

First Sunday after Christmas, December 27, 2020
“More Than a Good Story” (Galatians 4:4-7)

Last Thursday evening we and Christians around the world gathered in churches and on-line to celebrate the incarnation of God and hear once again those wonderful words that tell the story of our Savior’s birth. We gazed into the manger and saw there a God who loves his people so much that he was willing to become one of us, a God that continues to bring us shalom, that peace that passes understanding. We ended our worship not only with that peace in our hearts, but with a spirit of joy and hope, and the song of the angels filling our thoughts. On Friday, those of us who could, spent time in fellowship with family and friends and enjoyed lots of good food.

Christmas truly is a special time for us and our families. But I would venture a guess and say that most of us breathed a huge sigh of relief when it was over. As much joy as it brought us, we’re tired from the shopping, the decorating, the cooking, the cleaning up after visiting relatives. We’re ready to return to some sense of normalcy – whatever that looks like for us living in the midst of this pandemic.

If we haven’t done so already, we’re itching to take down the tree and pack up the decorations for another year. With Christmas behind us, our minds are focused on the New Year and what 2021 will bring for us, hopefully including a vaccine that will bring an end to the COVID crisis.

But for the Christian, it is important to understand that Christmas has not ended at all. The celebration of Christmas day is not the end of the story, but the beginning. Even though merchants have already been deep discounting their Christmas paraphernalia and will quickly remove it all from their shelves, even though corporate accountants are recording all the holiday sales, Christmas is *not* over. And even though we’ve packed up and put away any evidence of Christmas 2020, we can’t pack away the good news of the Christmas story and what that story means to us.

We have to remember that the birth narrative we heard last week is more than just a good story and that Christmas is not an event for just one day, but an invitation to new life. That’s what the Apostle Paul is telling us this morning in those four short verses from his letter to the Galatians which serve as our second reading for today. He shows us that the story of Christmas really is more than a good story. And in this story, we see the unfolding of God’s glory.

If we look closely, we’ll see that it is first of all, a mystery story. Paul writes: *When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman.* I have read a lot of mystery novels and few would match this story for sheer excitement. Think of it. Almighty God invading human life in the person of his Son.

John in his gospel tells us that the Word (referring to Christ) became flesh and dwelt among us. The Greek word for “dwelt” actually means to pitch a tent. God came down and pitched his tent beside ours. And in doing so...he experienced everything we experience. He understands our fear, our worry, our anxiety, our pain, our disappointment. And even though he was without sin, he understands our temptation to do sinful things.

Here is the mystery that unlocks the meaning of all history. When we read the gospel accounts of our Lord, we're not just reading about an historical figure, but an up-close and ever present God who comes to us in the living of our lives to walk with us, to talk with us, and tell us we are his own.

The Christmas story is a wonderful mystery story. It is also an adventure story. Paul tells us that *God sent his Son... to redeem those who were under the law*. The Christmas story is the record of God's plan for transforming a world that had lost its way. The mission of God's Son was a redemptive one: *to redeem those who were under the law*.

This entire human race was in bondage to the law, because the law of God stood over us in judgment. Yet God did not seek to retaliate – which is the first things we humans are prone to do when someone offends us. Instead, Jesus took all the evil, all the wickedness, all the lostness, and the judgment of God on the whole human race and carried them to the cross. The cross of Calvary – which is the supreme evidence of human wickedness – is at the same time the crowning revelation of God's redeeming grace. It was all in his loving purpose. It was the price he was willing to pay. Since humanity's need was so desperate and the world could be redeemed no other way...*God sent his Son to redeem those under the law*. What an adventure story!

But primarily, the Christmas story is a love story. Paul tells us that *God sent his Son... so that we might receive adoption as children*. Can you conceive of anything more loving than the experience of adoption? There is a child, orphaned or unwanted, because of some event beyond his control. Then there is a couple anxious to pour their love into a child, learn about him, fall in love with him, and choose to make him part of their family with all the rights of one born to them naturally. He becomes *their* child.

Our text tells us that, in a similar sense, every Christian has passed through this experience. Orphaned because of our sin and separated from the God who made us, we later became the objects of a love that would never let us go. So great was that love that it entered our world, lived our life, died our death, then conquered death for us on that first Easter. Having done all this, the Eternal God, through the gift of his Son, bestows on us the blessing of reconciliation. We are adopted into his family, with all the rights and privileges of an heir.

That moment of adoption, which comes to us in the holy waters of baptism or at that point when we realize the emptiness of our lives and turn to God in faith, is *the* defining moment in our lives. Our wandering is over. The prodigal has come home.

So you see, if Christmas for you and me ends with the passing of December 25th, the Christmas story *is* just a good story, and we miss the promise and the fulfillment of the divine gift that has been offered to us. But when we recognize the story of God becoming a tiny babe as *more* than just a good story, we open our hearts and lives to the gift it declares – namely Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world – and discover our identity as Christians.

In that last verse of the second reading, Paul confidently tells us who we are in light of the Christmas event. *So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir*,

through God. Here we see the progression that takes place in our lives because of what God did at Christmas.

Paul tells us, first of all, who we were – namely a slave. Every Sunday we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. That's because we cannot keep the laws of God perfectly or live lives totally acceptable to God. We are slaves to the law of God and slaves to our sin because we, on our own, cannot be the people God created us to be. But when we embrace the Christmas story and receive the gift of the Christ Child, we realize – as Paul says – that we are *no longer* slaves. We are something more. And that leads us to the second phase in our identity progression.

When Christ was born, he created a family. And when we accept him as Lord of our lives, our identity is set. We become a spiritual child of God, claimed and adopted by God to be a part of his family. The gift of Christmas, you see, doesn't so much define *who* we are, but *whose* we are. We belong to God.

And the third point is that we become heirs. The joy of this gift God has given us can never be taken away. It cannot be destroyed and cannot fade with the passing of time. This divine gift was given so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. Because of Christmas and Easter, we cannot be disinherited.

My friends, the good news this day is that we are no longer slaves. Rather, we are children of God and heirs to this promise of everlasting life. This is our identity. As we prepare for a new year, even as we pack up and put away everything associated with the Christmas holidays, let us remember that the story of Christ's birth is more than just a good story. It is a mystery story, an adventure story, and above all, a love story that defines whose we are and transforms our lives forever. Thanks be to God. Amen..