

Why December 25th for Christmas?

Well brothers and sisters, we have just finished off our Breakfast Theater presentation - exploring the story of Esther, and today we begin our series on the Symbols of Christmas.

And that might seem to be quite the jump – going from the Story of Esther all the way to the birth of Jesus at beginning of the New Testament, but it's not...

You may have picked up on that last week as we looked at how the story of Esther sets a precedent for the creation of celebrations by which God's people can remember the significant ways in which He has saved them.

We discovered that Esther and Mordecai gave a royal decree to create the celebration of Purim on the 14th and 15th days of Adar, and so it was added to the list of major celebrations found in Leviticus 23 which the Jews observed to help them remember who they were, and to whom they belonged.

These included the Sabbath, the Passover, the offering of the First fruits, the Festival of Weeks, The Festival of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Tabernacles.

Now – you may be somewhat familiar the Sabbath or Passover, and may have heard of the Day of Atonement – also known as Yom Kippur... but the Festival of Trumpets and Tabernacles... those are a bit more obscure and not as well known.

However, if you wanted to learn more about them - all you would need to do is read Leviticus 23, it contains all the details and explanations for these festivals and gives instructions on how to celebrate and observe them properly.

Now, why am I talking about all these Old Testament festivals as we are starting our Christmas sermon series?

Well friends – as we start our most celebrated season in the Christian tradition – especially as those who would call

themselves bible-believing Christians who hold scriptural in high regard...

I want us to notice that nowhere in the New Testament do we find any instructions to observe and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ in the same way that we do for all these Old Testament celebrations. In fact there is a conspicuous lack of any such celebrations for the early church.

The gospels do not record Jesus instructing his disciples to continue celebrating the Lord's Supper and teach other believers to do the same... nor does He leave any instructions about how to celebrate His resurrection and victory over death and His ascension into heaven.

Now, those who are familiar with scripture will say *"but aren't there instructions on orderly worship and celebrating the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians?"*

Yes there are, but that begs the question as to where did those early Christians get those ideas or instructions for

worship and celebrating the Lord's Supper, because the first of the N.T. letters weren't written until 50 - 70 years after Jesus ascension.

So it appears that the early church developed its worship practices by taking the Jewish festivals which had thus far shaped their identity, and under the Spirit-led guidance of the Apostles - began to modify them and celebrate them, just as Jesus changed the Passover into His Supper, to reflect the work and ministry of Jesus and encourage their continued faith in Him.

And I want you to be aware of how this came about because I think it helps to lessen the shock that we experience when we discover... that for the first 300 years the early church did not celebrate Christmas.

In fact the birth of Jesus was of so little concern to the first Christians that only two of the four gospels say anything about it – instead the early Church was very focused on the death

and resurrection of Jesus and what it meant that He fulfilled the Mosaic Covenant as the Messiah.

You won't find many references to the birth of Christ in the N.T either... in fact there are only three outside the gospels – two in Galatians and one in Revelation.

So, this begs the question – with absolutely no scriptural commands to celebrate the birth of Jesus, no day or month recorded for his birth, and no precedent set by the early church for such a celebration...

How did we come to the point where December 25th is globally recognized as Christmas Day and the Christmas Season has become the most widely celebrated holiday of the Christian faith?

And more importantly can we learn anything significant from these historical developments that will encourage our faith and trust in Jesus Christ and help us to be more intentional

and less sentimental as we celebrate the birth of Christ this season... I believe we can.

So, it starts out with understanding that the early church had no theological reason to focus on and celebrate Jesus' birth.

Theologically their focus was on the basic gospel message that was first proclaimed, and was responsible for their rebirth and the birth of the Church.

As you may remember in Acts 2:23-24, 38-39 Peter says *“and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead...”*

When the people heard this they were convicted and they asked what they should do so Peter says *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

All through-out the book of Acts this is the basic message;
Jesus was put to death on the cross but God raised Him back to life and the forgiveness of your sins is available in His name.

This specific focus is also reflected in Mark's gospel – the first of the four - it mention nothing about Jesus' birth at all. It simply starts with Jesus at His baptism.

So theologically speaking the early church was far more concerned with the immediate implications of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension and... his return.

The Apostle Paul wrote some of his first letters to the Thessalonians Christians to clarify how they should live as they waited for and what they could expect at the return of Christ.

However as the years went by – ten, twenty, thirty... fifty, seventy, one hundred... the early Church realized that while no one knew when Jesus was going to return, it was maybe not as soon as they had first expected it to be, and with this realization their focus began to shift.

And... the composition of the church began to shift as well, before long there were more Gentiles in it than Jews, and more churches outside of the Holy Land than inside it.

So as the initial anticipation of Jesus' return subsided, people started to have questions about how Jesus' death and resurrection specifically accomplished the forgiveness of sins.

There were concerns about how to deal with Christian beliefs that were similar or different from Greek philosophy and values, how one could correctly describe who Jesus was in order to distinguish Him from the Roman gods and heroes of the day.

