

First Sunday after Christmas: Galatians 4:4–7

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Gal. 4:4 But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

The true gift of Christmas for each one of us is an inheritance. The Son of God was born of woman under the Law so that we might become heirs together with Christ of His kingdom.

It happened in the fulness of time. At just the right moment in human history. It was a perfect storm of variables that all came together at one time. Roman rule established peace for the first time in centuries. Roman technology and government brought roads and plumbing. Greek culture brought a common language and a love for learning. Israel, God's nation of the Old Testament, was in a kind of protective custody, held as a territory under Roman rule. It wasn't the splendor of Solomon by any stretch, but it wasn't bad either. Protected from her ancient enemies, Israel was free to pretty much carry out its business as usual, providing it rendered to Caesar the appropriate taxes. Nothing new there. The synagogues were thriving under the rabbinic teaching of the Pharisees. The temple was clicking along under the Sadducees, while King Herod was busy rennovating the temple to secure the favor of the Jews.

The people were in a watchful mood. Waiting, expectant, hoping. They had a sense of being on the threshold of something big. God had been strangely silent for 450 years or so. There were some bright spots, such as the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes that is celebrated as Hannukah. But the glory had long departed from the temple; there was no ark in the holy of holies. And the sense of the people was that God was about to act. Time was literally pregnant with the Promise. Simeon, a prophet who lived in the temple, had even been told directly by God Himself that he wouldn't die until he had seen the Lord's messiah with his own eyes.

This was the "fulness of time" of which the apostle Paul speaks. All the pieces of the puzzle in the right place. That's when the eternal Father said to the co-eternal Son, "now," and in that

moment the Word entered our world, the Creator became the creature, the Word became Flesh, and the Son of God was born of woman.

The first woman, Eve, was deceived by the devil's lie in her virginity, and brought Sin and Death into the world. To the devil, God said that a "seed of the woman" would crush his head, and it was that Promised Seed carried along by the generations from Adam and Eve, through Noah, then Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that would finally implant in the virgin womb of Mary and be conceived as the Word made Flesh.

Everyone has a mother, and our Lord is no exception. To be "like us in every way," He had to be conceived and born like us. His Father, of course, is another story. In that way He is not like us, but He is the counterpart to Adam. He is humanity's second Adam, its new Head. He is born without the inherited Sin of Adam, and yet He is born of woman and so is like us in every way except for Sin. That's why you can't say, "To sin is human." It isn't. It's anti-human and un-human. Christ is fully human, as fully human as that baby lying in a manger needing to be changed and nursed and burped and all the other things you do with newborn babies. He is bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh. He was born "from below" of our human flesh so that we might be born "from above" by water and Spirit.

His birth from the virgin Mary in the fulness of time is the fulfillment of the promised Seed, and all that centuries of prophets foretold to Israel. Jesus is the end of the line, God's last Word in the flesh. When Simeon and Anna received Him in the temple when He was forty days old, that was the old testament receiving the Promised Seed in the flesh. This is the One whom the prophets foretold; this is the One the people were expecting; this is God's messiah, His Christ, His anointed One.

He is born under Law. We call that His state of humiliation or humbling. He humbled Himself and became obedient to the Law. Actively, in the sense that Jesus did the Law perfectly. Passively, in the sense that He suffered our punishments under the Law for us even to death on a cross. This is why He didn't just appear as a man out of nowhere. He had to be born under the Law – be obedient to father and mother and other authorities. He had to experience the trials of childhood and adolescence. There was no cheating. No divine hand tied behind His back. He had to do it our way. He had to live our life the way we live it, and die our death the way we die it.

He came to redeem. To buy back. Not from the devil, he doesn't own. Not from Sin and Death, they hold us captive, but God doesn't bribe these things, He conquers them. He came to redeem us from the Law. The sting of Death is Sin (the condition not the symptoms), and what gives Sin its power over us is the Law. The Law condemns us, the Law amplifies our Sin, the Law stirs up sin in the sinner. The Law can't make a sinner into a saint, it can only kill the sinner, and that's what it did to Jesus.

That's the remarkable thing. In being born of woman under the Law, Jesus in effect became our Sin. It would be like someone intentionally becoming infected with the Ebola virus in order to save people from the virus. Jesus didn't sin but He became our Sin, and God allowed the Law to condemn Sin in the Flesh of Jesus rather than in our flesh. This is how He is the Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the world. He becomes the Sin of the world. This is how He redeems you from the Law, by becoming Sin for you, in your place, so that in Him you might become the righteousness of God.

To be redeemed is to be set free. Christ became our Sin and entered Death to enact a prisoner swap, His life for the life of the world. His life for your life. That means in Him the Law is silent. It has nothing to say. Your sins are forgiven in Christ. The wrath of God is stilled in Christ. Death has lost its sting, the grave has lost its victory. Christ has conquered, and in Him you conquer in His victory.

Though Jesus looked like any other baby born in Israel, except maybe the thing about the manger, this was no ordinary Baby. The Child that Mary held to her breast, the baby that Anna and Simeon received in the temple, was the Redeemer, the One who would pay the price for Adam's Sin, the Liberator, who would set humanity free of its captivity, the Shepherd who would gather His sheep, the Lamb who would die for the sin of the world, the Priest who would offer Himself as an unblemished sacrifice, the Davidic King who would establish David's throne, the messiah (Christ) of God, God's anointed servant. And all of this packaged as this little Child, indistinguishable from any of the other baby boys in Bethlehem (something that would lead to their untimely death under King Herod).

The Son of God was born a Man so that the sons of men might be reborn as sons of God. You are sons of God, baptized in the Son of God. The girls too. You're all "sons" in the sense of heirs. Remember that in Christ there is "neither male nor female." You are all sons in the Son, born of our virgin mother, the Church, with God Himself as our Father, conceived by the Word and the Spirit, that same Spirit that cries out "Abba, Father" as we pray "Our Father."

This Child of Bethlehem is your freedom and life. You are no longer slaves but sons. You have a place in your Father's house. You have permission to call upon Him with your Abba, Fathers. You have a new identity, the way an adopted child receives the identity of his new adopted family. You have a new and better answer to the question "Who are you?" You are a child of God, a son of God, an heir with Christ of His kingdom. You are not what you do, or your sin, or your vocation, or anything that has to do with your birth as a son of Adam. You are a son of God. Your baptism is, in one sense, your adoption papers, or, if you will, your birth certificate. It tells you who your mother is: the church, God's city, the Bride of Christ. It tells you who your Father is: the eternal Father who sent His Son in the flesh to save you. It tells you who your family is and what your identity is.

As you unwrap your gifts to each other and reflect upon the meaning of Christmas, this fourth day of Christmas would be a good time to reflect upon God's gift to you in this Child of Bethlehem's manger – adoption as sons of God and the privilege to call God "Father" with delight.

"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

In the Name of Jesus,

Amen.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Galatians 4:4-7 / Christmas 1B / 28 December 2014", posted 2014-12-28 (<https://htlcms.org/2014/12/galatians-44-7-christmas-1a-28-december-2014/>).