

Christmas Restores Hope: You Belong to God

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This morning we are going to read a scripture passage that is not one of the typical passages we consider a part of the Christmas story. We love Luke's version about the angels and shepherds. We love Matthew's account of the wise men. Our scripture this morning comes from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians. This letter was written around 52 AD—less than 20 years after the death of Jesus. Paul may have met Mary. He certainly spent time with John who took care of Mary after Jesus' death. He heard all the stories that Luke and Matthew would record. But rather than recounting the stories, in a few words he captures the profound significance of Christmas. He was the first to proclaim the real reason for the season.

For centuries faithful Jewish people had waited for the promised Messiah. When the appointed time came, God sent forth his Son. Paul tells us what it all means.

⁴ But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. ⁶ Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Galatians 4:4-7

VIDEO: Where do you feel like you belong?

Where do you feel you belong? The Christmas story reveals where we belong. In order to enter the place where we belong, there is a problem that must be resolved. Paul says the problem is that we are all under the law. There is something innately inside of us that does not like laws. We rebel against laws. "Laws are made to be broken!" However, our existence is saturated with laws. We put ourselves under laws all the time. When you go on a diet you make laws for yourself: "I can eat this; I can't eat that". How long does it take to break one of those laws? When you become a parent you make laws for yourself: "When I have children I will never...." But it does not take long until we are making the very same mistakes as parents that we swore we would never make.

As citizens we are under laws of our government—city, state and federal. There are laws about how fast we can drive. We have all violated those laws. We may not have gotten caught, but we've all driven over the speed limit some time.

When we break laws we create a debt-debtor relationship. When you break the law of the speed limit and get pulled over, you are given a slip of paper for a debt you owe for breaking the law. You will have to pay a fine. Whenever we break a law, no matter what law, we incur a debt. If we break a law of parenting, we incur a debt with our children. If we abuse them, neglect them, abandon them—we break a law of parenting, and we owe our children a debt.

Sometime we cannot pay the debt. If we are broke and cannot pay the traffic ticket, we go to jail. The debts with our children we cannot go back and repay—there are no “do-overs” when it comes to parenting.

When we break the laws of the state, the consequences vary according to the seriousness of the crime. There are degrees of misdemeanors and felonies. Punishments vary from a small fine or a few days in jail to life without parole or even the death penalty.

When we break God's laws - no matter which ones - it is a serious offense. We are all under God's laws. The most well known laws are the Ten Commandments. In New Testament times, some of the religious leaders thought they had never broken those laws. A rich young ruler told Jesus he had observed all the commandments since he was born. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clarified some of the Ten Commandments to make it clear that we had all broken them. He said, “If you have lusted after another person in your heart, you have committed adultery.” “If you have

been angry with a brother or sister, it is the same as murder.” Ouch. He makes it clear that we have all broken the law of God. When we break any of God’s laws the consequence is the same: separation from God which results in death. The debt we owe for breaking God’s law is the death penalty—spiritual, emotional and physical death. It is a debt we cannot pay.

In our scripture reading this morning, Paul tells us that Jesus came to redeem those under the law. Jesus paid the debt for us that we could not pay. As the chorus says, “I owed a debt I could not pay. He paid a debt he did not owe. I needed someone to take my sin away. Christ Jesus paid a debt that I could never pay.” Jesus Christ gave his life on the cross in our place. He paid our debt so we could be forgiven. Because of his death, we are set free from the penalty of death.

All of that is legal terminology about debts and debtors and wiping the slate clean. It is good to know that our sins are forgiven because of what Jesus did for us on the cross and that we will go to heaven and not to hell. But Paul says there is more to Christmas than Jesus just coming to pay our debt.

Paul says we are not just forgiven, we are adopted—we receive full rights as sons. God says, “I don’t just forgive your debt, I want a relationship with you.” You can forgive someone, but not have a relationship with someone. God says, “Not only do I forgive you. I adopt you as my son with full rights.”

