

SERMON TITLE: “That We Might Receive Adoption...”

TEXT: Galatians 4:4-7

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

DATE: December 28, 2008

Introduction

Well, Christmas has come and gone—at least we think it has. Actually, according to the Christian calendar we’re still in the middle of “Christmastime” (December 25—January 3) because “Christmas” refers to the twelve-day celebration that *begins* on Christmas day. We tend to think of December 25 being the climax of the season but historically it has been the beginning of a party that we Advent had us waiting for. So we’re still in Christmastime—why not preach a Christmas sermon?

I think a Christmas sermon is also appropriate because we haven’t really had one this Advent season. The first two weeks of Advent we had missionaries (first the Hamp’s, then the Godard’s) who gave the messages. Then two weeks ago, a snowstorm blitzed us and church was canceled. Last week was the kid’s Christmas program and... no sermon (although sermons do come in various forms, don’t they?). All of these Sundays were great, but the end result was that Christmas themes didn’t really didn’t play much of a role in the preaching life of the church.

Well, today we’ll address this.

Last month I was at a workshop in Surrey where we were previewing some small group educational material. The speaker was a big-name American philosopher-type and he began one of his sessions with this question:

Why did Jesus come to earth?

This wasn’t a rhetorical question. He wanted answers, and he got a few.

- “To save us,” said one
- “To save us from *our sins*,” said another
- “So that we could have a personal relationship with God,” came yet another

A few more answers trickled in, mostly of the fairly standard variety. Then the speaker gave us the “right answer,” taken from John 18: “to testify to the truth.” (the workshop was called “The Truth Project”) I remember thinking at the time that each of the answers didn’t quite say enough and that probably all of them told part, but not all of the story. But the question stuck with me throughout the workshop and returned throughout Advent and as I was thinking about this sermon this week. *Why did Jesus come to earth?* Why is Christmas such a highlight in the Christian calendar each year? I think our text this morning provides an important part of the answer.

4 But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. 6 Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba,

Father." 7 So you are no longer slaves, but God's children; and since you are his children, he has made you also heirs.

This is not what you would typically consider to be a traditional "Christmas passage." So why this text? Well, the short answer is that it is one of the assigned texts for today based on the lectionary, which is just a book outlining which passages to be read or preached on from Sunday to Sunday throughout the year which is used by many branches of the Christian church. The longer answer—the reason I was drawn to this particular passage—is because I think it gives us a nice summary of the importance of Christmas. I think this brief passage tells us, in a nutshell, what Christmas "did," what it was and is "for." So we're going to walk step by step through some of the key points of this passage

First, a bit of background. The book of Galatians is a letter written to a specific church at a specific time and place to address specific issues. In the case of the Galatian church, Paul was a little angry. One commentator has said that Galatians "gives us a glimpse into what makes Paul tick and what ticks Paul off." All of Paul's other letters begin with an extended thanksgiving in the introduction. Not so in Galatians. Paul's tone is abrupt and stern. He's not happy with what's going on.

So what's got Paul so agitated? Well the first hearers/readers of Galatians were mostly Gentiles—former pagans—who had accepted the gospel during one of Paul's earlier visits to Galatia. Now, there were a group of teachers circulating convincing these non-Jews to undergo circumcision as an act of obedience to the Jewish law. Adherence to Jewish ritual was being set forth by these teachers as an essential part of following Christ.

(It's worth noting that all of this is taking place few only a few decades after Christ's death and resurrection!)

Paul writes this letter to counter these false teachers who were causing so many problems. One of Paul's main concerns throughout the letter is the role the Jewish Law played in history and what the coming of Jesus meant in this context. Paul argues that the Law had a temporary protective role *so that* faith could come—the Law served a *temporary* role in the history of salvation that had now ceased. The role of the Law was the protection of Israel so that Christ could come—it was to prepare the ground for the coming of Christ.

