

First Sunday after Christmas – December 29th, 2024
FIRST BORN

Prayer

Jesus, thank you that you have been our sacrifice and have redeemed us from the Father's due punishment for our sins.

AMEN

Context

In today's reading, Moses recounts the commandment he received from God immediately after he had led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. If you remember, God sent ten plagues to demonstrate to Pharaoh his power and to validate the claim that Moses had made to let his people go. In the last plague, all of the firstborn of both man and animals were killed, except those where the blood of the lamb was put on the doors, so that the Angel of the Lord would pass over those home, thus avoiding the consequences of that final plague.

In verse 2, God claims for himself the firstborn males of both man and beast, although in the later verse there are ways to redeem or buy back those whom He had claimed.

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Current Jewish Practice

Even today, the role of firstborn son carries significance in the redemption of the first-born son, in the allocation of a double portion of the inheritance, and in the prophetic application of "firstborn" in Jewish culture.

The firstborn male sons undergo a "redemption" ceremony, translated as redemption of the son, when they turn 30 days old. This ceremony is not performed for all firstborns: for example, if a woman's first child was a girl, or born by caesarean section, redemption is not performed for any of her sons. In the ceremony, a set of five silver coins is paid to a kohen or priest to "redeem" the son. The nation-state of Israel mints special coins for use in such ceremonies.

The prophetic application comes from earlier in Exodus 4:22-23, where we read:

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Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'"

This prophecy refers to God's firstborn son – Christ, who with His family fled to Egypt to avoid Herod's slaughter of the innocents, the killing of all male children under the age of 2.

This leads to the question – does God claim on the firstborn have any impact outside the Jewish tradition? From what I can read, the answer is maybe.

Anthropology

In many cultures, firstborn is often given responsibility for younger siblings and may take on the role of a surrogate parent. Through this role they accept their position of leadership and the power that comes with it. Firstborns may become overachievers to set the example for younger siblings and meet the expectations of parents. They are also

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known to be authoritarian (or bossy according to their siblings). A great positive trait is that they can be very responsible and helpful.

Pharoh

Again, if you remember the history of the Exodus, Pharoh was very stubborn; hearing God's demands only hardened his heart – God's word always accomplishes its purpose – either to bring people into a closer relationship with God through the Gospel or causing them to turn away because of their rejection of the Law. Even when Pharoh finally relented and allowed the Israelites to leave Egypt, he almost immediately changed his mind and sent his army in pursuit of them to bring them back.

And we're not too different. We hear God's law and disregard it. We repent of our sins and then change our minds and fall back into the same old sins. But unlike Pharaoh, God through our Baptism has replaced our heart of stone with a heart of flesh, so we continue to repent and ask God for the forgiveness that He so freely offers because of the finished work of Christ.

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God

In the same way that God's word will accomplish its purpose, God is faithful to keep His promises. God promised to kill the firstborn of the Egyptians unless Pharaoh let them go; He didn't so God kept his promise.

God also kept His promises to Adam, Abraham, and David in the person and work of Jesus; these include:

Adam - *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Gen 3:15)*

Abraham - *I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, (Genesis 26:4)*

David - *When your days are over and you go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his*

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*throne forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son, (1
Chron 16:11-13b)*

And Mary and Joseph, being good Jews, believed God and presented Jesus in the temple to be redeemed according God's law, as recorded in the selections from the Gospel of Luke that we read today.

Redemption

The theme of redemption, of buying back, can be found throughout scripture.

One of the lesser-known examples is that of the prophet Hosea, whom God told to marry a prostitute, whom he forgave for her ongoing adultery. Scripture makes it clear that this is a picture of God and Israel, who was in a constant cycle of rebellion followed by repentance and forgiveness. We are Israel, who sin constantly yet are forgiven when we acknowledge and repent of our sin.

Indeed, the whole world was redeemed through the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, the babe in Bethlehem, on a cross outside of Jerusalem when he was an old man of 33.

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Because we are redeemed, **we have** the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Because we are redeemed, **we have** been reconciled to our creator (Eph 2:13)

Because we are redeemed, **we are** sanctified (2 Tim 2:1-2)

Because we are redeemed, **God** no longer remembers our sins (Jeremiah 31:34)

Because we are redeemed, **we have** the sure confidence of eternal life with Christ in the new creation that will transpire when He comes again in glory.

In the coming year, let us remember to thank and praise the Lord for His work that accomplished redemption for us.

AMEN