



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for the Sunday after Christmas

**Galatians 4:1-7 &
St. Matthew 1:18-25**

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January 2, 2011 — Christmas 1

Today is the Second Sunday of Christmas, but the lessons are those for the First. We missed the first Sunday because it coincided with the feast of St. Stephen. Because these lessons are so important to what it means to be “Christmas people”, because they show us the new life that lay behind St. Stephen’s profound profession of faith, and because the promotion this week of our pastor, friend, and brother Bill reminds us that in some sense there is a veil between eternity and our lives here. We need to hear the message of the lessons today—we need to remember our baptism and what it means for us here and now.

St. Paul wrote this letter to the churches of Galatia—not just one congregation, but a group of them that covered a whole region—because some of the Jewish Christians in those churches were teaching that in order to be a Christian, you first had to be a Jew and obey all the regulations and observances of the Old Testament. The relationship between Law and Gospel has often been a problem for Christians. The Church sometimes swings like a pendulum, at some times virtually ignoring the law and acting like it doesn’t matter and is irrelevant. (We’re in one of those times right now.) But at other times swinging to the opposite extreme and throwing the yoke of legalism onto people who have been freed by their baptism into Christ. In the Galatian churches this teaching was threatening to throw the yoke of slavery onto these people whom Christ had freed. The New Testament often likens the Jews who lived under the law to slaves and, of course, those who are in Christ to freemen. In this case, Paul illustrates his point in a similar way, likening the Jews to the son of a wealthy man who is waiting for his inheritance. Look at Galatians 4:1-2:

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

A young son might one day be a rich and powerful man, but until he comes of age, he’s not only under the authority of his father like the slaves of the household, but he was also under the authority of his father’s slaves—his tutors and guardians. In a sense, that son was lower than a slave, despite the inheritance that was to one day be his. Paul goes on:

In the same way we also, when we were children [before Christ came] were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. (Galatians 4:3)

The Jews were slaves to the law and the Gentiles were slaves to pagan religions. The Jews were better off in having a law that pointed them to Christ, but all, Jew and Gentile alike, were in bondage. But Paul doesn’t leave us in bondage.

But when the fullness of time had come, [just as when a son has reached his coming of age and receives his inheritance] God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, [his Son came as one of us] to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Galatians 1:4-5)

Christ makes us free. Again, Christ makes us free. What does that mean? Paul says we’ve been “redeemed”—Jesus has *paid the price and purchased us out of slavery*. The Son of God came as one of us, paid the penalty of our sins on the cross, and restores us to the Father. Through the Incarnation and the Cross, we are joined to Christ—to the Son of God—and are ourselves made sons and daughters of God by adoption. We are lifted from our slavery to the law and made co-inheritors with Christ—made free in him, which is why Jesus tells us, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing” (John 15:15). Paul goes on:

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” [“Abba” is what a son would call his own father—sort of like “Papa”. This was how Jesus prayed to his Father that night in the garden, and because we are his sons and daughters by adoption, so can we.] So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 4:6-7)

Through our union with Jesus Christ, we now live as God’s adopted sons and daughters—no longer under the curse of the law, but free in Christ. We need this reminder. It’s not just that we sometimes fall back into legalistic thinking; it’s that we often forget altogether that we are sons and

daughters right now. We live as though there are no practical applications of this new life on this side of eternity. We push all the promises of God into heaven instead of living them now. We need this reminder: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Not “*will* put on Christ,” but “*have* put on Christ.” We should be living like our master. Instead of standing under the law’s curse of death, we fulfil the whole law as we live in the Spirit of love. St. John tells us, “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, *because he has given us of his Spirit*.” And lest we forget that this means a changed life here and now, he also tells us, “By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because *as he is so also are we in this world*” (1 John 4:13, 17). We are God’s adopted sons and daughters, and as much as we await the fullness of our inheritance in eternity, we are his sons and daughters *already* and his loving Spirit lives in us *today*.

Today’s Gospel points us to the same reality of our sonship. We might think that after Christmas, the lessons would talk about Jesus as he was growing up, but instead they take us to a time *before* his birth. St. Matthew tells us:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)

The first thing he tells us is that the birth of Jesus, the Second Adam, was a miraculous one. That’s vitally important as we saw on Christmas Eve. The baby in the manger isn’t just a baby. He’s the Son of God. But then Matthew goes on telling us about Joseph.

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:17-23)

Even the child’s name and title bring us back to this theme of adoption. He was named Jesus: “The Lord Saves”. But Matthew also

takes us back to the name Isaiah said he would be called by—Emmanuel: “God with us”. The first name identifies him as the Son of God and the second as the Son of Man. The first one reminds us that he saves us from our sins and the second that through him we are united with God. Satan lied to the first Adam, telling him that he could be a god himself, knowing good and evil, and now, in his mercy, God has opened our eyes to Satan’s lie and given the truth to all of us who are born again in Christ. Through submission to Christ we are made one with God and our eyes are opened to the evil and sin of Satan while God makes his goodness known to us.