The Fullness of Time

In this context, Paul writes in our passage this morning, "When the set time had fully come..." Paul was a pretty smart guy. He knew his history, and he knew his theology. He knew about God's promises to Israel, and like many of his fellow Jews Paul probably had a pretty clear conception of how he thought those promises would be fulfilled. Yet for Paul, the coming of Jesus is the turning point of history; everything changes with Jesus, including the role of the law and what our approach to it ought to be. We are no longer under the law because God sent his son in the fullness of time. *A new day had*

dawned. Jesus had thrown open the door to welcome in those who were formerly outsiders. God's promises were being fulfilled.

And *how* did God accomplish all of this?

God sent his son born of a woman, born under the law...

There are two important dimensions of Jesus' coming that Paul wants to emphasize here. "Born of a woman," emphasizes Jesus' humanity; "born under the Law," emphasizes his Jewishness. Jesus is fully human, he knows our struggles, yet he shows us what it means to live a life of obedience to God. He shows us what it means to bear God's image in the way God intended. The Incarnation shows the importance that God places on human beings—he loves us enough to become one of us, to be with us, and to take our burdens upon himself.

He is not just any human, though. He enters a particular story at a particular time to fulfill a particular promise. *Way back* in Genesis 12 (remember Genesis?) God promised to make Abraham a great nation and that through him, the entire world would be blessed. Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise—he is the one through whom the nations will find salvation, the one through whom the family of God will be opened to all tribes and tongues.

Paul is very careful to first locate Jesus *within* the story of Israel, and only then go on to say how he carries the story *beyond* the borders of Israel.

... to Redeem Those Under the Law

What does it mean to be "under the law?" Two thousand years after the first Christmas, I wonder if we have a sense of what this means.

Fundamentally, what the law did for Israel was define the shape of the covenant community. Keeping Torah was the means by which one demonstrated their belonging to the community of God. This community still came into being by an act of grace—God did not choose Abraham because of any particular merits he had—but the borders of this community were defined by who kept Torah.

This is *very* different from our context. We live in a modern nation that prides itself on its inclusivity and openness to all peoples. We are mostly unfamiliar with having to live according to a detailed set of rituals and observances that governed every sphere of life, or with the possibility of exclusion from community if these laws are transgressed.

I got a brief glimpse into how this may have felt last Sunday when a few of us went out to participate in a service at the jail. I've only been to the jail a few times, but every time I go I am struck by the nature of the reality facing these guys. They know that they are excluded, that they are separate:

- They're dressed in red, we're dressed however we want

- They've got identification numbers on their pants, we do not
- They have to be brought in and led out by a guard; we come and go freely.
- On and on...

As I sat there last Sunday I couldn't help but think that these men would know, much better than I, what it means to be "under the law." Their bars are daily reminders that they are on the wrong side of the law. You can see it in their eyes and you can hear it in their voices that they feel shame and regret for what they have done. They know that they are excluded, that they do not have the rights of "normal" citizens and they know why. They are separated because of their inability to abide by the law.

And if it weren't for Christmas—if Jesus had *not* come—this would be our status before God as well. We would be separated from him by our inability to live properly "under the law." Paul is quite clear—here and elsewhere—that

all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

None of us can live rightly "under the law." All of us are in need of redemption. And because of Christmas, this redemption is available.

That we Might Receive Adoption to Sonship...

A wise man (and a former pastor and good friend) once told me—as I was contemplating the prospect of becoming a pastor—that one of the most important jobs of a pastor is to help people to see their story in the story of Scripture. He said that all of our stories are in there somewhere; we just need to have eyes to see and ears to hear them. It is a skill that I saw him model well, and a skill that I am trying to learn.

Well, it's not very hard to find my story in this passage. This little phrase—that we might receive adoption—has obviously become more significant to us as a family in the last seven years. As an adoptive parent, I know a bit of what it means to take an "outsider" "inside." In many ways, adoption has grown to become one of the most significant theological themes for me personally and has given me a new appreciation for being adopted into God's family.

Just as our kids have taken on a name and a heritage that would not have been theirs by birth, so we, as non-Jewish Christians, identify with a family we have no biological connection to. *This is Paul's point to the teachers causing trouble in the church at Galatia.* Christmas makes possible the existence of a family not dictated by bloodlines, but by the gracious adoption of God, where those who believed in his name are given

the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. (John 1:13)

Adoption is a key aspect of our salvation! But adoption is not a painless process.

