

"In The Fullness of Time"  
Galatians 4:4-7

December 31, 2017

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Christmas

The First Sunday after Christmas is such a lonely spot on the church calendar. Like the Sunday after Easter, all of the big celebrations are over. We have sung our little hearts out. We have rejoiced and celebrated and celebrated and rejoiced over and over again. So, what are we to do with the first Sunday after Christmas? Well, how about if, there is nothing more to celebrate on this day after the Big Celebration, let's look back and recap how Christmas went.

So, how did Christmas go for you? Christmas is always a busy time and this year was no different. It was busy and there were a couple of serious curves thrown in the lives of some of our family members. Even if there were no unexpected problems and you wrote out a precise schedule of all that you were going to do, it would still be hard to fulfill all of your duties and responsibilities that come with our Christmas celebration.

There is always a problem with time. You probably didn't get to every concert, every Advent/Christmas worship service, and every special Christmas event that you wanted to attend or were invited to attend. There wasn't enough time. You may have been late for some events, while missing out on other events all together. You probably didn't or couldn't get every gift you wanted and get it on time, perhaps because you lost track of time and in ordering things in time. (A gift for my wife spent Christmas Day in Memphis, Tennessee. I hope it had a good time.)

As poorly as we are in having enough time, managing time, and getting everything done on time and in the right way for our celebration of Christmas, God is able to do so much better in His planning of Christmas to begin with. Think about it. Several centuries before the first Christmas, God spoke through the prophets to announce how and where the Savior would come. He was very precise. The Savior would be born of a virgin girl and in the small village of Bethlehem, not the capital city of Jerusalem. Then God moved heaven and earth to arrange the circumstances that this might happen. He chose a young maiden from Nazareth. However, several years before that, God influenced Caesar Augustus to make a census. He also influenced the method of that census: having everyone return to their ancestral village. Meanwhile, God had already arranged for Mary and Joseph to be descendents of David. Centuries before that, God established Bethlehem as the town of David. So at the very right time (the text calls it "in the fullness of time"), God sent his Son into this world. Everything worked out just fine, precisely and on time, but it was certainly very difficult.

Why did God have to do this in the first place? God created this world to live in perfect symmetry which it did in the beginning. We can't even imagine that. There was a world where there was perfect weather, perfect crop growth, perfect climate, and so on. Man and woman lived in perfect harmony with their Creator and with each other. Everything was just great.

However, when Eve gave into the devil's temptation and broke the one and only law God had given them by eating the fruit of the tree of the garden of good and evil, everything changed. The world was no longer in symmetry but out of sync with God's will. Communion with God was broken and a great separation took place. A paradise of perfected living conditions was replaced with thorns and thistles, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, fires, and painful childbirth. A life which would be perfect and last forever was replaced with a life full of suffering and which would end in death.

Spiritually, things became terrible, too. Our sin contributes to the suffering that all endure on this earth. Sin has earned death for us and threatens us with eternal punishment in hell. However, God, in His great love and mercy has intervened on our behalf. The Nativity of our Lord is not so much a decoration or cute story, as it is a rescue mission. God would make everything right again, align everything in sync as it had been, and He would do it in just the right way and in just the right time.

After the Fall, when Eve gave birth to her first son, Cain, she responded by saying, "I have received a man – the Lord," indicating that Eve believed that the Messiah, whom God had promised to Adam and Eve after the Fall into sin, had already been born. However, it was not the right time. The Lord renewed the promise of a Messiah to Abraham. When Abraham was 90 years old and Sarah wasn't far behind, Abraham tried to help God keep His promise by having a child with Sarah's servant. However, it was not the right way.

No, God insisted on doing this in the right way and in the right time. Lord sent out prophecies about the coming Savior and salvation to help people know when the right time would be. He sent out further prophecies to help know how the Messiah would save people. God then fulfilled each of those prophecies, one by one, at the right time and in the right way, so as to lead people to the Messiah.

Finally, as our text says, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son." At the right time and in the right way, God fulfilled His promise of salvation by sending forth His Son, Jesus Christ. As I said before, He aligned all of the political, religious, and social circumstances so that Jesus would be born when and where God had prophesied He would be born.

That was only the beginning of God working "in the fullness of time." Jesus was born "under the law", that is, living under the same law of God as we do. By doing this, Jesus could fulfill the law of God and do everything that the law required of us, but we failed to do. Jesus did none of the things which the Lord forbade and which we often do. Jesus did all of the things which the Lord commanded in which we often do not do. And, because He did everything according to the law, at the right time and in the right way, His holiness and perfect obedience is credited to our account.