Through Christ, God has restored us and given us new birth. That’s what lies behind our being “Christmas People”, but that new life isn’t just a change in our eternal destination—it’s a new life that we live *now*. It’s redemption that we live *now*. And we live it now because we are one with Christ and because we are God’s sons and daughters by adoption—not just after we die or after Jesus comes back, but *right here and right now*. And so, because our new life flows from him, if we want to know what our lives should look like here and now, we look to him. Isaiah wrote, “Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the LORD: look to the rock from which you were hewn” (Isaiah 51:1). He was pointing the people back to the faith of Abraham, but this verse points us as Christians to Jesus too. By the power of the Holy Spirit, each of us is a “chip off the old block”—and the block is Christ.

Through Jesus we are born again. By his indwelling Spirit we have new life. And yet while we know these things in our heads, a lot of the time we really fail to see what that means *today* and for how we live *now*. Instead of living out the new birth, we’re born again, but we keep living as if we were still dead. We’re free in Christ, but we keep living as slaves, only trusting we’ll be free on the other side of eternity. St. Paul reminds us in the Epistle that we are no more slaves, but sons of God. And the Gospel—these verses that tell us who the baby in the manger really is—it reminds us that God himself came to free us and call us his own. He is the Son of Man who came down from heaven whom he told Nicodemus about; he is the Word made flesh; he is the living tabernacle in which our souls can take refuge in the wilderness of the world; he is the living water, he is the bread of heaven—and we are united with him—and that means that we have new life *now*.

I was thinking about this last week. The book of Revelation crops up in the readings a lot in these last weeks of December and one particular passage seems to strike me every year during Christmas. In Revelation 12:1-5 we read:

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun.... She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon.... And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne.

These verses are a wonderful picture of the great spiritual battle that took place at Christmas—as the Virgin gave birth to the Messiah who would destroy the serpent, and yet it’s more than that. Because it’s a picture of the birth of Christ and the Father’s provision for him, it’s *also* a picture of us. That woman clothed with the sun and in her labour pains is the Church giving birth to her own son—to the saints who, especially in that first generation, were persecuted and martyred. Revelation 14:4 describes them as the “redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb.” It’s the Church of God, clothed with the Sun of Righteousness, giving birth to Christ the first-born in his members. Someone asked me once, “How can this be both a picture of Christ and a picture of the Church?” It can because he is the Son of God and through him we too are sons of God. We are risen with him, we reign with him, and we sit with him in the heavenly places.

And this is our problem. We fail to understand the Scriptures—and in failing to understand the Scriptures we fail to realise that our hope isn’t just for some time in the future—because sometimes we don’t realise just how privileged we are through our new birth in Jesus. Throughout the gospels Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, but for some reason we don’t realise that for the most part in describing that kingdom, he’s describing his Church here and now on earth and that heaven is something that in large part exists in our hearts by faith. And when we don’t realise these facts of life—of what it means to be God’s adopted sons and daughters right now—we read the Scriptures, but we miss just how practical they are for life today. Instead, we push it all into the future—something we’ll experience after we die. We’ve looked at a

couple of passages from Revelation already, so consider some of the other images that we see there: the throne of God and the One sitting on the throne and all around him the great company of saints rejoicing and praising him; think of the image of wearing crowns and reigning together with Christ for a thousand years—that long reign of the Church here in the world; think about those who have been redeemed and follow the Lamb who leads them to living fountains of water. If we miss what it means to be God’s children by adoption, it never occurs to us these things are simply pictures of the new life in Christ that we read about in the prophets and the gospels, and the epistles—that they’re portraits of the great blessings we have because we are born again with Jesus—not just future blessings, but blessing today and blessing that should be making an impact on how we live in the world—how we witness Christ.

The Scriptures show us these amazing things—heaven on earth, in a sense—but too often we miss them. For some reason we’re sometimes hesitant to accept that his kingdom has already begun and that his throne is among us. And yet thinking specifically of Revelation, St. John tells us that God has revealed these things because they are important now, that they’re practical, and should make a difference in how we live today—not just to inspire hope in us for tomorrow. Consider that Daniel—whose book is sort of the Old Testament counterpart to Revelation—when Daniel had received his visions, was told by the angel to seal the book up. It was full of prophetic revelations about the coming of Christ—something that wouldn’t happen for more than half a millennium. Daniel’s prophecy would inspire faith and hope in the coming Messiah, but it wasn’t about his own time. And yet St. John received his vision and the angel, deliberately using the same language of Daniel to make the connection, tells him *not* to seal the book. Why? Because in contrast to Daniel, John’s book wasn’t about things that were hundreds and hundred of years away, but that they described the Church right then and in the near future—that what was described in those pages was the life of God’s sons and daughters as they live in his kingdom—in his Church—here on earth. And yet what the angel told John not to seal, we choose ourselves to seal up—to push it into the future—and when we do that we miss the reality of the privilege of sonship that God has brought right to our own door. Brothers and sisters, heaven is near! Jesus said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat

with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). Jesus reminds us that he and his kingdom are not something far away or something we have to hope and long for—they’re right here if we are in him. Let me repeat that: Jesus and his kingdom are right here if we are in him.

