



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## *On the 8th Day of Christmas*

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ DECEMBER 30, 2018

---

**W**e live in a “seatbelt” society. What I mean by that is that we live in a world that is moving so rapidly we almost have to buckle up just to survive. The blistering pace of the world means that things are changing all around us all the time and it can be a struggle just to stay in stride! Every single year it seems we work harder and harder just to keep up with the world that keeps running out ahead of us, and every year we seem to fall farther and farther behind. Because of this we often opt for the *CliffsNotes* version of almost everything. Do you remember *CliffsNotes*? *CliffsNotes* were the summaries of major books that you could pick up at the bookstore so you didn’t have to read the entire volume.

We settle for the concise version of almost everything to conserve our time and to stay up with the times. For example, we may opt for store-bought, premade food as opposed to making food from scratch. We may opt for reading an article about a given topic rather than having the discipline that sit down and read an entire book. We may opt to send short, concise, abbreviated messages to one another via text or tweets or some other form of electronic communication rather than sitting down to have a deep, significant conversation with someone we love. How many of you sent countless text messages saying, “Merry Christmas” rather than calling those people that you should have called? We may even opt for headlines rather than listening to deep analysis and reporting. We live in a “seatbelt” society that flies from event to event. And guess what? Our holiday celebrations are a victim of this “seatbelt” society.

When I was growing up, we had a Thanksgiving tradition in our family. After celebrating our Thanksgiving meal, we would clean the kitchen and then the entire family would descend on our family room where we would watch a movie together. Would anyone like to guess our Thanksgiving movie of choice? Someone has guessed *White Christmas* at every service so far. Actually, we watched National Lampoon's *Christmas Vacation* on Thanksgiving evening. The turkey hadn't even digested in our bellies and we had moved beyond that celebration to Christmas!

The world around us does the exact same thing. On Black Friday the big-box stores are all decked out and ready for the Christmas season. How quickly we leave the holidays behind, and Christmas is no exception. Though we build up to Christmas for the weeks prior to its arrival, by the time Christmas Day comes and goes, we have moved on. We have left the manger behind in pursuit of the glimmering lights of the New Year's celebration.

Christmas was never supposed to be a single day; rather, Christmas was intended to be a season. There are 12 days of Christmas, hence the song by that title. Some scholars believe that it took months or even years for the wise men to arrive and present their gifts before Jesus. Can you even imagine in today's "seatbelt" society having the discipline to follow the light of a star for two years in order to greet the newborn King? Perhaps we should unbuckle our seatbelts for just a little while this morning and linger a little longer by the manger of Jesus Christ.

This Sunday is in the midst of the 12 days of Christmas. It falls between Christmas morning and Epiphany, which is when we celebrate the arrival of the wise men. This year, Epiphany is next Sunday, January 6. Let's pick up the story of Jesus on the eighth day of Christmas, focusing on one passage in the Scriptures that gives us a little insight into what happened after the birth of Christ.

If you spend time with the Scriptures, you begin to sense that those who penned them, carried along by the Holy Spirit, were extremely

clever individuals. In fact, they used all sorts of ways to build in theological truths through the use of numbers, hints and allusions. It is for this reason that we see certain numbers recurring in the Scriptures—numbers like 3 and 7 and 12 and 40. The writers of Scripture were trying to convey deep theological truths through the use of those numbers. Additionally, something else you learn by studying the Scriptures is that those who wrote them didn't live in a fast-paced society; rather, because there were no seatbelts at all, literally or figuratively, they moved at a pace where they could build significance into their celebrations so that the generations that followed would always remember the true significance of events. With these two things in mind—how the authors used numbers to convey points and how they used the traditions around holidays to build significance, ensuring that what God had done would not be forgotten—let us read our Scripture passage in Luke 2, picking up the story of Jesus on the eighth day of Christmas:

**On the eighth day**, when it was time to circumcise the child, **he was named Jesus**, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

<sup>22</sup>When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup>(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the LORD”), <sup>24</sup>and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

Luke 2:21-24

When my wife and I were expecting our oldest daughter, Lucy, we went to our 20-week appointment. Today, the 20-week appointment is significant for young families expecting a child because it is at that appointment an ultrasound is done that can tell you the gender of your unborn child. We found that we were going to have a girl. We knew, even before we thought of having children, that we would give our first daughter the family name of Lucy. We went home

from the 20-week appointment and started referring to our baby as Lucy. We started to build the nursery with a crib and changing table and rocking chair, and we started referring to it as Lucy's room. The problem was that we weren't going to tell anybody else the name or gender of our baby until week 40, when she was born. My wife was really good at keeping this secret; however, as you may have surmised, I'm a talker. At home we referred to our baby as Lucy, but in outside conversation with someone I'd mention that I was working on something in Lucy's room ... Lauren would give me *that* look and remind me that we were **not** sharing the name or gender of our child. Finally, I shared it one too many times and my wife looked at me and said that if I were to tell another person the name of our child, she would not even let me **know** the name of our next one!

