

“The Eighth Day”

Psalm 148:1-5; Genesis 17:9-14; Luke 2:21-35

January 5, 2020

PRAYER:

Almighty God, by the Holy Spirit fill each of us with a sense of new beginning in Jesus Christ as we worship together on this first Sunday of 2020. Reveal to us through Scripture your will for living in Christ. May our hearts and minds be open to hearing and abiding by your Word. Guide me to proclaim rightly the message you will have us embrace in all aspects of our lives. Amen.

INTRODUCTION:

For many of us it may be difficult to get our heads around the fact we are living in the year Two Thousand and Twenty. For my generation 2020 is the stuff of which Sci-Fi movies used to be made. Some of us may have welcomed the New Year with a party. Others probably spent a quiet evening with family and friends. My wife and I usually celebrate sitting in front of the TV trying to stay awake to watch the countdown in Times Square. This year we enjoyed being up in the Grayson Highlands of Virginia, sitting in front of a wood burning stove, watching the fire and listening to music. This was one of the best New Years we've had in many years.

New Years is the traditional time for some folks who make resolutions on what we are going to leave behind, and change, hoping to do better in our lives. Within a month or so how many of us forget or decide to ignore a few, if not all, of these promises to ourselves? Our ironclad commitment to the gym mysteriously vanishes. Stepping on the scale to gauge pounds lost no longer seems important. Giving up sweets is a dim memory. Despite our possible lack of will power, the New Year is a time when we may look forward to new beginnings. It is a time, so soon after Christmas, when we may resolve to do all in our power to live according to God's Word and Will for our life. It is a time to repent and re-commit to following Jesus by our thoughts, words and actions.

BODY:

In our Luke 2: 21-35 text, it is the eighth day after the birth of their child and a time of new beginnings for Joseph, Mary and their baby. They have made the long journey to the Temple in Jerusalem to fulfill their parental duties under the law. Parents are expected to have their child named and their male child circumcised on the eighth day after birth, according to God's command in our Genesis 17:9-14 reading. Circumcision is the mark of the covenant God made between him and his people symbolizing the child's adoption as one of his chosen. It is the mark of identity and recognition of the child's heritage. It is a reminder of the solemn obligation of the people to love God and love one's neighbor embedded in the Law of God. For Mary and Joseph this is a time of rejoicing as much as parents today rejoice when their baby is baptized.

Just as in the time of Jesus, naming a child today is an important moment for the Mother, Father and for the child. The naming process depends on family traditions and expectations. Sometimes the naming of the baby treads on the delicate balance of trying to please both sides of the family. Naming the child should be a joyful time. But it can also be one of those agonizing "Boy Named Sue" experiences that Johnny Cash so eloquently sang many years ago.

Mary and Joseph do not agonize on selecting a name for their baby boy. God has already named the child for them. In Luke 1:30-31, the Angel Gabriel is sent by God to Mary and delivers a message. "Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you will name him Yeshua" (NRSV). His Jewish name is Yeshua bar Joseph, Yeshua the Son of Joseph. The name "Yeshua" proclaims his calling from God and literally means, "shout to God when in need of help," or in shorthand, "God saves." From his birth throughout his earthly life, Yeshua, whom we call Jesus by his Latinized name, and those around him will be reminded that his purpose from God is to save.

One of those present at the Temple for Yeshua's ritual ceremony is Simeon. Luke informs us Simeon is a righteous man favored by God. The Holy Spirit previously blesses Simeon with the promise of seeing the Messiah before his death. Now the Spirit guides him to the Temple so that the promise will be fulfilled. When Simeon hears the baby's cry and sees the child in Mary's arms, he knows he is in the presence of the Son of God. He reaches out to Mary and takes Jesus into his arms. I don't know anyone who doesn't feel it is a blessed moment to hold a baby. We can only imagine how it feels as Simeon looks upon this precious child. He praises God for allowing his final wish to be granted so he can depart this world at peace.

Simeon tells all present this child will be the Redeemer and Savior for all people. Mary and Joseph are amazed at what this stranger is saying about their baby. As they stand speechless beside him, Simeon looks into Mary's eyes and gives her what must have been a troubling prophecy for a new Mom. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against so that the inner thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And Mary, a sword will pierce your own soul, too!" (Luke 2:35 NIV). In one breath Simeon proclaims the future of this baby is to be the saving grace and glory of God as the Messiah, the Christ. Then in another breath, he declares there is a price to be paid by Jesus and Mary for this saving grace. Jesus will bring faith, hope and salvation to those who faithfully love and live in him. But there will be others he comes to save who will refuse to hear and obey his teachings. They will reject and attack him. Jesus and Mary, by their decisions to serve God, will sacrifice and suffer for their faithful obedience to the will of God.

In this time of joy in the birth, naming and adoption of Jesus into the family of God, Mary must acknowledge in his life she will experience excruciating pain. Suffering is not new to Mary. Over the past year she has become pregnant before her marriage to Joseph and endures rumors and scandal from the community. She has suffered through the difficult journey, nine months pregnant, riding a donkey, many miles over several days, to Bethlehem. Mary gave birth under conditions we would find at the very least, unhygienic, and most probably disgusting. She shares a barn with the smells and filth of the livestock. Motherhood begins in pain, in poverty and in loneliness. Simeon is prophesying her life will continue to be one of hardship and sorrow. Throughout her life she will love Jesus and watch him fulfill his Heavenly Father's purpose. Mary will stand by the sidelines helpless as her Son is subjected to ridicule, attacks and rejection by the Pharisees and Temple officers. She will stand by as a crowd of her neighbors and friends threaten to throw him off a cliff. Mary will watch Jesus tortured and put to death on the cross by the Romans. Throughout her life she will share in her Son's pain and suffering.

This is a message every parent understands who has raised a child through many trials and tribulations. We recognize in our lives and in the lives of our children that we will experience moments of joy and moments of sadness. Some in this Church know the pain of rejection by loved ones. Others know the agony of standing by helpless as serious illness and death takes those we hold dear. Many of us may have felt a sword piercing our soul in the sometimes self-destructive and hurtful behavior of family members and close friends. It is in these times of hardship and sorrow we can rely on the comforting love and strength of Christ to lift us up. In Jesus, we are able to open our hearts with sympathy and understanding toward others wounded by profound grief and sorrow. In Jesus, we can repent and change our behavior. In Jesus, we can forgive those who have hurt us.

CLOSING:

As we embrace the new beginning New Year's brings it is a time to ask ourselves, "What do I want to leave behind?" What grievances, hurts, and slights will I forgive and let go? What behaviors do I live that contradict the teachings of Jesus, and what will I do about it? This is the time to re-commit to Jesus and his Gospel expectations, and our service to his Church, as our highest commitment. Let us re-dedicate ourselves to strengthening our relationship and faith in the "One Who Comes to Save," our Lord and Redeemer, Yeshua the Christ. Amen.