Isaac Williams wrote, “We are too much inclined to put away from us what God tells us of our condition, as being grafted by Baptism into the Body of his Son, and having the inestimable gift of His Spirit. And thus we fall short of a due apprehension of the Scriptures; for we are led away by our own earthly wisdom and human sense of things...we cannot think that, as St. Paul says, we are made to sit together in Heavenly places with Christ, above the troubles and cares of this world; neither are we humbled at the reflection that because we are not doing so we are unfaithful to our high calling.”

Brothers and sisters, we inadvertently give up our birthright. And yet if we would only be diligent to walk in the Spirit and to learn as the Spirit reveals the deep things of God—the things such as eye has not seen nor ear heard—consider the difference it would make in our lives. Think of the blessings John shows, again in Revelation: “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power” (Revelation 20:6). Jesus tells us that those who partake of his living water will never die. It’s death that casts a dark shadow over life, so what better blessing can there be than to have no more reason to fear death. Many of us visited with our brother, Bill, during these last months and noticed his peace even as he knew his time was near. Bill was a profound encouragement to me in that even as he faced death, he had joy and was at peace. But Bill was at peace because he knew he was God’s son through Jesus. Friends, St. John wrote, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:19). What peace we would face were we to live with that blessing in mind every day. Each of us has been called to that marriage supper. We receive the foretaste of it every Sunday as we come to his Table.

In other places we—God’s sons and daughters—are described as “sealed” by the Spirit of God, and kept from all harm, temptation, and trouble. In another picture we’re described as playing instruments and singing before the throne, making that music to the Lord that St. Paul describes—peace and joy and a thankful spirit that rejoices in

the goodness of Christ; we sing the song of the angels to the shepherds—the song of the glory of God, peace on earth, and goodwill towards men. In yet another picture John sees us standing by that sea through which we escaped from our great enemy, holding harps, and singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb—giving thanks to God in the words of Scripture—of his Word—and bearing testimony of Christ. Or he shows us as having washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, serving God day and night in his temple as he sits on his throne in our midst—we hunger no more as we feast on the bread of that came down from heaven, and we thirst no more as we drink his living water. The lamb leads us by his own living guidance and refreshes us at the fountains of his own everlasting peace; and the God of comfort himself wipes away every tear and sorrow.

We could sit all morning and look at all the images John gives us of the sons and daughters of God—those “called, and chosen, and faithful”—but all these simply show us the life we have in Christ that we read about in the rest of Scripture—just given to us here in images that grab our attention. So instead of trying to push these images into the future, we need to see them for what they are: the amazing and glorious things that are ours through our adoption as God’s sons and daughters through Jesus Christ. Our friend and brother, Bill Hedges, was promoted to the Church Triumphant this past Thursday morning and we can take comfort and joy in the blessings of the life he has there, but brothers and sisters, remember that there is little more than a thin veil between the Church Triumphant and the rest of us here in the Church Militant. The blessings and life of the kingdom of heaven are ours, regardless of which side of the veil we’re on. Through Jesus, God has adopted us as his children. We are free and heirs with our Lord—but not heirs still living as slaves and waiting for their inheritance, but heirs living in the full blessings of the inheritance owned by the Son of God—our brother—now sitting at his Father’s right hand and ruling over his kingdom!

Melville Scott, a wise and insightful priest, preacher, and writer whom I only just encountered last month and whom I wish had written so much more than he did, wrote these very profound words that struck me yesterday and that should remind us of the reality of our sonship: “Though absent from the heavenly City, we are none the less its citizens, for the Church on earth and the Church in Heaven are in truth one, and the Kingdom of Grace is but a suburb of the

Kingdom of Glory.” Friends, let us live our lives in the full knowledge that we live them in the Kingdom of Grace. Bill understood this fact and that was why he was living in the light and couldn’t help but tell everyone around him about it. Let us too live in the hope and joy of the Gospel’s new life—not new life as just a future hope, but new life right *here* and right *now*, that we might shine the light of Christ our Saviour in the midst of a dark world that has no hope at all. And so we pray: “Almighty God, who gave us your only Son to take our nature upon him and to be born of a pure virgin, grant that we, who are born again in him and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.”