The world has changed when it comes to having children. You can probably recall a time when there was no such thing as an ultrasound and, like ancient times, you could not find out the gender of a baby, let alone the baby's name, until after it had arrived. There were exceptions for just a couple people in Scripture: the mother and father of John the Baptist, to whom an angel had announced his birth and his name, and Mary and Joseph, who were told by an angel that they were to have a son whose name was to be Jesus. According to Jewish tradition, as our text today indicates, Mary and Joseph did not reveal the name or gender of their child until the **eighth day**. This was the day that Jesus' name was introduced to all the world.

In the unfolding narrative, Luke very carefully reveals the details of Jesus' life as the fulfillment of all that had been written in the Old Testament. We learn that Mary and Joseph made an offering of a pair of doves or two young pigeons as the law prescribed so that what Jesus said later in the gospel would become true. "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). Luke very carefully explained that on the eighth day, according to custom, Mary and Joseph went to the temple where they had Jesus circumcised, dedicated to the Lord and given the name Jesus.

The eighth day in Scripture has a fascinating and rich history. In fact, although it probably isn't on the list of numbers that you think of as often recurring in the Scriptures, it goes all the way back to the Creation. According to Genesis 1 and 2, God created the heavens and the earth in six days. He then rested on the seventh day, thus setting it apart and creating the Sabbath day; so, all creation including the Sabbath was created in seven days. The eighth day? That was the **first day** of the **first full week** of God's brand-new creation. So, from very early on the number 8 carried with it the sense and symbolism of new creation.

Fast forward just a few chapters in the book of Genesis and we see the number 8 again. This time it returns as God reaches out to a man by the name of Abraham who became the forefather of the entire nation of Israel. God made a covenant with Abraham. The sign, seal and symbol of that covenant became the act of circumcision. God told Abraham to circumcise his son Isaac on the **eighth** day. Eight then began to symbolize a covenant; it began to symbolize a sense of new birth. Isaac was born into the world and then reborn as he entered into the covenant with God.

Eight gets its most significant reference in the story of Exodus. In today's Scripture passage, Luke quotes the story of God's people enslaved in Egypt when he says, "as it is written in the law of the Lord, every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the LORD" (Luke 2:23). These words are a direct quote from Exodus 13:2, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the LORD." This quotation came about when the people of Israel had been enslaved in Egypt and had become quite numerous. Pharaoh was concerned that they might overtake their slave masters, so he issued a decree that every male child be thrown into the Nile. One of those children was spared by God's Providence: Moses. He was the one God called to lead His people out of Egypt's slavery and into the freedom of the Promised Land.

God sent 80-year-old Moses to tell Pharaoh to let His people go. Pharaoh, of course, refused, so God sent Moses back nine different

times with nine different plagues. Each time Pharaoh's heart was too hard, and he wouldn't let the people go. Finally, God sent Moses with one last plague. Remember the children thrown into the Nile? That plague was turned around. The last plague Moses delivered required that every firstborn son of Egypt perish. All children living in Egypt would have perished in that plague, but God protected His people. He ordered them to sacrifice a lamb and to put the lamb's blood around the doorframe of their homes so that when the angel of the Lord went overhead, it would pass over the homes of the Israelites. This became the night that the Israelite people celebrate the Festival of the Passover. It was that plague that caused Pharaoh's heart to soften. He called Moses in the middle of night and told him to take God's people away.

Because the Israelites had to flee in the middle of the night, they didn't have time to prepare their bread dough with yeast which is why the Israelites now celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread for the seven days following the Passover. Thus, this most central story of the Jewish people is celebrated every year in eight days. God told the Jewish people that every year this celebration would mark the **first month** of the **new year**. They were to tell their children and never to forget what God had done for them. One commentator wrote,

The deliverance from Egypt is a new beginning for Israel; from now on, every glance at the calendar will remind them of this fact. It also provides a connection to Genesis and creation. At the Exodus, God's people are being "re-created"; they are starting over with a fresh slate.

—Peter Enns

So far in the Old Testament, the number 8 has stood for both creation and re-creation. It stood for "entering into" or "being reborn into" the covenant of God. It was marked on calendars as the day God "re-created" or freed His people. The eighth day was absolutely central to the story of the Old Testament, but the New Testament picks up on it as well.

