A brief excurses on why we celebrate Christmas on December 25 when the bible doesn't explicitly state a date.

Last week, our head elder (thanks, John Lund ☺) posed a question about the connections between ancient pagan celebrations in December and the Christian celebration of Christmas. Although, I knew the answer was probably more nuanced than many people think, I wasn't prepared to say much about it on the spot. So I did some reading this past week --- because it's not like I had anything going on with a major holiday like Christmas to prepare for. Ha Ha!

The prevailing notion today is that early Christians simply appropriated pagan holidays to create Christmas, but the evidence suggests a more nuanced relationship. For while it is true that, throughout history, missionaries have often adapted existing cultural practices to introduce Christian beliefs to new societies, the December 25th date for Christmas may well be authentically Christian in origin. In fact, some ancient pagan celebrations associated with December might have emerged later, as a response to an established Christian observance of Christmas.

- First, let's keep in mind the connection of Christ's birth with John the Baptist: While Luke doesn't give us exact dates, he does state that John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus and conceived during a specific priestly course, the division of Abijah (Luke 1:5), which some ancient sources say was late September/early October. Nine months later places John's birth around June 25th, making Jesus' birth around December 25th. However, other ancient sources suggest that the course of Abijah was May/June timeframe, which would have put Jesus' birth sometime in the spring.

- Next, consider the significance of December 25, which is close to the winter solstice—the shortest day of the year. This timing aligns beautifully with the prophecy of the "Sun of Righteousness" (referring to Jesus) as mentioned in Malachi 4:2, symbolizing the arrival of light. After December 25, the days begin to grow longer, echoing the portrayal of Jesus as the light of life which the darkness cannot overcome described in John 1:5. While ancient Christian writers did not explicitly state that December 25 was chosen for these reasons, their writings reflect the idea that these theological and prophetic connections illustrate how God used His Son to replace the worship of pagan gods.

- Thirdly, while there were many pagan holidays that existed in ancient times in and around December, there is no exact way to determine if these predate Christianity. For instance, the Germanic festivals of "yule" certainly involved gift giving and decorated evergreen trees, but the earliest historical reference to these celebrations is in the 500's A.D. Thus, it could well be that Christianity's observance of Christmas predates Yule, and it could also be the case that early Germanic converts to Christianity simply adapted their own customs of gift-giving and evergreens to their new found faith and joy in Jesus' birth at Christmastime—a reverse coopting of religious traditions. Note also: The first mention of a Christmas tree isn't until the time of Martin Luther, 500 years ago. While Martin Luther didn't

invent the Christmas tree, he's widely credited with popularizing the tradition of adding lighted candles to his family's Christmas tree, inspired by stars shining through evergreens.

The Romans also had December celebrations, the most prominent of which was Saturnalia. This festival began, perhaps, as early as the 5th century B.C. and lasted until the 4th century A.D., eventually being absorbed by Christianity. While not many specifics are known, it likely started as a celebration on December 17 and evolved into a week-long festival that concluded on December 23.

Another Roman observance was *Sol Invictus* (the "Unconquered Sun") which was created/elevated by Emperor Aurelian in 274 AD to provide a unifying, official state god for the Roman Empire, bringing together diverse peoples and competing cults, symbolizing imperial power, and competing with rising Christianity by establishing a grand temple and promoting a single divine patron for the "one empire, one god" idea. Note, that while modern popular thought is that *Sol Invictus* was celebrated on December 25 and early Christians just stole the date, there isn't a lot of reliable historical evidence that *Sol Invictus* was an ongoing pagan festival celebrated on a specific date and it is entirely likely that, if it was, the date of December 25th might have been a reaction to the already existing Christian celebration rather than the other way around.

- One of the most compelling reasons to challenge the idea that Christmas was influenced by pagan rituals is that the earliest historical references to Christmas as a Christian celebration appear in the 200s and December 25th celebrations of Christmas date to before 312 A.D. During this time, Christianity was still a persecuted faith in the Roman Empire, and Christians actively sought to distance themselves from pagan customs. It wasn't until later in the 4th century, with the rise of Emperor Constantine—who is believed to have been a Christian and the first emperor to embrace religious tolerance—that Christianity began to significantly influence Roman culture. This much later cultural shift led to the incorporation of various Roman customs and celebrations into the Christian tradition.