Our kids are starting to ask questions—some of them, uncomfortable ones: “Why didn’t my mom want me? Why are we a part of *this* family and not *that* one?” These are difficult questions to answer. I think they’re starting to get a sense that adoption isn’t the way things usually work, that our family is put together differently than others, and possibly even that adoption usually takes place in the context of painful decisions and circumstances. As a parent, I want to insulate them from these things. I don’t want them to think about *how* they came to be with us. Part of me wants them to just love us and never wonder about the circumstances that led to them being with us—to just think that everything’s all right and leave it at that.

But like our adoption story, God’s adoption of us is a response to things “not working right.” Part of what Christmas tells us—despite the joy and the wonder, the lights, and the nativity scenes, and the gifts and the big family dinners—is that God comes to be a part of a world where everything is not all right. Our adoption does not take place in ideal circumstances either, does it? Jesus came to fix a pretty big problem after all (remember our Genesis series!). It cost God dearly to make our adoption possible.

But what Christmas *also* tells us is that God steps right into the pain, confusion, and complexity of our broken world. The story of the baby who would become the boy who would become the man who would become the Saviour of the world shows us is that no situation is so bad or unusual or fearful or disorienting or complicated that God *cannot* and *does* not enter and transform it.

SO... You are No Longer Slaves but Children

Christmas is “the fullness of time” in which God sent his son to redeem those of us who were slaves—as it says in Galatians 4—separated from God, imprisoned by the law, outsiders in the family of God. The story of Christmas is the story by which we move from “excluded” to “included”; it is the story that moves us into the category of “beloved children of God, heirs according to the promise.”

Because of Christmas, we are no longer slaves. Of course, we know that there is more to the story—we know that the baby in the manger will one day hang upon a cruel Roman cross, we know that Jesus’ birth by itself was not enough to secure our salvation. But in today’s text, Paul draws our attention to the significance of the Incarnation, the sending of Christ in the fullness of time to open wide the doors of his family—to welcome in those who had formerly been left out.

So why did Jesus come to earth?

Well, I think he *did* come to

- save us from our sins
- make it possible to have a personal relationship with him
- testify to the truth
- most of the other answers I heard at that workshop last month.

But I think all of these answers to the question find their place in the answer Paul give us in Galatians 4. Jesus came, in the fullness of time, to be with us, to redeem us, so that we would no longer be bound by the many things that ensnare and enslave us and *that that we might receive adoption* into his family.

Because of Christmas, we are no longer slaves, but God's children.

Because of Christmas, for that one brief hour at the Nanaimo Correctional Centre last Sunday, we could worship together with those prisoners as God's children. Because of Christmas, for that short time, the categories of "inside" and "outside" did not apply in the same way. In that little prison chapel, we were all on equal footing before God—we were all adopted children of God.

Application

So in conclusion I would submit that what Christmas "does" is open the door for our adoption into God's family.

What kind of people would we be if we understood our existence and identity as defined by the gracious adoption of God made possible by Christmas?

- **Three things:**

- *We would resist returning to our slavery*, we would refuse to believe and live as though our status before God depended upon our performance; Paul makes this very clear in the remainder of Galatians; the coming of Jesus marks a turning point in the story and how God's people relate to him
- Correspondingly, *we would accept our freedom gratefully and use it responsibly*; we would use it not to gratify our own desires but to serve others, to model God's gracious adoption of us by welcoming the stranger, the foreigner, the outsider as an act of obedience to God
- *Our hope in the future God has promised would be strengthened*—both now at Christmas and throughout the coming year; the God who acted in Jesus Christ to fulfill the hope of Israel can be relied upon to act again, to keep his promise one day dwell among his people, to wipe every tear from their eyes, to bring healing, redemption, and blessing to all the nations.

May God help us to be "Christmas people" throughout the coming year, people who understand that they are no longer slaves, no longer outsiders, but adopted children of the living God, the Lord of History, the Prince of Peace.

Thanks be to God.