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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

First Sunday after Christmas (One-Year Series)

December 31, 2017

Text: Luke 2:22–40

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus...a Merry Christmas to you all!!

The divine message that God became a man and a man became God has received our attention this past Christmas weekend. What joy and hope this Gospel brings to our Christian ears. For God took upon Himself our human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary through the conception of the Holy Spirit for the singular purpose of saving us from the wicked powers of sin, Satan, and the grave. Our blessed Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God the Father almighty and the Son of Virgin Mary; God and man united together for all eternity.

That glorious message continues in today's reading from Luke 2:22–40 but with a new wrinkle added since from last weekend. The new wrinkle is that the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ, began His work of redemption within the context of a family. The family, that common, so ordinary, so taken for granted divine institution, is the setting in which Jesus “grew and became strong, (and was) filled with wisdom.” In that Nazarene family, “the favor of God was upon the Lord Jesus” (vs. 40).

It's easy to overlook this fact. As true God and true Man, the Lord Jesus grew up and was prepared for His future ministry of saving the world within the confines of a pious, godly family. God the Father used Joseph and Mary to prepare Jesus for His noble vocation: to be the Savior of the world.

Look, in today's gospel text, at what Joseph and Mary are doing when Jesus is but 40 days old. According to vs. 22, Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus, go to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer up the required offerings for “their purification according to the Law of Moses.” The OT Law required that sacrifices be offered in thanksgiving to God for the birth of a new born child. Mary, His mother, was required by God's Law in Leviticus 12 to offer sacrifices for her purification, specifically a sin offering. That's about as unromantic a view of child birth you will ever find! Have children, which the Bible in other places calls a heritage and reward of the Lord (Ps. 127:3);

and then offer up sin offerings, 40 days later for a boy or 80 days later for a girl. The Bible consistently says that children are a blessing of God to be received with thanksgiving.

Jesus is Mary's firstborn. The Law says the firstborn males belong to Him for "every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord". They must be redeemed by the sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons (vs. 23–24). This harkens back to the original Passover in Egypt when the firstborn sons were saved from the last plague of death by the shed blood of the Passover lamb. In remembrance of God's salvation, turtledoves or pigeons must be sacrificed in thanksgiving to God.

Everything else that is described in today's gospel text, from vs. 25–38, the meeting with Simeon and Anna, the prophetess, all takes place because Joseph and Mary were doing the things that pious families were supposed to do when children were born. Luke summarizes this beautiful picture of the family with these words, "And when they (i.e., Joseph, Mary, and Jesus) had performed everything according to the Law of Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him" (vs. 39–40). That's the summary of Jesus' life in Nazareth for the next 30 years or so. Let that settle in for just a few brief moments.

The Lord didn't prepare for His ministry by living in Jerusalem's Temple under the tutelage of the priests and scribes, like Samuel in the OT. Jesus wasn't sent off to prophetic boarding school and become one of the "sons of the prophets", again, like in the OT. Nor was He sent off to this or that prominent Pharisaic teacher. None of that took place with Jesus. His formative years were spent with His family; His messianic training school was a pious, godly home in Nazareth of Galilee.

Be encouraged this day, dear saints. The blessings and promises of God reside upon you, your families, and all your loved ones. Marriage is good, a gift of God. According to God's design and intention, families grow from the union of husbands and wives. Children are born, loved, and nurtured. These things are to be cherished and strengthened among us. And know this, God's love and favor rests upon you and your loved.

(As an aside, Star Wars has received and continues to receive a good deal of attention. It has always struck me as odd that the potential Jedi Knights are taken away from

their families, sometimes at very young ages, to learn the ways of the Force. And it always goes bad! What a strange view of the family the Star Wars universe is presenting to our culture.)

We have very little Biblical information on Jesus' upbringing except that it was ordinary. When Jesus begins His public ministry, the people of Nazareth, His hometown, consistently called Him the carpenter's Son and named His other family members: Mary, His mother, and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). In both of those passages, the gospel writers state that the citizens of Nazareth took offense at Jesus precisely because of His ordinary life among them.