Ultimately, we probably will never know why Christmas ended up as a December 25 celebration. But that's okay because, it's just adiaphoron, which means it doesn't matter and is more about tradition than it is doctrine or the clear Word of God. While the fact of the incarnation is foundational to our faith, it's not the fullness of our faith. Like all doctrine, it points us to Christ's redemptive work on the cross and His Easter Resurrection. He had to be flesh to take our place under the Law and redeem us through His actual fleshly death. The resurrection is of utmost importance to our faith. Thus, the date for celebrating Easter held greater significance for the early Church than did the date of Christmas.

Simeon and Anna Rejoice to Hold the Christ Child in Their Arms.

1. So, as we wrap up the Christmas story, our shepherd friends head back to their flocks. Meanwhile, Mary and Joseph settle down in a house—maybe a relative's place—according to Matthew (check out Matthew 2:11 if you're curious). Mary gets down to the nitty-gritty of life, washing diapers, while Joseph was probably on the hunt for carpentry gigs. The glamorous Christmas vibes are pretty much gone—if they were ever there, right? I mean, the whole scene with stables and mangers isn't exactly Hollywood. It's sentimental and beautiful to us, but it probably seemed quite underwhelming in the moment. Read Luke 2:22-24.

   Even though life's gotten a bit real for them, Mary and Joseph are sticking to their roots and following Jewish laws. They make sure to have their baby circumcised and then, forty days later, show up at the temple for purification, as prescribed in Leviticus 12. This was about the mom being unclean after

childbirth. The Mosaic Law said that a woman had to sacrifice a lamb and a dove. But if she was poor, two turtle doves would suffice. Mary brings the poor man's offering, which tell us much about this family's financial status. But how wild is it that she also brings her baby with her. What is the irony here?

The lamb was supposed to be for a burnt offering—totally consumed. The dove, for a sin offering—only the blood is used. It was to make the woman right in God's eyes after the uncleanness of childbirth. (Here it might be good to have a basic discussion on cleanliness in the Old Testament and how it points us to Christ. See asterisk).

Mary only brings the poor man's offering –two doves instead of a lamb and a dove. But technically she has the lamb. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

* The Temple represented God's presence. Where God is, there only that which is holy and sinless can abide. Which mean no human being can be in God's presence (the temple) because we are all sinful and utterly unfit. To bring defilement into the presence of God is to be consumed or destroyed. This is why in Isaiah 6 when Isaiah finds himself in the presence of God, he throws himself on the ground and says "I am destroyed." The same happens to Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu when they sin against God while serving as priests in the temple. They took fire from a ordinary source rather than use the fire that was continuously burning on the altar which came from the Lord, Himself (Leviticus 6:13 & Leviticus 10). To be unholy in God's presence was to bring God's wrath upon you.

❷ Luke also notes that Mary and Joeseph present the baby Jesus to the temple in accordance with the Old Testament mandate that every firstborn male child belongs to the Lord—the first to come through the womb. This command originates in Exodus 13:1-2 & 12-16 which states: The Lord said to Moses, *"Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine. . . . You shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord's. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.' It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt."* In Numbers 18:16 the price of redemption is said to be 5 shekels of silver.

What was the purpose of this "redeeming of the firstborn" and what powerful connection does this have with Christmas?

Remembrance of Deliverance: The practice was to serve as a reminder of the Israelites' deliverance from slavery in Egypt. By redeeming their firstborns, families acknowledge God's role in their salvation and remember the dramatic events of the Exodus, where the firstborn Egyptians were killed for Pharaoh's refusal to free God's people.

Foreshadowing of Redemption: Jesus' presentation at the temple is a foreshadowing of His future role as the ultimate Redeemer. Just as Israelite families redeemed their firstborn sons throughout biblical

history in obedience to God, Jesus would ultimately come to redeem all of humanity through His sacrificial death. God still pays the ultimate price.

