

Galatians 4:4-7

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son to be born of a woman, so that he would be born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those under the law, so that we would be adopted as sons. ⁶And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts to shout, “*Abba*, Father!” ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but a son. And if you are a son, then you are also an heir of God through Christ.

Heirs

I.

He was not allowed to talk about it. Perhaps that’s too soft a way of putting it. He wasn’t able to talk about it. Literally. To make sure he would not speak about it, his ability to speak was taken from him. He would simply have to wait until the time was right.

The time came and he *still* couldn’t speak. Not until he asked for writing materials and wrote the child’s name on a tablet. As soon as Zechariah had confirmed that his son’s name was to be John, his voice returned. You probably noticed what he said in today’s Gospel. The theme of Zechariah’s song was not his own son, but the Savior God had promised through the prophets for centuries.

As today’s sermon text says: “The set time had fully come” (Galatians 4:4, EHV). What was it about that moment of time?

Alexander the Great had conquered large swaths of territory a few centuries before. The spread of his empire had made Greek the language of commerce for the entire civilized world of the day, much as English has become the language of commerce today. Other languages would also be used, of course, but most of the people would know Greek, as well. Even the Old Testament had been translated from Hebrew into Greek, so God’s promises about the Messiah were widely available to a large population.

Before Alexander the Great came along, people of Jewish descent had been scattered into many different places. Many had returned to Judah and Jerusalem so that the temple had been rebuilt by the time Jesus was born, but there were pockets of Jews all over the Mediterranean region. To keep their religion alive, these people started synagogues. The word synagogue means “gathering together.” Hope for the Messiah was kept alive by Jewish people in many countries as they gathered together to study the Old Testament promises of the Messiah.

By the time of Jesus the Romans had conquered the Mediterranean world. Alexander’s empire had begun to crumble after his death, but Roman rule unified a kingdom that had become divided. Because of the peace established by Rome, a system of roads was developed to make transportation more convenient than ever before. A census was needed. It was determined that all the people were to report in their hometowns to be counted.

Could these be the reasons that God determined the time was right?

II.

“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son to be born of a woman, so that he would be born under the law” (Galatians 4:4, EHV). God does not promise to tell us everything we might want to know, he promises that everything we *need* to know, he *has* told us.

Whatever his reasons were, the set time had come. All God’s conditions were met. He

sent his Son to be born under God's law.

You will have noticed that today's reading began with one of those words that urges us to look back to earlier context. Paul starts with "but." In the previous verse, Paul says: "We were enslaved under the basic principles of the world" (Galatians 4:3, EHV). Paul is speaking about the laws Moses had brought down from God at Mount Sinai to the People of Israel. There were many laws about the worship life of the people, as well as God's Moral Law, summarized by the Ten Commandments which he intended for all people of all time.

In other words, every human being is enslaved by the law. Every human being is required by God to keep the entire Moral Law, or else. Since none of us can do it, we are all enslaved by the law and subject to the judgment of God.

The law demands. When we fail to meet the demands, the law dooms us to punishment.

III.

"When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son to be born of a woman, so that he would be born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those under the law, so that we would be adopted as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5, EHV).

Paul puts all of Christmas into one sentence. He does it without all the ornaments and decorations and lights. It's all there, without the angels singing from on high to the shepherds tending their flocks. It's all there, though the Wise Men never put in an appearance.

We like the story. We like the *whole* story. We fill the days leading up to Christmas and the days after Christmas talking about the details of the story. The Christmas story is what gets people who don't visit a church service in person—or even online—the rest of the year to pay attention for one holy night.

Paul summarizes the whole thing in one sentence. Remember how Paul said we were enslaved by the law? God's entire reason for Christmas and Easter—and all the promises of the Messiah that came long before those events—is wrapped up in slavery to the law. And Paul summarized the whole thing—*all* of Jesus' life and death—in that one sentence.

The Second Readings of the last two weeks have spoken about the perfect sacrifice for sin that was necessary to appease God. Jesus had to prepare to be worthy to be that sacrifice. He had to be born under the law. God is not *under* the moral law, he *is* the moral law. Jesus had to be truly human to be subject to obey God's moral law. He had to go through the process of being born, just as every human being must do.

God sent him for a purpose—to *redeem* those under the law. Redeem means to buy back. Being called a "good kid" by those who knew him best wouldn't be good enough. To buy back those under the law he had to be a sacrifice that was even better than the combined sacrifices of thousands of animals through the centuries. Jesus had to be perfect—for his whole life—to measure up as the sacrifice God required.

IV.

At the beginning of the chapter, Paul wrote: "As long as the heir is a young child, he is no different from a slave. Although he is owner of everything, ²he is still under guardians and managers until the day set by his father" (Galatians 4:1-2, EHV). Under the Roman legal system, even the natural child who was to inherit the estate of his father was treated like a slave.

The set time has come. Not just for God to send Jesus into the world, but the set time has come for you. The Holy Spirit has called you by the gospel to be a child of God and an heir of heaven.

"...to redeem those under the law, so that we would be adopted as sons" (Galatians 4:5,

EHV). Do you have any idea how expensive it is to adopt a child? Thousands of dollars. Multiply that by the billions of people God wanted Jesus to pay for by living under the law to redeem those under the law. God wanted you so much he was willing to pay any price. He paid the price of his only-begotten Son for you and me.

“Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts to shout, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Galatians 4:6, EHV). In his explanation of the Address to the Lord’s Prayer, Martin Luther instructed that we are to pray as “dear children ask their dear father.” Abba is a term of endearment. You could say it is less formal than “father,” perhaps more like “dad.”

God the Father is not far away or aloof or frightening to us because Jesus came into the world and redeemed all of us who had been under the law. God is close by. He is the loving Father we can turn to in any and every situation. In fact, he is the very Father who *sent* Jesus in the first place to redeem us and make us his own by adoption. He cares about us. He *wants* us to be brought into this perfect relationship with him.

“So you are no longer a slave, but a son. And if you are a son, then you are also an heir of God through Christ” (Galatians 4:7, EHV).

Have you ever heard of Boxing Day? No, it’s not a day on which two fighters slug it out in the ring. Boxing Day was traditionally the day after Christmas. On that day, those who had servants would give each of the servants a gift. In at least one little way, the roles of servant and master would be reversed when the master gave a service, of sorts, to the servants.

God’s Son, Jesus, was the real Heir, the rightful heir. He reversed it all by being born under the law to redeem us from under the law. Jesus didn’t do it so that we would just have one day of gifts. By his gift he made us heirs with him of the eternal joys Jesus has prepared for his family in heaven.

Remember Zechariah and his song that is today’s gospel? Once he had his voice back, he sang about God’s great love. More than just the birth of his own son, John the Baptist, Zechariah sang for joy because he understood God was fulfilling his promise. The set time had fully come for God to send his only-begotten Son to save sinners.

Don’t be silent. Sing for joy with Zechariah. Don’t just sing about the wonders of God’s love for a day, or even a season. Don’t just visit the manger for a Christmas service and wait until Easter to worship the King. Worship him every day. Sing his praises and tell abroad the great things you have heard and seen. God’s Son has redeemed everyone. All should know. Their inheritance is waiting. Tell them. Amen.