Concerns and questions which perhaps would have been unimportant if Jesus' return was immanent, but now that it was delayed, began to emerge and grew more and more pressing.

And a group of Gnostic Christian scholars in the ancient city of Alexandria (Egypt) were wrestling with such questions about

Jesus and the Christian faith because prior to their conversion they had been adherents of Plato's philosophy.

Plato had taught that this world was only a poor physical reflection of the true spiritual world and so this understanding had them getting hung up on the fact that it was Christ's physical suffering and death which saved this world.

They couldn't understand why this physical world was worth saving when the spiritual world was so much better, so they concluded that the focus on Christ's physical death and suffering was not what produced salvation – instead they figured that Christ saved human beings by imparting spiritual knowledge to them.

So, they were very focused on when Jesus, as a human being, first manifested His true spiritual power proving He had come from God, and they saw this occurring at His baptism and so they began to celebrate it – and they did so on January 6th

Now the gospel of Luke says that Jesus was about 30 years old when His ministry began at His baptism (Luke 3:23) so because of this reference, these Gnostic Christians determined that Jesus was born on the same day that He was baptized – January 6th.

So, approximately 200 years after His death – we find the first attempts to determine the date of Jesus birth occurring - but pretty much as an afterthought that came from celebrating a theologically incorrect understanding of His baptism.

But it got the ball rolling – more and more Christians became interested figuring out the day on which Christ had been born, and as the early Church scholars worked on the important matters of correcting the heretical teachings about Jesus by groups like the Gnostics, they also made side comments about other possible dates for His birth.

Now as these Early Church scholars developed correct biblical teaching on who Jesus was, a scripture passage from Malachi 4:2 caught their attention. It says *“But for you who revere my*

name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays."

And they also noticed that New Testament writers often spoke about Jesus using the sun as a metaphor or description of Him; e.g. Jesus shone like the sun at His transfiguration, when He died the sun disappeared, the women go to the tomb the next day at sun-rise, in Revelation Jesus appears to John who describes his face as *"like the sun shining in all its brilliance."*

So this began to create a significant symbolic connection in their minds between Jesus Christ and the sun.

And prominent early Church scholars Hippolytus and Tertullian believed that the Spring Equinox on March 25th, the day when the amount of sunlight begins to increase, was thus the date of Christ's death - because it symbolized the recreation of the world that occurred when Christ died and rose to new life, it was God repeating "let there be light!"

As the gospel of John says *"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."* (John 1:4-5)

Now in the same way that the Gnostic scholars had concluded that Jesus would be born on the same day He was baptized, scholars now began to conclude that Jesus would have been born on the same day that He died, and so March 25th began to gain credibility as a date for the Jesus' birth.

And that very well could have been the date for our Christmas celebrations, had it not been for an important theological development put forward by a fellow named Sextus Julius Africanus.

You see the Early Church scholars had been working to correctly describe or explain how Jesus came to us from God – John 3:16 says "He sent his only begotten Son..." but how exactly did that sending take place?

Was Jesus an avatar, just a human being in appearance only?
Or was it the reverse – he started out as a normal human and then at some point later in life he evolved up to become divine?

I know it might sound like silly basic stuff but remember – the scripture was not widely available, teaching travels mostly by word of mouth, only two gospels have any record of the birth of Jesus, so how would early Christians know how Jesus comes from God into our world...

Besides we've lived with the explanation that the early church formed in coming up with the doctrine of the Incarnation for a couple thousand years... and it was this new formulation of speaking about Jesus becoming a human being – right from conception – as Incarnation which is responsible Christmas being celebrated on December 25th.

Because Sextus Julius Africanus argued that the recreation of our world began when Christ was conceived – redemption begins at conception so to speak – and thus what occurred on

March 25th was the announcement to Mary that she would conceive by the Power of the Holy Spirit.

Which you have to admit does have a certain attractive parallel symbolism that repeats the creation story where the Holy Spirit is said to be hovering over the water, and then God begins to speak His Word and bring forth the creation, dry land out of the water and out of that earth – the first man...

So the Holy Spirit hovers over Mary, and the Word then becomes flesh in the waters of her womb, the conception of a New Creation, a new man – who is then birthed into the world nine months later - on December 25th.

So brothers and sisters - that is how we ended up with the 25th of December as the date for the birth of Jesus Christ.

Now before I started researching this topic, I was under the popular impression that our Christmas traditions along with this particular date had developed as part of the Church's

missionary efforts to Christianize the pagan mid-winter festivals in Europe.

But in fact, when the Church in Rome declared December 25th to be Christ's birthday in 336 A.D. they were not trying to Christianize pagan Europeans... they were competing with the Roman Emperor who was promoting the cult of the Unconquered Sun and proclaiming that the winter solstice on Dec 25th was the birthday of the Unconquered Sun.