In order to redeem us (that is, to pay the price for God to have us back), Jesus had to do more than simply pay the debt of obedience and holiness which we owed. Jesus also had to pay the price for our prior failures – sin – by earning forgiveness for that sin. In Jesus did it all in the right way and in the right time. Beginning with His temptation by Satan in the desert, Jesus was often tempted to use His power to establish an earthly kingdom. But that was not the right way to earn forgiveness and Jesus would have none of it.

Jesus was determined, not only to do the right thing, but at the right time. At times, during Jesus' ministry, people tried to force Jesus' hand to establish the kingdom of God at that time and there were times when it looked as if Jesus would die or be killed. But, either the Gospel writer or Jesus Himself would say, "It was not His time." Or "it is not my time."

But at the right time, when the fullness of time had come, Jesus was nailed to a cross and died, precisely at the right time, right place, and in the right way. Jesus did this that we might be forgiven and be adopted as God's children who are no longer slaves to sin with Satan as our master, but are now heirs of everything there is with the Lord as our Savior. To guarantee this and to make sure there was no doubt about this, at exactly the right time and exactly the right way, Jesus rose from the dead and came back to life.

While we rejoice in the "big picture" of salvation, we also rejoice that God continues to act in each of our lives according to the "fullness of time". In other words, personally, God does things for us that happen at exactly the right time, at exactly the right place, and in exactly the right way, some of which we can see and some of which is known only to God.

Perhaps, you have a story about how God has done this for you – a story which you can see only as you look back. Maybe it has to do with your baptism – how God arranged for it to happen in exactly the right time and place when you or your parents were not planning on doing it. Maybe it has to do with the fact that you got a Christian education and how you did and when you did. Perhaps it has to do with having the spouse that you do, the job that you do, the city in which you live, and the church which you attend. Perhaps you can look back now and say, at just the right time and in just the right place, God acted in my life, even when I could not see it, have planned on it, or would've done it on my own.

Together, as the people of God's Church, God continues to act "in the fullness of time", doing His work and accomplishing His will in His way and according to His schedule. This frees us off from worry and despair about how our church will minister in the coming new year and in the years to come. With the world the way it is morally and the way the church is numerically, financially, and age wise, it would be easy to be discouraged. However, God will continue to do things "in the fullness of time" – on His timetable and according to His plan – so that the work of this congregation and the advancement of His kingdom will take place.

We are often concerned about when we will die to be with the Lord or how long we must stay here on earth. With the deaths occurring in our congregation recently, we may have this concern for others, as well. However, we don't have to worry. God will work "in the fullness of time" to keep us here on this earth just as long as He needs us here and to deliver us to heaven to be with Him precisely when He wants us there.

We may wonder when Jesus will come for the final judgment and to bring us, His people, home with Him. This has led people to work feverishly to calculate when that might be; to sit around fearfully waiting for it to come; or to despair as to whether they are ready for this cataclysmic event. None of that is necessary. God will continue to

act “in the fullness of time” to determine when that, how that will be, and that it will be a great blessing for us and all of God’s people.

So, live your life “in the fullness of time.” By that, I mean rejoice in your status as children of God and heirs of His kingdom. God has worked “in the fullness of time” to bring you into this position. Despite any twists and turns that you have gone on in your life, you are still here: still children of God through Holy Baptism; still children of God through faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection; and you are still heirs of the kingdom of God through the new life given to you by virtue of Jesus’ new life from the grave.

Trust that God is still working “in the fullness of time” to lead you, to guide you, and bring you, at last, to your heavenly home. This is easy when life is easy, obviously. However, the challenge is to believe that God is doing exactly the right things, exactly at the right time, and in the exactly the right place when you wonder what the right thing is; when you are unsure of God’s timing; and when you worry how this is all going to work out.

However, St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians, “We walk by faith, not by sight.” That means our entire life is one of faith, trusting God to do the right thing, at the right time, and in the right way. Therefore, we live confidently, without fear or worry, in the coming days and weeks ahead. Despite all of the turmoil going on in our world, all the tragedy going on in our families, and even the difficulties happening within our church, God will do, as He has always done in the past, everything “in the fullness of time.”

Unlike what we may think or attendance and participation might indicate, the First Sunday after Christmas IS a time to celebrate, but not in the usual way. We celebrate, unlike our usual reason for celebrating, the fact that God got everything all right, at the right time, and in the right way.. After a hectic Christmas season, we may feel a bit jealous that God can do this. However, instead of that, we rejoice that God has done everything needed to rescue us from sin, death, and hell and everything to bring us to heaven, holiness, and salvation. And we continue to live in faith and in hope, knowing that God will continue to accomplish everything – everything – for us “in the fullness of time.” Amen.