

December 27, 2015  
Exodus 13:1-3a; 11-15

Christmas 1C  
A Lamb to Take Your Place

*Grace, mercy and peace be yours from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Bethlehem King. Amen.*

The Sunday after Christmas and before New Year's is a strange time. Even various pastors struggle with this very sermon. You see we are trying to hang on to the high of Christmas, but realizing in a week or so the decorations and music will be gone. It's a Sunday when churches across the country are quite empty, even though we still sing the Christmas favorites. Perhaps they've been to church a time or two during the past week and are overspent and tired. Perhaps they've spent quite a bit of time cooking, baking, celebrating, entertaining that they are tired and worn out and just need some sleep. Maybe you are suffering from the Post-Christmas Blues. Or maybe you are like quite a bit of the world who is trying to hang on to some last bit of holiday cheer and some extra vacation time. Maybe you just want to hold on to some sense of joy and light this year, before we enter into the dark, cold months of January and February. Maybe you are just needing some rest after this busy time.

This Sunday after Christmas and before New Year's is a strange and unique time because most if not all of the presents are unwrapped and perhaps the excitement of those gifts have waned. Perhaps some of them are either broken or torn by now. This seems to be the focus of Christmas far too often...the gift exchange and the materialization of Christmas. We all fall into it. No matter the reason for you that this time of year is strange I want to tell you that...(pause)

The church is very busy considering just exactly what the birth of this Christ Child is all about. For all the pretty lights and music we might be sick of seeing and hearing, since it's been playing all of Advent, the birth of Jesus isn't about some ideal "peace on earth" that people like to pretend can happen. No, this Baby, this Christ Child, came to die. He came to do the job of the lamb that was given in exchange for the life of the firstborn child. Poor lamb! A family has a son and a lamb has to die. IT would be bad to be the firstborn lamb or the lamb that's chosen to replace the child who first opens the womb! But the redemption of the firstborn that the Lord commanded in our Old Testament lesson of Exodus 13 is precisely a picture of just what Jesus came to do.

The fact is Jesus was born because God the Father chose him to take your place. Already in the Old Testament, God wanted his people Israel to know that—and he wants us today to remember it.

Israel was sitting right where we are this morning. They had celebrated the high point of the year; of their whole lives actually. God had just brought them up out slavery in Egypt by killing the firstborn of the Egyptians and sparing their sons by the blood of the Passover Lamb on the doorposts and the lintel. Coming up for Israel would be another grand celebration, passing through the Red Sea, their final escape from Pharaoh's army, just like we're looking forward to New Year's Eve and Day, perhaps even the

Rose Parade and the bowl games. Yet at this busy but yet odd intersection, God stops to teach his people a lesson they were never to forget. Each time you have a firstborn, bring a lamb and kill it. That'll save the child. Such a wonderful Christmas message!

Perhaps you were one of many who read up and watched up the Hunger Games books and movies. I still have yet to see the final act in movie form. I'm guessing by now it's out of the theatres. One of the main characters, Katniss Everdeen was born into a society in which every year children from each district are forced to fight in competition to the death. When her younger sister is chosen, rather than let her go to face certain death, Katniss volunteers to take her place, fully convinced that now she herself will die. Likewise, the lives of Israel's firstborn children would have been forfeited if God had not delivered them through the blood of a lamb, given in their place. The lamb points to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes the place not only of the firstborn but of every sinner, so that they are rescued from sin and death.

It was the death of the firstborn that finally pushed Pharaoh into letting the children of Israel depart from Egypt. When the angel of death passed through Egypt, it was clear that the Lord and God of Israel could take the life of the firstborn. Pharaoh couldn't do that!!

We are to remember the death of God's firstborn, which sets us free from slavery to sin. That's what redemption is, you know. It's a price paid to get something back. On the night of the Passover, all the firstborn die, unless they're redeemed. Lamb slaughtered. Blood on the door, that sort of things. But now, not just the firstborn, but all sinners face the prospect of death. So here comes the firstborn of God himself, born to be the Lamb of God. To take your place. Slaughtered in the temple of the cross so you won't be. Killed so you are set free. Don't let the cozy manger scene fool you. The baby, This Jesus, is the firstborn of Mary so that he will redeem all people from their sins.

There's a great irony when Joseph and Mary present Jesus in the temple and make an offering because he's their firstborn son. He was the one that first opened Mary's womb. This reminds us that Jesus fulfills all of the Law for us. But in a great reversal, HE will be offered up on the cross to redeem Mary and Joseph—and you and me...and the whole world. He will shed his blood to buy us back. This little baby, who seems to escape death because His parents had a couple of pigeon necks twisted instead, ends up being broken in His body on the tree. But just as the death of the firstborn signaled the beginning of salvation for Israel, so Jesus' resurrection is His passing through death and bringing you with him.

Of course, not everyone was there when Israel left Egypt. Generations of children who hadn't witnessed it firsthand grow up. So whenever the firstborn was redeemed or sacrificed, the children were taught to ask the Lutheran Question: "What does this mean?" And the father's answered, "Well, a long time ago, God rescued us from Egypt when the firstborn were killed. The lambs protected us by giving their life so our firstborn didn't die."

And so it is with the gifts that we not only receive on Christmas, but every time we come into the Lord's House, by which our Lord delivers his salvation to us and reminds us of his saving works.

"What does it mean that I had water poured on me and the pastor said words?"

"It means that Jesus took your place and died for sinners like you and rose again, and now his death and resurrection are yours, and your sins are forgiven...and you are a member of the family of God."

"What does it mean when pastor tells me my sins are forgiven?"

"It means that because Jesus died for you, all that you've done is forgiven, and you are God's Child...not just God's Child, but God's redeemed child."

"What does it mean that we eat and drink Jesus' body and blood, in, with, and under the bread and wine?"

"It's the Passover meal. When the Israelites ate it, it reminded them that the lambs were killed to save their firstborn. When we eat, we are eating and drinking the body and blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We are reminded that Jesus took our place and saved us. To top all of that...it's a meal for the forgiveness of our sins and we have God's promise that we will live forever."

The redeeming of the firstborn in Israel was a reminder of what God had done and a promise of what he would later do in Christ. In the same way, the water, the Word, and the body and blood of Christ are Christ's promises to you that he has indeed taken your place and redeemed you. You are a part of his people. He stepped down onto Earth for you and your salvation.

Just two days ago, on Christmas, we celebrated the birth of Mary's firstborn Son. But He is also the only-begotten Son of God. And he came into this world for a purpose: to redeem, buy back, ransom, to take the place of and save not just the firstborn kids, but everyone. To save you!

It's easy to get caught up in the world's celebration of Christmas with its music, lights, presents, and holiday cheer. So we are reminded that this Child was born for a much greater reason than to give us an excuse to exchange gifts and to party! He came into this world to be the Lamb who is given in our place. He came into this world to be the greatest gift ever given.

Christ is born for you. Christ is born to be LAMB to redeem you and Rescue you from and sin and death.

And that means new birth and everlasting life for us. In the name of the Firstborn, the One born for us on Christmas, Jesus, the Lamb of God. Amen.

*Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior, our Newborn King, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.*