Don't let our Christmas traditions get in the way of seeing the wonder of God sending the Savior into this world by means of the family. Don't let the mangers with animals, angels, shepherds, Caesar Augustus and his worldwide taxation, Wise Men following a miraculous star, and so forth distract us from these truths:

- about Jesus being born into a family with a mother and step-father and other extended family,
- about a newlywed husband and wife circumcising and naming their 8-day old Son in obedience to angelic visits and the inscripturated Word,
- about those same parents offering the sacrifices required of all faithful and godly parents; it doesn't seem to have occurred to Joseph and Mary to excuse themselves from such requirements because their firstborn happens to be the Son of God,
- about Jesus being protected by loving parents when Herod sought to kill Him,
- about Jesus being taken to Jerusalem every year by His earthly parents to celebrate the Passover (Luke 2:41–52),
- about Mary being a faithful mother who ponders all these things in her heart as only a mother can,
- about a stepfather who almost certainly taught Jesus the manly trade of carpentry,
- about Jesus being nurtured by parents who taught Him/required Him to learn and memorize God's Word so that during His earthly ministry Jesus quotes the OT from memory, even when He is dying on the cross.

These are the kinds of things the nativity narratives from God's Word are telling us. The apostle Paul, in today's epistle, describes our Lord's work in unmistakably family language (Gal. 4:4–7):

<sup>4</sup>But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup>to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. <sup>6</sup>And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Because Jesus was born into this world with a human mother and stepfather, He was able to redeem us. Through Jesus, we are adopted into God the Father’s family! We are not slaves but sons and heirs of Christ’s riches in glory. God the Son, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person of the Most Holy Trinity, didn’t just appear one day in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel as a mature adult. He chose to share in every stage of our human existence, from conception to death. And by so doing, He has redeemed our entire life from conception to death. This miracle of the incarnation by itself compels us Christians to be opposed to abortion, euthanasia, or any other means of artificially or prematurely taking away human life. Even discussions of capital punishment, which the Bible gives qualified support, must consider our Lord’s incarnation. That Jesus was born into a family, also compels us Christians to support every institution, law, and cultural practice that upholds the sanctity and priority of the family.

I have made it no secret over this past year that I think our congregational ministry must focus on providing Gospel, Word and Sacrament, ministry to the entire family, not just youth or young adults, or any other arbitrary marker. Our Gospel ministry must be from cradle to grave offered in the context of households, families. The family is not the means of salvation. It’s the context in which the means of grace, God’s Word, Sacraments, prayer, forgiveness and reconciliation, all piety and godly living, take place. Husbands and wives, love and honor each other. Children, respect and honor your parents. Pray for one another; bear each other’s burdens; share the love of God given to you with everyone in your family. Remember, the family was the context that nurtured the Lord Jesus; the family has God’s institution and His blessings.

I want to bring this message to a conclusion with a warning and an appeal. First, the warning. Beloved in the Lord, the family is under constant assault from Satan and his fallen angels. The spiritual war is intense and it’s really bad out there. If you don’t believe me, come by my office and I will give you journal article after journal article, book after book, website after website documenting the attacks being waged against the family. These sources include many disciplines: theology, sociology including

culture and entertainment, psychology, politics, law, history, the humanities, even the hard sciences. The family was established by God in the Garden of Eden: a husband and a wife with the promise of children. The first promise of the Gospel was preached to the first family on the day of their original sin. Even those called by God to lead a celibate single life fulfill that godly vocation in the context of the Church, the family of God. Yes, the threats are real.

Please pray for our families. Prayer calendars are available on the back table. Pray fervently and faithfully. I beg for your input and ideas on how our congregation can provide faithful ministry to the families of our congregation and communities. How can we help parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, cousins, and their friends and acquaintances know the life-giving Lord and Savior better, in more meaningful, and personal ways? May God grant us renewed vigor, courage and wisdom for the New Year.

Be encouraged, saints of God, the promises of God are also real and powerful unto the breaking down of spiritual oppression, to the restoration of the downcast, to the present and eternal salvation of all who call upon God as Father through faith in His Son by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The blessings of the Lord be upon you and your families.

A Merry Christmas to you all!!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.