How profound that all of Israelite family life – even something as ordinary as having children – was colored by the future act that God would one day give up His own Son to pay our redemption price.

3. Read Luke 2:25-37. I'm sure Simeon wondered what the Messiah would look like. Would He ride into town on a white stallion, leading an army? Would He come in a brilliant burst of light and peals of thunder? Like all of Gods' people, who had throughout the ages watched and wondered how and when God would send the Messiah, Simeon was blessed to have been told by the Holy Spirit that it would happen in his lifetime.

   And then, just like that, Luke records how it happened. Probably like any other day. Mary and Joseph—no doubt, in every respect, looking like any other ordinary couple—enter the temple grounds. And Simeon just knows on the spot that this is it; this is the big day he's been waiting for. But just consider how was this gifted wrapped? In swaddling clothes! Just a baby!

   This gift that God presents at Christmas is, indeed, a strange package. In fact, you might say that the wrapping itself is the gift—God became flesh. We call it the *Incarnation*. What does this mean?

   Well, if you took Spanish in High School, you might have an idea; or even if you just happen to love Mexican food. Either way, you probably know the difference between *chili con queso* as opposed to *chili con carne* – *queso* means cheese, *carne* means meat. That's Spanish, but Latin is similar. In Latin, *"in-carn-ation"* means *wrapped in meat* or *wrapped in flesh*.

   But despite the strangeness and mystery, Simeon sings. Our liturgy labels it the "Nunc Dimittis" which is the first words in Latin—"Now let depart". His song paints a lyrical image of a servant who has been instructed by his master to stay at his post until a certain visitor arrives—even into the long, wee hours of the night. Simeon is that servant and he's spent his life watching and waiting as instructed by the Holy Spirit. Now he is sleepy, happy to see his task completed. He asks, "Can I go to sleep/depart in peace?"

   How does Simeon's recognition of the Messiah in such an ordinary package challenge our expectations of how God works in our lives today?

   We sing Simeon's song usually right after Holy Communion—after we've held in our hands, like Simeon did, the very body of our Lord wrapped not in swaddling clothes, but in bread and wine. This is God's presence in our lives. Assuring us that if we have Jesus, we have everything we truly need.

   This doesn't mean that God doesn't care about all the other problems and concerns we have in a sinful, broken world. He does! And He invites us to bring everything to Him in prayer. He also assures us that He is working for our good in all things (Romans 8:28). But we know His true purpose for our lives is found in Christ. This gives us a peace that can chase away fear. Even if the worst thing comes our way—death—with Jesus, we need not be afraid.

4. Both Simeon and Anna remind us that peace in this world doesn't come through _____ pacificism nor appeasement, just as surely as it doesn't come through human might or strength. Peace comes only through Christ.

This also was the purpose of the Angel's song to the Shepherds. It the years that led up to WWII, appeasement didn't prevent Hitler from perpetrating his atrocities. Pacificism doesn't stop evil or the suffering of others—it certainly doesn't show love for our neighbor, who might just need us to defend them. In war or in times of relative peace, we need Jesus, who gives us the true peace of knowing that despite how irreparable this world is because of sin and death, we have peace in knowing that God is now in part and one day in full, going to set all things right in Christ.

5 In a powerful moment, we see Simeon prophesying to Mary and Joseph as they bring their offering of two turtle doves for sacrifice. This offering reveals their poverty, as the typical offering would be a lamb. It's striking to think that Mary, the mother of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, couldn't afford a lamb herself.

As they present this humble offering, Simeon speaks directly to Mary, foretelling that a sword will pierce her soul. This poignant statement foreshadows the deep suffering she will experience because of her child. I wonder if in that moment she recalled Gabriel's greeting: "Blessed are you among women." How could Mary be blessed if she would experience heart-piercing suffering? This paradox encourages us to reflect on our own lives:

How do we understand God's blessings when we face challenges and pain? What might this reveal about our faith and the deeper purposes behind our struggles?

Read Romans 828-29.

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