

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Galatians 4:21-5:1: "The Children of Promise Are Free."

March 21/22, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty and everlasting God, who gave Your only begotten Son into suffering and death, that in our stead He might render satisfaction to the Law: we most heartily ask You, graciously keep us from this time forward from seeking our own righteousness by the works of the Law, and enable us in true faith to put our trust solely in the merit of Jesus Christ, that by Your Holy Spirit the righteousness of the Law may be fulfilled in us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 90)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fourth and fifth chapters of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians.

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. / Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband." / Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who took upon Himself the yoke of sin and entered the dungeon of death, so that we would be ransomed and freed, dear fellow redeemed:

You and I are Americans. We were born here. We are citizens, so we have all the rights and privileges as outlined in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. We wouldn't like it if someone came along and tried to say we weren't actually Americans. "You don't understand what it means to be an American," you're told. "You don't appreciate American freedoms. You may have been born here, but you are not *from* here." We probably wouldn't have to think too hard about a response. We know what we are.

But what if it were true? What if we thought we were "good Americans," but everything we stood for contradicted the founding principles of our country? Something like this happened

when Jesus told the Jews they were not descendants of Abraham. "What!?" they said, "Of course we are descendants of Abraham! We can trace our family line all the way back to Abraham and his son Isaac and his son Jacob!" Jesus replied, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did" (Joh. 8:39-40).

The Jews to whom Jesus spoke may have been blood relatives of Abraham, but they were not his spiritual heirs. They thought they were children of promise in good standing with God. Jesus called them "slaves" – slaves to sin. "Whoever is of God hears the words of God," He said. "The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God" (8:47). The Jews were so offended at Jesus' criticisms and His claim to be God that "they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself" (v. 59). It wasn't His time to die yet, though that time would come.

In his letter to the churches of Galatia, the apostle Paul by inspiration of the Holy Spirit took up the same topic of Abraham and his descendants. Paul had traveled through the area of Galatia on his first and second missionary journeys. Christian congregations had been established along the way. But after Paul left, other preachers came. They did not teach the same doctrine as Paul. Presenting themselves as Christians, they urged the Galatian congregations to diligently keep the Old Testament laws. This included the laws regarding Jewish festivals and the law of circumcision.

But the Old Testament regulations were in place to point to Christ. Once He had accomplished His work, the Old Testament ceremonial and civil laws were no longer required (Col. 2:16-17). Jesus perfectly fulfilled them for all (Mat. 5:17-18). Hearing that the Galatian Christians were being swayed by these false teachers, Paul sent his letter. He asked the congregation members whether they received "the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith" (Gal. 3:2). He wrote that Abraham received the Spirit by faith, so "it is those of the faith who are the sons of Abraham" (v. 7).

Further on in the letter, Paul illustrated this teaching by the example of Abraham's two sons. One was born from Sarah's maidservant Hagar whom Sarah gave to Abraham in the hopes of obtaining a child (Gen. 16:2). Abraham and Hagar conceived a son named Ishmael. But Ishmael was not the child of promise. God kept His Word to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son of their own. They named their son Isaac. Isaac was the child of promise. "[A]ll the nations of the earth [would] be blessed" (Gen. 22:18) through him, because the Messiah would come from him.

The practicing Jews in Paul's day would have absolutely called themselves the spiritual descendants of Isaac. But Paul disagreed. Paul called the Jews who rejected the Gospel the spiritual children of Hagar's son Ishmael. "[Hagar] corresponds to the present Jerusalem," he wrote, "for she is in slavery with her children." And what was it that the Jews were enslaved to? They were enslaved to the law. They adhered to a religion of works. They rejected Jesus as their Holiness, their Substitute, and their Savior, and they trusted in their own righteousness. Therefore they remained in slavery to sin.

But the spiritual descendants of Isaac are those who believe the promise. They believe that God the Father sent His only Son to be born of Mary who could trace her lineage back to Abraham

and Isaac. They believe her Son Jesus kept the law perfectly in their place, so the law could no longer condemn them. They believe that His sacrifice on the cross ransomed them from the power of sin, devil, and death. These, wrote Paul, are "*children of promise,*" children of freedom.

So which category describes you? There are some who believe that the freedom which Jesus obtained for them allows them to do whatever they want. They are kind of like those who behave badly and say whatever wicked and unkind thing they want because "it's a free country." Our freedom as Christians can be misused just like our freedom as citizens can. Jesus' death for the forgiveness of our sins should not make us comfortable with sin. Since our sin caused the death of our perfect Lord, we should want to avoid sin at all cost. We are free from the condemnation of the law, but the Ten Commandments are still in place for our good and for the good of our neighbors.

Let's dig deeper into what it means to be free in Christ. Freedom in Christ means I do not have to wear a certain kind of clothing, eat or avoid certain foods, or work a certain job. I am free to go to the grocery store and buy whatever I want. I am even free to buy more than I need in the case that I might need it in the future. However I am not free to disregard the needs of my neighbor. Unfortunately we see this happening now when people hoard essential goods in quantities far higher than they need or for the purpose of reselling the products at a higher price. This selfishness and greed leaves their neighbors without and uncertain what to do. That is not the way of Christ.

At the same time, it is easy to think well of ourselves when we do not do those things. We care about our neighbors. We want to help them. We are generous. From these thoughts, it is only a small step to self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is comparing ourselves with others and imagining that we come out ahead. It is the opinion that we have done a fair job of keeping God's law. This is how the Jewish preachers were who wanted to pull the Galatian Christians from the doctrine they had been taught by Paul. They urged the Galatians to seek comfort and peace in what they did for God and not in what He had done for them.

Like the Galatians, we have fallen for this temptation many times. We love to compare ourselves with others and pass judgment on them: "Well I wouldn't have done that!" "How could he be so stupid!" "We would be so much better off without them!" Or, "They would be so much better off if they were like us!" This kind of self-righteous behavior comes even easier to us at this time of tremendous stress in our country. We want to find people to blame for this disruption in our lives. It could be carriers of the virus from other countries, our national and local government officials, health care workers who do not support us the way we expect, or any number of other targets.

But if all we want to do is hold other people's feet to the fire, then we should start holding our own feet to the fire. If we want to level the law at others, we should level it at ourselves. The fact is none of us by ourselves is better or more righteous than another. Paul wrote in another letter quoting a Psalm that "*all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one'*" (Rom. 3:9-10). By nature we are all slaves to sin.

But "*Christ has set us free*" from this slavery. He kept the requirements of the law perfectly in our place. As soon as we came to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, His righteousness became

our righteousness. That means we have no need to compare our life with the lives of others. We have nothing to do to get ourselves into heaven. Jesus fulfilled the law for us, and He fully paid the price for our sins. His atoning death in our place means the devil can do nothing more than blow hot air. His accusations cannot stick anymore, because Jesus won salvation for us.

We are now *"heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ"* (Rom. 8:17). We are children of promise, and **The Children of Promise Are Free**. We are free to love God and our neighbors, not in an attempt to get ourselves out of trouble or to prove our worth, but because Jesus set us free to love freely just as He loves us. We are members of *"the Jerusalem above,"* the holy Christian Church.

Our membership in Christ's Church by faith subjects us to persecution from those who remain enslaved to sin. But we are not about to return to that slavery. We *"stand firm"* in the glorious freedom we have in Christ. In Him, our sins are not counted against us anymore. Through Him, our salvation is certain when our life in this world ends. And with Him, we will enjoy the perfect bliss of heaven forever.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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