

Fifth Sunday of Advent – When is Christmas?

*Delivered by Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian
St. Sarkis Armenian Church. Carrollton, TX
December 25, 2016
Gospel Reading: Luke 19:12-28*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We all know that today is Christmas Day in America and throughout the world, but for us Armenians, we still have about two weeks until we celebrate Christmas. Many ask why do Armenians celebrate Christmas on January 6 and everyone else celebrates it on December 25. In order to fully understand why this happens, we first need to realize and recognize that no one knows the exact date of Christ's birth. It is not recorded in the Gospels, but only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are the circumstances surrounding Christ's birth mentioned.

In fact, early Christians did not consider the birth of Christ to be a very important feast. This is why different Christian groups remembered His birth on different dates. We see this in a letter written by St. Clement of Alexandria around the year AD 200 when he calculates Jesus' birth to be the 28th year of Augustus Caesar's reign, but says that Christians celebrate His birth on May 20th, March 21st, April 21st, April 20th and even April 15th. However, ultimately two dates became the most popular, December 25th and January 6th.

But why these two dates? What is so important or unique about these two? Some will say and we've probably heard the story that at one point all Christians celebrated Christmas on January 6th and then there was a pagan holiday on December 25th called Saturnalia and the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) moved the celebration of the birth of Christ to December 25th from January 6th. Then we like to believe that the Armenians, because they are stubborn and always right, refused to move the date and follow the rest of Christendom, thus keeping the original date, January 6th.

This is a nice story, but there is absolutely no evidence that this happened. In fact, the evidence as to these two dates, December 25th and January 6th is found in the Gospel of Luke. In the Gospel of Luke (1:8-10) Zacharias, St. John the Baptist's father, is offering incense in the Temple as he was the priest that year and an angel tells him that he and his wife Elizabeth will have a son. Zacharias does not believe him and he is struck mute until he sees the glory of God in his son. The early Church Fathers are in agreement that this event took place on the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which can occur at the end of September or early October, since it is a moveable feast.

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Later in the Gospel of Luke, the Archangel Gabriel visits Mary (the Annunciation) and says that her cousin, Elizabeth, is already pregnant six months, which would place the Annunciation at the end of March or early April. Thus, if we count nine months from Gabriel's visit to Mary at the Annunciation, it would place the birth of Christ in late December or early January.

Yet, there was another tradition and belief in early Christianity which taught that a perfect man would be conceived and die on the same date; that is to say that a perfect man should enter and leave this world on the same day. Christ's death took place on the 14th day of the Jewish month Nisan, which, depending on what calendar is used, would be either March 25th or April 6/7th. Nine months from these two dates would have us arrive at either December 25th or January 6th. This shows and testifies to the reality that Christ's purpose in this life was to die and we see this in the icons of the Annunciation and Nativity.

So now the question still remains: which date is correct? The answer is very simple: we don't know and we shouldn't care because it is not important, but rather the meaning of Christmas is what is important.

Unfortunately today we have lost the meaning of Christmas. It has become a day of commercialism and materialism, hijacked by companies and toy manufacturers. We also hear that Christmas is birthday of Jesus, so we should celebrate with a cake and sing Him "Happy Birthday", but this is not what Christmas is at all. Christmas, in its most fundamental and basic essence, is the celebration of the incarnation of God. The reality of God becoming man, taking all of His glory, majesty and love and humbling Himself into a human body, called Jesus Christ.

We hear and remember this every Sunday in the Nicene Creed (page 19) when we say, "*Who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven, took body, became man, was born perfectly of the Holy Virgin Mary, by the Holy Spirit*". What's interesting is that we remember this every Sunday, but forget it every Christmas.

Christmas is the celebration of God being born like us; humbling Himself in a home with a family, like us; working and sweating, like us; hungering and thirsting, like us; being tempted by Satan, like us; grieving, feeling compassion and crying, like us; suffering and even dying, like us; and ultimately being resurrected like we will be – this is the meaning of Christmas.

St. Athanasius the Great says it perfectly, "God became man so man could become God". God became man so that we could be like Him in love, compassion and eternal life. Let us strive

to make Christmas a time when we remember the purpose of His birth, which is ultimately that He would die for us in order that we could become like Him. And if we remember that during the Christmas season, not just now, but at every Christmas, and if we preach and teach that to people, Christmas will no longer be the material Christmas of companies and industries, but Christmas will become what it was centuries ago for the early Christians – not caring when it happened, but only caring *that* it happened.

Amen.