

In God's Time

New Year's Day, 2023 / First Sunday after Christmas

Galatians 4:4-7 and Matthew 2:13-23

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, Abba! Father! So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Matthew 2 - Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Dear Christian Friends

A Sunday School class was studying the story of David and the giant Goliath one morning. The teacher asked Johnny to tell the story in his own words. He told it in this way, "*Well, the big clumsy giant got hit in the head with a stone from David's slingshot, and he died.*"

The teacher then asked the class what they should learn from this story. Johnny replied, "It teaches that when someone throws a rock at you, you should duck."

Johnny hadn't really learned what the teacher was trying to teach him that day. And so it is with the familiar stories of Christmas, as well our own life experiences. Frequently, we fail to learn what the Holy Spirit is trying to teach us. In today's Epistle lesson, the Spirit of God would teach us the difference between living as a slave owned by a harsh Master and living as sons and daughters of a dear Father in heaven. The difference between living as a slave of the circumstances of your life vs. a child with all the rights and privileges of family living.

As we enter the year of our Lord 2023, we do well to learn again what Solomon wrote in his old age, "*that for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven....that God has made everything beautiful in its time.*"

Today's sermon theme is, "In God's Time." On this 8th day of Christmas we continue to celebrate God's perfect plan of salvation, which He carried out in the fullness of time. That is to say - at just the right time.

When the time was just right, God sent forth His Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and born under the Law. When the time was just right, the Son of God remained what He had always been - true God. And He took on what He had not previously been - truly human. When the time was just right, Jesus paid the ransom price for people who had been living under the guardianship of the Old Testament ceremonial law. He who was greater than all law placed Himself under that Law. He Who was greater than His mother became her child.

God becoming human changes everything. 1) It changes our motivation for living. 2) It changes our living arrangements. 3) It changes our benefit plans.

God becoming human changes our motivation for living.

There's a huge difference between doing something because you have and doing that same thing because you get to. The "have to" mentality is, by definition, a Law motivation. And a "get to" mentality, at least in terms of the Kingdom, is a Gospel motivation.

Slaves obey their masters out of a fear of the consequences if they do not obey. Sons and daughters who are properly motivated do their assigned chores out of gratitude for all their parents have provided. Slaves serve in constant fear and trembling. Properly motivated Christians serve voluntarily and with glad hearts. Slaves feel as though they will never satisfy their owners and if they can never truly relax. The baptized people of God rest in knowing that on a little hill outside of Jerusalem, their Savior has done it all. Slaves think of work as work; on their good days, Christians think of their vocations as pure privilege.

One could speculate what was going through the minds of Joseph and Mary as the angel of the Lord directed them to take their baby in the middle of the night and run for their lives. Did they consider the 500 mile journey a pure privilege? Or were they shaking their puny little fists at Almighty God and cursing the darkness?

We don't know the answers to those questions, but we do know this - that way of discipleship wasn't meant to be easy. God could have made it easy for Joseph and Mary, but He didn't. He could have seen to it that the census was called for at a different time and Joseph and Mary could have stayed in the familiar and safe small town of Nazareth, but He didn't. God could have worked it out that there was a nice room in the inn with a king size mattress and running water, but He didn't. He could have seen to it that King Herod didn't get all bent out of shape and command a slaughter of innocent children, but He didn't. God could have

arranged the first few months of the baby Jesus' life so that they didn't have to take flight into a dangerous darkness, but this is what had been prophesied and this is the way God wanted it.

Or as Lynn Anderson sang it out, *I beg your pardon / I never promised you a rose garden / Along with the sunshine / There's gotta be a little rain sometime*

Or as our old coaches used to like to say in ten words or less, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

Or in five words or less, "Attitude is everything."

The kingdom of God is like a man who is learning along the way that disappointment and painful experiences are in fact terrific opportunities for God to draw him closer and closer. That lighting a candle is far more helpful than cursing the darkness. And that what seem like unwelcome detours in life are in fact part of a divine plan to build his character.

God becoming human changes our living arrangements.