This winter, Pastor Allen will be teaching a class on the Gospel of John specifically focusing on the miracles. The Gospel of John has two distinct sections. The first 12 chapters of the Gospel of John focus on all the miracles of Jesus and is called the *Book of Signs*. The second part of the Gospel of John is called the *Book of Glory*, and focuses on Jesus' passion, His crucifixion and His subsequent resurrection. In the first half, the *Book of Signs*, John chose to focus on seven signs; a sign for each day of the week. Can you guess how many signs are found in the second half of the Gospel of John? There is only one! John told the story in such a way that the **eighth** sign—the resurrection of Jesus — is the sign of the new creation.

What's more, all of the Gospels focus on similar details around the resurrection—namely, that Jesus was crucified and lay in the tomb for three days. The women went to the tomb early in the morning on what day? On the first day of the week; in other words, on the **eighth** day. Theologians have been talking about the significance of the number 8 for centuries. St. Augustine wrote about it in this way:

[Christ] suffered voluntarily, and so could choose His own time for suffering and for resurrection, He brought it about that His body rested from all its works on the **Sabbath** in the tomb, and that His resurrection on the third day, which we call the Lord's day, the day after the Sabbath, **and therefore the eighth, proved the circumcision of the eighth day to be also prophetic of Him.**

Everything that happened in this section of the Gospel of Luke sums up the entire story of the Old Testament! Jesus is the fulfillment of all that had been promised and the reason why they all took place on the eighth day. In Jewish culture, the eighth day symbolizes new creation and a new year.

If Jesus were born on December 25, according to Jewish custom it would have been day one; He would then be named on day eight—December 25 (1), December 26 (2), December 27 (3), December 28 (4), December 29 (5), December 30 (6), December 31 (7), January 1 (8).

We celebrate New Year's Day on a day that was historically understood to symbolize new creation, a fresh start, and a new year because it was the day on which Jesus was dedicated to the Lord and circumcised; it was the day on which the world first heard the name "Jesus"!

John Ortberg, a pastor from Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California, wrote a book called *Who Is This Man?* in which he summarized it all saying that Jesus changed how we think about history:

The fact remains two thousand years after the birth of this carpenter that every time any human being anywhere on the planet opens a calendar, unfolds a newspaper, or boots up a computer, he or she is reminded that Jesus Christ has in fact become the hinge of human history. Caesar Nero died in the year of our Lord AD 68. Napoleon (the emperor of the world) died in the year of our Lord 1821. Joseph Stalin died in the year of our Lord 1953. ... how strange that now every ruler who ever reigned must be dated in reference to the life of Jesus.

Last week in worship we talked about the reality that we can celebrate Christmas culturally today without ever once thinking about Jesus. There are so many cultural traditions that it's possible to have a celebration, even a warm Christmas, without remembering its origin or the story that brought it about.

Today the New Year's Celebration might be our most secular holiday. Nearly every other holiday can in some way be tied back to Christianity: We give thanks to God for our blessings at Thanksgiving, and All Hallows' Eve was the forerunner of Halloween. Although New Year's Day is probably the least Christian of our holidays, its origin goes back to the eighth day after Jesus was born, when His name was first spoken in the world! It symbolizes a new life and a new beginning.

Sometimes in our "seatbelt" society, we move so quickly that we lose the depth and significance of even the most widely celebrated holi-

days. Could it be that knowing the biblical significance of the day changes the way we celebrate New Year's Day this week? That this isn't just New Year's Day, but this is the day that Jesus' name was first spoken in the world.

This is the time of year when we think about the resolutions we might make to improve and change our lives, but the Scriptures say that in Christ we've already been made new. The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" If that's the case we don't need to re-create ourselves; rather, we need to allow the work that God began in us to come to completion.

How extraordinary that the Call to Worship this morning said, "... that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:10-11). And how extraordinary that 2,000 years ago we marked the new year by the naming of Jesus and that 2,000 years later, nearly the whole world will be celebrating with us on January 1, whether they realize it or not.

My hope and prayer is that this knowledge changes the way you perceive the upcoming holiday. I know that it tends to be a holiday when you are out late and don't really want to be on the roads because of the crazy drivers, but what if New Year's weren't about that at all. What if this New Year actually celebrated the day on which the Savior of the world was given His name; a name which means "**He saves**"? In that case, this eighth day of Christmas ought not be about making New Year's resolutions to start anew and get fit, but about what it was like on that first eighth day when Jesus was dedicated to the Lord in the temple. Maybe this New Year should be about us dedicating our lives back to the One who received His name on that day. ■



FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

BONITA SPRINGS

9751 Bonita Beach Road | Bonita Springs, Florida 34135 | 239 992 3233 | [fpcbonita.org](http://fpcbonita.org)