parents bringing this child, the Spirit nudges him—"this is the one"! Suddenly, all this waiting is over. God has been faithful, letting Simeon see the Promised One himself! Simeon takes the child from Mary's arms. His watchman duty is over, and with his words he bears witness, he tells God's perspective on one particular child, as any true prophet would. For many people in cultures with large families, "If you've seen one baby, you've seen them all." Not Simeon. Not here. Not now.

But Simeon has a second word from the Lord, and this is for Mary. He tells Mary what God is telling him. Your child will cause division; some will rise up in God's favor, and others will fall out of God's favor. This baby will grow up to be rejected—spoken against. And those who speak against him will be revealing more about themselves than telling the truth about him. And finally, you will share in the pain over his pain. And then, Simeon simply leaves.

Mary and Joseph are stunned. People mill around them and here comes an old woman named Anna, who—like Simeon—gives a prophecy about what God is going to do through this child. And she tugs on the cloak of several others in the courtyard, telling each one the wonder surrounding this child in God’s plan for Israel. Then Mary and Joseph turn, and Anna has left, also. They look at each other and at little Jesus. Having completed his dedication, and having encountered these two wise witnesses to God’s plan, they don’t know what else to do, so they start for home. After this trip, they need a rest, to think things over!

Isn’t it striking to you what some people see in an event or in a person, things that others miss? Have you ever had anyone, perhaps a teacher, say to you, “You know, you could be a good artist”—or chef, or bricklayer, or leader? They saw something in you when you were young that made them take notice of you. That feels pretty good. But how does anyone see such astounding things in a little baby that is not even old enough to have done anything that reveals his potential? Well, such truth has to come from people who have learned to—and tenaciously wanted to—listen to God.

Now let’s shift forward to Jesus’ most fruitful messenger, Paul the Apostle. Find his letter to the Galatians, about in the middle of the New Testament, and get to chapter 4. Paul had started some house churches in this region—Galatia is a *province*, not a town, you know—and after he had moved on to other locations he had received word that all was not well back in this province of Asia. Other preachers had followed him into that territory, and they persuaded many that they had to become Jews first—circumcision, dietary laws, the works—before they could become Christians. You can imagine, can’t you, how their argument might have laid out? Perhaps they said, “Jesus was a Jew; the Jews are God’s chosen people; all the original Apostles were Jews; so to be a follower of Jesus the Jewish Messiah you have to be a Jew, also. Then you’ll be able to understand all that Jesus was about.” This unsettled these Christ-followers in Galatia because Paul had never mentioned any such thing—even though Paul, himself, was a Jew. They wondered, were they “saved”—or *not*??

So Paul wrote his letter to put the whole Jewish thing—centered on the Law of Moses—into perspective. I won’t repeat his whole argument here, but listen with me as I read these verses from chapter 4, as Paul addresses how Gentiles can be saved without having to become Jews. Listen for God’s voice in this text.

[Galatians 4:4-7]

All who are in Christ are children of God—John the Gospel Writer said the same thing in his opening chapter. And if we’re children of God, we are inheritors of what God has promised. God said so, and gave us the Holy Spirit as an inner witness to this fact. That takes care of the claim that one has to become a Jew first. If you are a Christ-follower, your salvation is secured—by Jesus, for you. Jesus paid it all. The transaction is complete.

Paul has another theme in here, though, and it’s the Person of The Holy Spirit. In addition to the fact of our new covenant with God in Jesus Christ, we have a living, personal friendship with God in Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit is the “go-between” who connects God and us together in an ongoing way. It’s kinda like epoxy glue. The work of Jesus on the Cross, once for all (for Jews and Gentiles) is Part A of the epoxy mix. The ongoing relationship with God is Part B of the mix. And if you’ve used epoxy glue or paint, you know you have to have both Part A and Part B for the mix to perform its solid bonding function. If you only have one

part, you have a gooey mess that never gets hard, or is so brittle that it breaks easily. Task AND relationship, the one-time work of Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, is what it takes to keep us connected to God. It's a warm, child-to-loving parent relationship of intimacy, fondness, and obedience and trust. Jesus lived that 24/7, and he knew God so well that he called God, "Daddy". (That's what "Abba" means.)

It's in the relationship Part B in which we live as a child of our Heavenly Daddy that we can talk with God and listen to God. If we are heirs, if we are God's children, then we have the capacity to hear from God and experience God's listening presence when we talk.

We have lived so much in the world, however, that most of us have lost that ability; it's been drowned out by the noise of our culture and by competing causes and relationships. Our self-centered nature hasn't wanted to listen to God, anyway—or would listen just enough to take God's gift and run back to running our own lives so we stay in control— 'cause we don't really trust God.

When we leave self and come to Jesus, something astoundingly new happens. We are "born again", or "born from above". But like a helpless infant born into the world, we can't do anything. Like a newborn baby, we can't wipe our bottoms, control our emotions and functions—and we certainly cannot feed ourselves. We would die in a few days if others did not step in to meet our every need. It's the same when we are born into God's Kingdom. We don't know anything. Everything looks new because we are new. We need lots of guidance, and must stick close to our Heavenly Father--to learn His voice, and to learn how we can turn to him constantly. It takes time to learn these things. We have to be as gentle with ourselves as God is gentle with us.

You see, when you become a Christian, when you leave self behind and "put on Christ", as Paul wrote in Galatians 3 and elsewhere, it is the first day of the rest of your life. And it is a new life with God. Grow in it. Walk in it. Grow in Him. Walk with Him. Hear Him. Know Him. Love Him. Serve Him.

When God shows up, when you start hearing His voice in Scripture, in imagination, in daily encounters, in memory, in emotions and all the other channels God uses, your relationship with Him grows. You discover more and more ways to connect with God. I think it was Brother Lawrence who loved to be assigned to the pot-scrubbing detail in his monastery. For while he was mindlessly washing pots, he found that took so little mental energy that he could talk and listen to God at the same time he had his hands in the hot, soapy water. The kitchen sink became his shrine, his window to the Divine.

In the middle of this Friday-Saturday night, God spoke to me in a dream. And I think this is for you as well as for me. I want to demonstrate how you can talk with God in the most ordinary of circumstances, and begin to see more in ordinary things that ordinary people don't see.

This is what Sharon and I call, "the slop bucket". We store it under our kitchen sink. We collect and drop in fruit and vegetable peels, coffee filters (but leave out meat and eggs)--and all of it becomes our base for making compost. Those of you who are gardeners know that compost is immensely helpful in the garden; it's often called "Gardener's Gold".

So now I'm going to talk with God over this compost pail, just to stimulate your own imaginations about talking with God over the common things of life, and seeing how those can become gateways to God.

*In prayer, I might say something like, "Lord, I am like the garbage in the slop bucket. I have this organic body, which will decay. But by Your grace, You have given me intelligence and a love for You, and I want to make every day count before I come to more closely resemble this worm food, which becomes "gardener's gold". And You said in Your word, You take "the foolish in the world to shame the wise", and "the first shall be last and the last shall be first"—as well as, "From dust you were made and to dust you will return." . . .*

If you are "in Christ", you are a child of God, an inheritor of God's promises, one who has access to your Heavenly Father who loves to spend time and converse with You. Many of you have not believed this; God is a belief in your head, not yet an experience in your spirit, led by God's Spirit. But maybe you're ready to change your mind, and open yourself to God in a radical and deep way. Look for Him. Let everything speak to you of Him. Talk and listen, know Him, love Him, live in Him and for Him and with Him.

To God be the glory!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on December 28, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]