So – while the evidence suggests that the calculation of December 25th by Early Church scholars was solely for theological reasons...

The establishment of December 25th by the Church, as a date on which to celebrate the birth of Jesus, was motivated by a culture battle between the Roman Emperor and the Roman Church – and since we are here now celebrating Christmas, I think we can take a guess as to who won.

But it has not been a tranquil victory for the Church, establishing an annual celebration of Christ's birth at that time of year when there were pagan Roman celebrations, the feast of Saturn, and pagan European mid-winter celebrations, meant that they would always be wrestling to reform those celebrations into something that would be honorable to one whose birth was being celebrated.

Simply changing the festival and the meaning of the pagan celebrations to a Christian focus did not guarantee that people would leave behind the customs and symbols they had been used to celebrating for so long – even if they no longer believed in them.

Over the next few centuries the celebration of Christmas would be a tug-of-war for the hearts of the people, between the Church's solemn and contemplative Christmas liturgies and worship services and the rowdy carnival-like celebrations left over from the pagan past.

And this tug-of-war did not lessen at the centuries passed, and by 1649 the riotous ways in which Christmas was celebrated by the common-people in England were part of the conditions which helped Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans overthrow King Charles 1st

And then after fifteen years of restrictions on celebrating Christmas in such a manner, the common people revolted against Cromwell's son and the Puritans and put King Charles 2nd back on the throne.

And as the new world was settled in North America, from 1620 on for the next 150 years, under the influence of the Puritans Christmas was essentially banned.

December 25th was to be a regular day, people were to go about their business as normal and anyone caught celebrating Christmas was subject to arrest and fines.

And for many, many years these laws were effective – but the continual influx of immigrants from Europe who celebrated Christmas eventually overwhelmed them.

In 1828 the New York City Council had to meet in a special session to consider how to deal with the gangs of drunken men that were rioting in the street celebrating Christmas – and a special police force was formed for the occasion.

Now I'm sure this all sounds very strange to our ears, especially the whole notion of banning Christmas celebrations, in fact that sounds a whole lot like what a certain Ebenezer Scrooge would say.

Because we are so used to the Christmas season as being a time where we tell the nativity story, visit family and friends, give gifts, and extend a spirit of good-will to everyone, because it's Christmas...

But the truth is friends – that what we know as Christmas has only been this way since the early 1800's – and we have

Queen Victoria's royal Christmas traditions, Charles Dickens' book "A Christmas Carol" and Clement Clark Moore's poem "A Night Before Christmas" to thank for it.

These three factors combined to change Christmas from a rowdy carnival street festival - into a family focused holiday that emphasizes peace on earth and good-will to all men.

So brothers and sisters – that is how we have ended up where we are right now, but what can we learn from the story of how Christmas came to be?

Well, let me suggest that the story of Christmas is very much like our story in the following way; that we may know and understand and believe the whole theological notion of who Jesus is and how he came into this world and that we have forgiveness for our sins in Him...

And yet we are caught in a tug-of-war between what it means to follow Christ in every area of our lives and the way in which we are used to living our lives with ourselves in charge.

Just as the Church tried to reform and redeem the pagan festivals – we try to reform and redeem our work, our sports, our relationships, our traditions and culture, so that it serves God and is focused on Him.

But just as the history of celebrating Christmas illustrates – we know all too well in our own lives that the attempt to serve God in these things turns into an excuse to indulge in them instead – and while we don't stop believing in Jesus or His forgiveness – our lives have fallen back into sinful patterns.

And this tug-of-war leads us either to despair and we attempt to ban ourselves from these things which we can't seem to stop indulging in...

Or, somehow our indulgence and sin disgusts us so much that we decide we're going to clean up our act – and we experience a Christmas miracle from within our self, and we discover the true meaning of life in family and charity and being a good person...

You see that's where the story of Christmas is right now friends; it's not a drunken rowdy street celebration anymore, but... if you look carefully at its transformation in the 1800's it wasn't brought about by the church, the gospel message or any theological understanding of the one whose birthday we are celebrating, it is humanistic at its core – with a Christian veneer over top.

And that is ironic friends – because as the Early Church scholars realized as they studied the scriptures to better understand Jesus: His birth is all about God re-creating the world, redeeming it, reforming it – especially reforming us and our celebrations so they give Him glory.

So brothers and sisters – as we celebrate Christmas this year, may the date, December 25th remind you of how Jesus was born to reform this world, and each one of us.

And may the story of Christmas remind us of the struggle that is involved in being re-formed... and that Christmas should be a time to be honest about that struggle in our own lives

And finally – may the current state of Christmas with its focus on family and friends and charity and good will towards all men - provide us with the opportunity proclaim to any and all who will listen that it is only because the Word became flesh and was born as a man that mankind can receive within themselves the Spirit of Christmas.

So let us celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus then – by celebrating not only the forgiveness he came to provide, but celebrating the redemption and reformation He brings for our lives and our for culture, and especially for Christmas...

Amen.