

Today we're going to start with a pop quiz! No!! Pastor, you can't give us a quiz on the day after Christmas. We're not ready. Our bellies are still aching from the sugar, and we're tired from opening presents. Okay, but this quiz should be pretty easy because it's material we hear about every single year. It's the Christmas story, not the movie about Ralphie, the real Christmas story about Jesus.

So let me set the scene for the million-dollar question. Here is the sequence you know well from Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken." So Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem to register. While they were there the time came for the baby to be born. She gives birth to Jesus out in the stable, wraps him in swaddling clothes, places him in a manger. A great company of the heavenly hosts appears to the shepherds announcing the Savior. The shepherds hurry to Bethlehem and find the baby Jesus just as they had been told. The shepherds returned glorifying God.

Here's the test! What happens next? The most important and famous story in the world...what happens next? Did your mind go blank suddenly? The Bible doesn't just end after the shepherds. Ahh, Jesus is grown-up, maybe?? No, there's important stuff that happens before then. Oh wait I remember, the star appears over the stable like in my nativity scene and the Wisemen come bearing gifts. Actually, no! But a very common misconception created by Nativity sets with too many figurines.

Here's the timeline. We heard it in our Gospel lesson. The shepherds leave. Then **"On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived."** (Luke 2:21). Mary and Joseph did for Jesus what was required of every single Israelite male since the time of Abraham's Son Isaac.

God had said to Abraham, **"This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised... Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."** (Genesis 17:10,11,14).

Right from the start, it was critical that Jesus undergo all the stipulations of the covenant in order to be our pleasing substitute. It was a nonnegotiable part of the plan that he needed to do what God required us to do. The Apostle Paul tells us in Galatians 4, **"When the set time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law..."** So right from the beginning Jesus is made obedient to the law because he needed to redeem us and our lives right from the beginning. It's already here that Jesus sheds the first drop of blood as the substitutionary sacrifice for our sins.

And this is just the beginning. Mary and Joseph continue to follow the statutes that are written in the Old Testament covenant. **"When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, 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")."** Luke 2:22,23.

The reason for this stipulation goes all the way back to the time when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. On the evening of the 10th plague, God gave special instructions to his people to celebrate what became known as the "Passover." Each family would sacrifice an unblemished lamb and use its blood to paint on the doorpost of their house so that the Lord would see it and pass over, sparing the firstborn son in the house. But for all of the Egyptian houses, God did not

pass over, but took the life of every firstborn child and animal in the house as the final plague and the last straw to break Pharaoh's back.

So God was really claiming the firstborn male of all the people, both Israelite and Egyptian, but he allowed his people to use a substitute instead. The lamb was given as a substitute, a voucher to redeem the life of the firstborn son. As a reminder of God's deliverance in the Passover, God made this stipulation for the days to come. **“Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal. (Exodus 13:2).** In order to receive the firstborn back from God, the people would have to redeem the firstborn with a substitute sacrifice. **“Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.”**

Now it was at this point as I was preparing this sermon when I had a Eureka moment. This is what I realized. I don't think I have ever really thought of redemption in its Old Testament Biblical context. I've always pictured all of us lined up as slaves to the devil, held in chains, and then Christ makes a payment to buy us back from the devil and set us free. Don't get me wrong. That concept of redemption—Christ setting us free from slavery to sin and the devil is a perfectly good Biblical picture.

But in this Old Testament context of redemption, the payment isn't being made to the devil. The lambs were the payment being made to God. God is the one whose holy justice demands that our lives be forfeited to him. God is the one who lines up as the destroying angel demanding the life of every sinner. God is the one who demands that blood must be shed. And in the first Passover, God was teaching his people what that substitute must be like; only the blood of an unblemished lamb will do. The blood of an unblemished lamb painted on the doorpost suffices as the payment to redeem a life from God.

That's exactly why Jesus needed to be—perfect, unblemished in every way, circumcised on the 8th day, consecrated to God as the firstborn. And for this reason, the gospel writer Luke mentions that Mary and Joseph did for him everything required by the law so that there would be no question. Jesus was perfect according to the law from the start.

Now to us, all this Old Testament covenant stuff may seem like a second language, so the meaning is often lost on us. But don't miss the significance of what is unfolding before our eyes in this verse, **“Mary and Joseph took [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.** They are presenting to God his only begotten Son, the child who would consecrate his life in service to God in the fullest sense. This child would be both priest and lamb, the firstborn who would shed his blood as the unblemished lamb to redeem all people.

If you're ever tempted *to think of sin but lightly* or think your evil isn't that great, then ponder for a moment what it took to fix it. It took God putting his One and Only to death to redeem us from the death we brought about ourselves. The joy of the manger is never far removed from the reality of the cross. This holy child's set purpose from the start of his life was to give his life as a ransom for many. And long before that, the Bible tells us the “Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world.” (Revelation 13:8). “What child is this?” we've been asking. The hymn tells us, “Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.” (What Child is this? CW 21, 344). He is our Substitute and Sacrifice, the world's ***Redeemer right from the start of his life.***

So Mary and Joseph went into the temple to present the Redeemer to the Lord and also to do what was necessary for Mary's ceremonial purification after childbirth. They needed **“to**

offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord;” a pair of (turtle) doves or two young pigeons.” (Luke 2:24). The doves were actually the budget option for those who couldn't afford a lamb to sacrifice for the purification.

Waiting there was a man who had been waiting a lot longer for the consolation of Israel. His name was Simeon, and he knew exactly who this child was. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would get to see the Lord's Messiah and when he laid eyes on his Redeemer, he began to sing the song we now sing after we've seen our Lord face to face in his Holy Supper.

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations; a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32) It's called the Song of Simeon or in Latin the *Nunc Dimittis* (which means “now you let depart”). Now I can go, Lord, because I've seen the child who brings salvation.

There was another woman there who was waiting as well for what the Lord promised. Her name was Anna and she knew who Jesus was too, her Redeemer. **“She gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”** (2:38)

Don't forget what happens in the first days of our Redeemer's life. They are just as important as any other day of perfect obedience to his Father's will. Since the Scriptures clearly testify that this child was our unblemished Redeemer right from start, we can be confident that our blemished lives are redeemed right from the start. His life under the law was just as important of an accomplishment to our redemption as his innocent death on the cross, because we needed both a Substitute and a Sacrifice. That's the child the angels sang about, and the shepherds found in the manger. That's the child Simeon and Anna were waiting for and sang for joy when they beheld his tiny face—the perfect lamb, the Son of God, **our Redeemer from the start. That makes us redeemed right from the start.** Amen.