Slaves are kept at a distance from their masters, but children are able to draw near on a daily basis. Slaves sleep in cold and damp servants' quarters, but children rest warm and safe and near their parents. (One of my earliest memories is that when I wasn't feeling good, I could sleep between Mom and Dad. Could there be a better memory than that?)

God becoming human changes our living arrangements. No longer do we live as oppressed and "ordered around" employees, but as sons and daughters free to ask for advice and help. Slaves cower in fear when they have disobeyed and know that they will be taught a lesson through punishment. Children may also be afraid when they have done that which is wrong, but they know that when Dad is done disciplining, he will take his dear child on his knee and say, "I have always loved you, I love you right now, and I always will. That hurt me more than it hurt you."

Not only did God send His Son to intervene in our messed up world at just the right time, He continues to teach and to mold and to shape and to work everything out for the good of those who love him and are called according to His purposes.

Our living arrangements, as we enter a brand new year, are the same as they have always been for the baptized and precious and redeemed people of God. We live

as dear children live in a family full of kindness and patience, as well as clear and consistent boundaries.

As a grandson cries out for grandpa to play ball with him, as a child crawls up on Grandma's lap for story time, as an infant nurses contentedly with her mom, as a teenage son asks Dad for \$10, as a college son asks Dad for \$10,000, as a husband asks his wife for forgiveness for his inattentiveness and self-centeredness, as a wife looks to her husband for refuge and strength in time of trouble, so do you and I have the privilege in this new year of crying out day after day for God to have mercy. The privilege of asking for and receiving daily bread and so much more. The privilege of coming and going as we please. The privilege of exercising free will and learning lessons by trial and error. Enjoying the privileges of heavenly citizenship, even as we travel through the ups and downs of life together.

God becoming human changes our benefit plans.

Christmas is that annual reminder that God carried out his perfect plan of reconciling a sinful world unto Himself in a perfect manner. In so doing, He has changed our status, our attitude, and our agendas. Our motivation for doing good works is centered at the cross and empowered by the empty tomb. Our living arrangements are first class and give us reason to be perpetually grateful. Again and again we eat and drink at the Holy Supper, where the benefits of our Lord's suffering and death and resurrection are delivered directly into our hearts and souls.

Over the last ten years, many workers have found their health insurance and retirement benefits getting cut and downsized. But not so with our eternal retirement plan. We live with the wonderful certainty that our names have been written in the book of life, our heavenly mansions are on reserve, our dear Father answers every one of our proper prayers in the way that is best for us, our brother Jesus intercedes on our behalf without ceasing.

In ancient days, slaves were usually unpaid, but only provided with basic shelter and necessities. Sons, on the other hand, looked forward to receiving the inheritance. Daughters could also look forward, not to receiving their parents' inheritance, but marrying into another family where they would be taken care of and provided for.

So much Good News we have today, as we tiptoe into the new year. Not only do we have a Savior that is with us, He is for us, He is alongside us, He is out in front leading the way, and He is behind us ready to pick up the pieces.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who have their not all that great days, their ok days, and their really good days.

On their not so great days, they don't do well with interruptions. They see no value in detours and disappointments. If you listen closely, you will hear them use a lot of "have to" and "woe is me." language. They're out of sorts, and if you ask them why, they're not really sure.

On their ok days, if you ask them how they're doing, they'll say "ok" or "fine" or "I'm here." They do trust in Christ as their Savior, and they know they are blessed, but it would be a stretch to say that they are on fire for Jesus Christ.

On their really great days, they confess their faults and failures to God, at which time His grace sweeps over them the way sheets of rain refresh a dry and parched land. They know by faith that marriage and family are not only full of duty and responsibility, but also tremendous privilege. They know by faith that chores and commitments aren't just something to be done, they are privileges to be enjoyed. They know by faith that their assignment each day is in figuring out when it's time to speak and when to listen, when to be served and when to serve, when to find refuge and hunker down and when to charge forward out of that comfort zone, when to let it go and when to speak the truth in love, when to mind their own business and when to be aggressively about their Father's business. In Jesus' Name. Amen.