

As a pastor, Christmas Eve is both the easiest sermon of the year to write... and the hardest. It's easy because the Gospel is so obvious. *"For unto you is born this day... a Savior who is Christ the Lord."* I mean, if you can't work with that, you really don't belong in the pulpit at all.

At the same time, though, it is fairly difficult in it's own way. Because it's a story that everybody knows. Even many non-Christians know the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph, the angels and the shepherds, the manger and the star. I wouldn't be surprised if half the people in this room could recite large chunks of Luke 2 from memory.

You may not even realize how much of it you have memorized. Not because you sat down and intentionally memorized it, but because you've just heard it so many times, it has become engrained in your memory. We know the Christmas story.

What we may not know quite as well is the post-Christmas story. The events that occurred after that first silent night and into the months that followed.

Because, you see, Mary and Joseph did not live in a borrowed stable forever. Nor did they just pack up and head back to Nazareth the next morning. They had traveled for several days to get to Bethlehem. They now had a newborn to care for. And so, from the looks of it, they eventually found a place to live in Bethlehem and made themselves at home for a while.

It would have been ideal to do so. Bethlehem is located just a few miles from Jerusalem. And there are things that need to occur at the Temple after a baby boy is born. He needs to be circumcised. His mother needs to go through purification rites following childbirth. These things are pretty normal.

But Jesus needs to go through one more ceremony. The consecration ceremony. He is Mary's firstborn son. And as we read in our Old Testament lesson, God requires something very special of firstborn sons.

They must be redeemed. They must be bought back. God claims ownership of them. He claims the right, in fact, to strike them dead, if he desires. Just as he did those firstborn sons in Egypt. And only by bringing them to the Temple and offering them to the Lord will he then give them back to their parents.

If you think that sounds a little bizarre, you're not alone. Moses writes, *"And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him..."* In other words, Moses is telling them, "When your son finds out what you had to do when he was born, he's going to come to you and ask you, 'What in the world was that all about?'"

It is a bit bizarre. Moses knows it's a bit bizarre. God knows it's a bit bizarre. But he has an explanation for it: It's a teaching tool. It's an opportunity to teach their sons about the exodus. To tell them about the plagues of Egypt and the escape from Pharaoh. To tell them about the love of God for His people and the lengths that he will go to in order to rescue his people from captivity.

And through teaching their sons, it also becomes a reminder to the parents as well. Because the supreme oddity of the idea of redeeming your own child from God's wrath really stems from it's... creepiness. It's a little unnerving to think about. And it's supposed to be.

We don't like thinking about God as someone who would simply strike our child dead because we neglected to take him to the temple for a ceremony. Not only does it run against the grain of what we want to think about God. About the kind, gentle personality that we so often give him. But it also makes him rather frightening.

I talked about this on Christmas Eve. When you are faced with the glory of an almighty, holy God, the natural reaction is fear. Fear of God's Law. Fear of God's wrath. Fear of God's judgment on sinners. It's frightening to see God in that way. And when he actually acts – when he actually carries out that holy wrath and judgement – it's overwhelming.

Which is exactly what God's enemies always feel. To Pharaoh, God was not a loving, compassionate Father taking care of his children. To Pharaoh, God was frightening. To the Egyptians, God was terrifying.

Day after day, plagues rained down upon them. And they were utterly helpless to stop it. And when the last plague came, it was horrible. Thousands of men and boys... dead. Overnight. All because of... what? They didn't perform a simple ceremony. They didn't spread blood on their doorframe. They didn't consecrate their house to the Lord. They didn't believe in the Lord's power or redemption. And so God struck them dead.

The consecration of the firstborn was a reminder of that, to everyone, young and old. It was a reminder not to take God for granted. Not to take his Word lightly. Not to take his threats lightly. Just because the almighty God has chosen you to be his people, that doesn't mean he stops being the almighty God.

That was an important reminder to the Israelites. It's an important reminder for us today. It's really, really easy to take God for granted. It's easy to forget that he's still the almighty God. Because, frankly, we don't see him in that way.

We don't see prophets like Moses who say, "Tomorrow, God is going to rain down plagues upon your nation." And then tomorrow, plagues rain down upon the nation. It doesn't happen on a regular basis. It really never did. It was a special event in the history of Israel. That's why they needed God's Word to remind them.

The same is true for us. In our society and our churches and our lives, God is, at best, distant and invisible. And, at worst, irrelevant and nonexistent. His Word is full of reminders that we don't remember and lessons that we don't take seriously. And in the end, we've got a very kind, gentle God, whose existence is largely theoretical in nature. Nothing more.

The funny thing is that the Jews of Jesus' day felt roughly the same way. God hadn't spoken to them through a prophet in roughly 500 years. There hadn't been anything approaching a miracle since the Feast of Dedication (what we now call Hanukkah). The temple in Jerusalem was quickly becoming a facade of worship. And the man sitting on David's throne wasn't even a Jew, let alone a descendant of David.

Yet, little did they know that God himself was among them. That he had come down in flesh and blood. And had entered into his own temple that very day. Surrounded by sin and corruption and a people who took him for granted. All so that he could redeem them. All so that he could redeem us.

The first born of Mary and the first born of God became the first born of all mankind. The baby brought into the temple to be consecrated to the Lord was himself there to consecrate us to the Lord. The one who needed to be redeemed according to the Law had come to redeem us from the Law.

And the reminder that God almighty should never be ignored was himself there in order to be ignored. To be ignored and rejected and punished and killed. By a people who had forgotten the almighty God. The same almighty God who had chosen them to be his people.

40 days after that Christmas morning, God himself appeared in flesh and blood to his people. And from that day forward, he never stopped coming to his people. Not through 30 years of growing in grace and wisdom. Not through three years of ministry to his disciples. Not through his crucifixion and resurrection. And not through 2000 years of His church on earth.

He still comes in flesh and blood. He still enters into his temple. He still consecrates us to the Lord. He still redeems us from our sin. He still sacrifices everything for us. And he still reminds us that we worship a God who should never be taken for granted. A God whose Word is perfect. Not only for its threats. But also for its promises. A God who reminds us daily that he has the power to kill and destroy. But he also has the power to resurrect and save.

A God who doesn't change. And yet, changed everything. Because he changed us. He made us more than his chosen people. He made us his beloved children. So that one day, like Simeon, he could dismiss us in peace. Bring us into his Temple. And show us his promised salvation. Amen.