

<sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

<sup>21</sup>After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

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My plan for this morning is to not give a sermon. Surprise, surprise. That doesn't mean we are ready to jump into our next hymn, however. What I'd like to offer instead is more like a history lesson. It has to do with why we have today's special celebration – Name of Our Lord – and how that factors into New Year's Day, other holidays, and calendars in general.

To start things off, civilizations around the globe had four annual astronomical events figured out, and the peoples of the world had them figured out centuries before Jesus was ever born. Those four astronomical events are the spring and fall equinoxes, and the summer and winter solstices. Simple geometry is the only requirement for figuring those out, which is why civilizations around the world recognized them. By knowing those four annual events, communities' planting and harvest dates could be fine tuned, migrations of animals could be predicted, and religious observances – often rooted in those plant and animal cycles – could be celebrated annually. Nearly all calendars that humans have ever created have tried to be consistent in dating those four events.

However, the calendars used long, long ago didn't accurately maintain set dates for the solstices and equinoxes. That was especially true of lunar calendars, but even solar calendars were

often not accurate. In the year 45 BCE, Julius Caesar instituted what is known as the Julian Calendar, which was largely based on Egyptian advances in keeping track of time. In the Julian calendar, each year was 365 days, and every four years an extra day was added, since they had mathematically figured out it takes 365.25 days for the Earth to make one revolution around the sun. Does that sound familiar? The Julian Calendar was more accurate than any calendar previously used. Like I said, it began in 45 BCE, and it set the start of each year on the 1st day of the month of January, which was somewhat based on preceding tradition and also because Janus was the Roman god of new beginnings.

So how does Christianity fit in with all this? To start, there is only one major event of Jesus' earthly ministry that the Bible gives us big clues concerning its date, and that is his crucifixion. The gospels tell us his crucifixion coincided with the Passover, or Pesach as it is called in Hebrew. Pesach always occurs on the first full moon following the spring equinox. So what early Christians did was celebrate Easter on the first Sunday after Pesach. Long story short, that is not always the case today, but they often coincide.

We know from some early Christian writings that March 25 was considered to be the date of Jesus' crucifixion, which could be accurate because it falls just after the spring equinox and therefore could have coincided with Pesach. We will never know for sure if that is the actual date, but it is the best date we have because early Christians apparently universally accepted it. So where do we go from March 25? Well, it isn't mentioned in the Bible, but there was a common belief back then that the great Jewish prophets reached "integral age," which means they died either on the date they were conceived or on the date they were born. Based on early Christian writings, there appears to have been some back and forth on whether Jesus' birth or conception should be tied to March 25, but ultimately the church settled on the conception. That is why the church commemorates The Annunciation of Our Lord every March 25. The reading for that day is the angel Gabriel announcing God's favor to Mary. So if we take March 25 as the conception, then add nine months to it and you get... December 25. Jesus: not too early, not too late, always right on time.

So when people say that the date of Christmas was chosen to replace the Roman celebration of Saturnalia, I'm bothered because such a claim is sloppy history. Saturnalia was December 17 and it was extended to December 23. Did people who previously celebrated Saturnalia bring some of

those traditions – like feasting and gift-giving – into their Christmas celebrations when they became Christian? Definitely. But was the date of Christmas chosen to replace Saturnalia? Not at all, even if that is the common myth. The date of Christmas was chosen based on the agreed-upon timing of Jesus' death, March 25.

You may remember that Julius Caesar established January 1 as the start of the New Year. Centuries later, not everyone cared what Julius had to say about the matter. So during the Middle Ages, many Christians began to recognize the New Year starting on either March 25 or on December 25, because – as they saw it – those dates were more important. I'll come back to that in a little bit.

You may be asking, “What about the Eastern church, though? Why do they celebrate Christmas on January 7, and not December 25?” Excellent question. Remember how the Julian calendar became the norm in 45 BCE? It remained the norm for roughly 1600 years. The problem with it is that the Earth doesn't revolve around the Sun every 365.25 days as Julian calculated. Instead, the revolving takes place every 365.24219 days. That decimal difference only equates to 11 minutes a year, which doesn't seem like a big deal. However, when you get ahead of yourself by 11 minutes per year and you do that for 1600 years, now you are days off from being accurate to the solstices and the equinoxes. By the 16th century, Pope Gregory XIII realized they were off by 10 days, and because Christians determine the date of Easter based on the spring equinox, if Gregory didn't fix it, then Christians would eventually be celebrating Easter in the wrong season. So Pope Gregory XIII introduced some changes to the Catholic church's calendar in 1582. He dropped 10 days off the calendar that year, and he introduced a system where basically once a century we don't observe leap year. That gets the calendar back on track with the actual solstices and the equinoxes and fine tunes the future calculations. That is the origin of the Gregorian calendar.

But wait! It is 1582! Not everyone listens to what that pope has to say! Protestant countries didn't come on board to the Gregorian calendar until much later. For instance, the British Empire and the American colonies didn't adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1752. Then there is also the Eastern Church, which never followed edicts from Rome. In the eastern region of the world, the church stuck to the Julian calendar. That was fine until an embarrassing incident in 1908. It was the summer Olympics, and London was hosting the games. Because there was confusion about the

calendars, the Russian delegation of athletes showed up nearly two weeks late to the games. Fortunately for them, at that time the Olympic Games lasted about 5 months total, so the Russians were still able to earn some medals, though their absence meant they forfeited competing in some events. The event was embarrassing enough that when the Russian Revolution occurred in 1918 they switched to the Gregorian calendar. Yet... that was a government decision. The eastern church to this day still sticks with the Julian calendar, and they likely will stick with it until a Pope sits down with the eastern patriarchs as an equal, which is unlikely to happen soon. That is why the Western Church celebrates Christmas on December 25 and the Eastern Church celebrates it on January 7. When Gregory instituted his changes in 1582, the two celebrations were off by only ten days. Now we are off by 13, and as more time passes the two celebrations will drift further apart. The use of the two calendars is also why the eastern and western Easter celebrations don't align.

Remember how I mentioned that in the Middle Ages, some Christians marked the New Year on March 25 and some others marked it on December 25? That needed to be settled. Gregory reaffirmed January 1 as the start date. However, Britain and its colonies developed a weird hybrid of accepting both January 1 and March 25 as the New Year. It wasn't sorted out until they switched to the Gregorian calendar in 1752, but by then many of early American legal documents recognized March 25 as the New Years Day.

By pure coincidence in all this mess of calendars and calculations is this: on the eighth day of a Jewish boy's life, he has his bris. This is when he is circumcised and named publicly.

December 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31,... 1

January 1 is always when the western church celebrates with fireworks The Bris of Jesus. (That's what the fireworks are for, right?) Well, "The Bris of Jesus" never caught on, so we call it The Name of Jesus. Why has the church celebrated this day? Because it is viewed as the first time the blood of Jesus was shed, which has been understood as the beginning of the process of humanity's redemption. The event also shows his full humanity and his obedience to the Law of God. Finally, the bris is the public naming of the child. The naming carries with it significance, because the name was understood to set the course of the child's life. In this case, Jesus... ישוע... "he saves."

Yes, indeed. Amen.