

CHRISTMAS IS AN ADOPTION STORY

GALATIANS 4:4-7

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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A few years ago, I was at a workshop in Surrey, BC where we were previewing some small group educational material. The speaker was a prominent American evangelical leader and he began one of his sessions with a question that seems appropriate on this First Sunday after Christmas.

His question was this:

Why did Jesus come to earth?

It 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
- "To testify to the truth" (the presenter's preferred option, taken from John 18)

A few more answers trickled in, mostly of the fairly standard (and individualistic!) variety.

I remember thinking at the time that while each answer pointed to something important none of them said *enough* in response to this question of questions.

*Why **did** Jesus come to earth?*

I think our text this morning provides an important part of the answer.

The reason I was drawn to this passage from the four readings this week is because I think it tells us, in a nutshell, what Christmas "did," what it was and is "for."

So we're going to walk through some of the key points of this passage, with a special emphasis on one in particular.

First, a bit of background. The book of Galatians, as with each of Paul's letters to first century churches, is written to address specific issues. In the case of the Galatian church, Paul was 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 church in Galatia was comprised of mostly Gentiles who had accepted the gospel during one of Paul's earlier visits.

Now, a few years later, 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.

Paul writes his letter to the Galatians in order to counter these teachers.

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—a role 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.

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 had upended all of his previously held assumptions.

Everything changes with Jesus, including the role of the law, the role of ethnicity and bloodlines.

A new day had dawned. God's promises had been fulfilled.

But *how*?

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: This emphasizes Jesus' humanity

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.

Born under the Law: This emphasizes his Jewishness.

Jesus is not just *any* human. He enters a particular story at a particular time to fulfill a particular promise.

Way back in Genesis 12, 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 locate Jesus *within* the story of Israel, and then to 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 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.

But Paul is quite clear that if it weren't for Christmas—if Jesus had *not* come—we, too, would be separated from God 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.

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 because, as many of you know, adoption is how our family was put together!

Our family is comprised of at least five ethnic threads, as I counted this morning: Russian/Mennonite, Japanese, German, Ojibway, and Metis. My kids often tease me for being the only unfortunate “white guy” in our family. ☺

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 what it means to be 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 the point Paul is desperate to make to the teachers causing trouble in the church at Galatia.

Christmas makes possible the existence of a family dictated *not* by bloodlines, but by the gracious adoption of God.

Adoption is a key aspect of our salvation!

This should not be a surprise, if we do even a quick survey of the broad biblical narrative.

Genealogies are not typically thought to be the most riveting portions of Scripture. But let's just take a quick peek into the genealogy of Jesus found in Matthew 1.

Here are just a few of the characters in the lineage of Jesus, the Son of David, the King of the Jews:

- **Rahab** – a Canaanite (i.e., non-Jewish) prostitute who wheels and deals her way into inclusion into the people of Israel when they are about to attack Jericho... Rahab becomes the mother of Boaz... who had a son named Obed with...
- **Ruth**: A Moabite woman (Moabites were among Israel's bitter enemies...) who hung on for dear life with her Jewish mother-in-law once their husbands died (Jewish husbands that Ruth wasn't supposed to actually *have*, given the strong prohibitions in Israel against marrying foreign women!)
- Anyway, Ruth and Boaz have Obed who is the father of Jesse who is the father of King David... who steals **Bathsheba**, the wife of a Hittite named Uriah (Hittites were an ethnic minority living among the people of Israel)... Uriah, a foreigner going to war for the people of Israel, who David strategically has killed in battle to cover up his transgression with Bathsheba
- Bathsheba who is not only listed in the genealogy, but is described not as David's wife (who she eventually *was*), but Uriah's!
- And of course David's adulterous (and murderous) relationship with Bathsheba ended up producing Solomon whose exploits with foreign women are, well, legendary!

Even this brief snapshot shows us that Jesus has a pretty mixed-up lineage!

(We didn't even talk about Tamar! Hers is another interesting story—one you'll have to read on your own in Genesis 38. It's not exactly PG material!)

Jesus has a remarkable genealogy, and for a number of reasons! The first thing to be said is that it is remarkable that Jesus' genealogy has women in it at all, because genealogies did not typically include women.

The second thing to say is, "what are these 'foreigners' doing in here, contaminating Jesus' pure Jewish bloodline? Isn't the point of the genealogy to demonstrate that Jesus comes from proud, royal Jewish stock?"

Why doesn't Matthew hide some of the more unsavoury characters from Jesus' background?

Well, apparently because God does not require or even *desire* "pure" bloodlines."

But even leaving aside the characters in Jesus' family tree, we know that Jesus *himself* had an interesting birth story.

The words “born of a virgin” roll off the tongue pretty easily, don’t they? But what would these words have meant at the time?

Joseph understood full well how the circumstances of Jesus’ birth would have been viewed by those around him. He had planned to divorce Mary quietly so as not to publicly shame her (Matthew 1:19).

Because he knew that she *would* be shamed.

A pregnant, unwed mother would have been in a very precarious and vulnerable position in the first century world! She would have been the subject of scandal, her child would have been deemed illegitimate, and the marriage would be off, as would her future prospects of finding a husband!

Joseph goes far above and beyond what would have been required of him in his context by not only staying with Mary *but by taking Jesus as his own son!*

Each Christmas, we are often tempted to think of idyllic manger scenes with a happy young couple welcoming a beautiful boy with a glorious star above them and adoring crowds around them.

But in the eyes of many around them, this scene would have been interpreted a bit differently.

To put it bluntly, they would have seen a bastard son, a scandalized teenage mother, and an adoptive father.

We see hints in the NT that this is *exactly* how some in Israel viewed Jesus. Jesus would often receive sneering questions about his background.

In John 9, for example, when the Pharisees are “investigating” Jesus’ healing of a man born blind, they are infuriated when the man asks them if they want to become Jesus’ disciple:

Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! ***[We have the right parents!!]*** We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, *we don’t even know where he comes from.*”

Or, in a dispute with Jesus a chapter earlier in John 8, the Pharisees boast about how they have Abraham as their father. They turn to Jesus and say, “Where is your father?”

Where is your father? Who do you think you are? We have the right ancestors, but you were conceived in scandal and questionable circumstances!

And they were right. Kind of.

Jesus *was* conceived in scandal. Jesus *didn't* have the sort of background that anyone expected or wanted for a Messiah.

And this was exactly the point!

Jesus was an adopted kid who would open up the door to the adoption of all kinds of kids into God's family!

John Swinton puts it like this in his book *Raging with Compassion*:

*[T]he God whom we worship is an adopted God! Adoption was the mode of parenting that God used upon entering the human condition. Adoption was the first mode of parenting that God used to initiate the new kingdom and the new humanity... **The act of adoption mirrors and embodies a primary redemptive action of God.***

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.”

The story of Christmas is an adoption story.

It is about God creating and redeeming an adopted family. It's about all kinds of different kids coming together under one roof to learn how to love each other and their adopted Father better.

It's a story about a big, diverse, colourful family that is loved, graced, forgiven, and learning and growing into what that might mean for themselves and for the world.

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

This is why Jesus came to earth!

To tell you and to tell me that no matter *what* our background might be—no matter how scandalous or unsavoury, no matter how unimpressive or full of conflict, no matter how *anything*—that we are loved, that we are welcomed, and that we are invited to be part of God's adopted family!

This is the meaning of Christmas.

So 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.