To the people in the first century, this was a radical idea. In the Roman world infants and young children were not adopted. You never knew how they were going to turn out, so why would you adopt them and make them an heir? The Romans waited until someone was an adult before they would consider adoption. If their own kids

turned out to be rotten, spoiled and irresponsible, then a Roman would adopt a responsible adult as a son to inherit his property and status. Julius Caesar did this. He adopted his grandnephew, Octavian, as a son when he was nineteen years old. He inherited Caesar's estate and his position as Emperor. Octavian became known as Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor when Jesus was born.

When Paul talked about receiving full rights as sons, he was talking about the process of adoption. Those reading his letter in the first century were blown away. God looks at us with all our flaws—stubborn, rebellious, spoiled, self-centered—no one would adopt us. But God looks at us as redeemed by Jesus and therefore worthy of adoption. God looks at you and says, “I want you. You belong to me. I give you full rights as my son.”

How often do you hear a story about a couple unable to have natural children, and they decide to adopt. A few months after the adoption is final, they conceive a child. A father who had both adoptive children and natural children, told me that one of his adoptive children asked him one day, “Do you love me as much as you do your other children?” The father responded, “Our other children just happened. But we chose you. You belong to us. You are special.”

That's what God says to us. He chooses us. We belong to him. We are special. We receive full rights as sons. Some wonder why didn't Paul use gender neutral terms like “children” or “sons and daughters?” In the first century, women had no rights. They could not become heirs of an estate. When Paul addresses the Galatians, he is talking to both men and women. He says that all of them receive full rights as sons. It was a radical idea. It elevated the position of women to be full heirs of God.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he says, "If we are sons, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ." (Romans 8:17) Amazing! We are elevated to the status of receiving the same inheritance of Jesus Christ! We are adopted as sons with the full rights. This side of heaven, we have no clue what that means, but we will receive an inheritance beyond what we can dream or imagine.

Paul isn't finished yet. He says the Spirit of Christ has been sent into our hearts and calls out "Abba." It is getting even better. "Abba" is an Aramaic word of affection for father. It is equivalent of our word, "daddy." A child calls a beloved father, "daddy." Jesus was the first to address the Creator God of the universe as "daddy." Paul says when we are forgiven and adopted and receive our full rights as sons, then we have such an intimate relationship with God that we can call him by the same name that Jesus called him. We can call him "daddy."

God invites us as his adoptive children to this level of intimacy. Paul is not finished yet with the staggering implications of what it means to belong. He says you are no longer slaves. A person became a slave when he owed someone a debt and could not pay. Rather than throw the debtor into prison, he would become a slave and would work with no privileges, no rights, no pay. He became an object—a debt payment. Paul says, you are no longer slaves. Your debt has been paid in full by Jesus Christ. You are redeemed. You are co-heirs with Christ.

Paul says this is the meaning of Christmas. The song "O, Holy Night" sums it up. "Long lay the world in sin and error pining, 'til he appeared and the soul felt its worth." That's it. Because of Christmas we know what our soul is worth! And we feel our worth.

It is not just a transaction. Christmas is an invitation to an intimate, personal relationship with God as Abba—daddy.

Fred Craddock was vacationing with his wife one summer in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. One night they found a quiet little restaurant where they looked forward to a private meal. While they were waiting for their food, they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting with the guests. Craddock leaned over and whispered to his wife, "I hope he doesn't come over here." He didn't want anyone intruding on their privacy. But sure enough, the man did come over to their table. "Where you folks from?" he asked in a friendly voice.

"Oklahoma," Craddock answered.

"Splendid state, I hear, although I've never been there," the stranger said. "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a seminary professor," Craddock replied.

"Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach, do you? Well, I've got a story to tell you."

And with that, the gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with Craddock and his wife.

Dr. Craddock said he groaned inwardly and thought to himself, "Oh, no! Here comes another preacher story!"

The man stuck out his hand. "I'm Ben Hooper," he said. "I was born not far from here across the mountains. My mother wasn't married when I was born, so I had a pretty hard time. When I started to school, my classmates had a name for me, and it wasn't a very nice name. I used to go off by myself at recess and lunch time because the things they said to me cut so deep. What was worse was going

to town on Saturday afternoons and feeling like every eye was burning a hole through me, wondering just who my father was.

"When I was about 12 years old, a new preacher came to our church. I would always go in late and slip out early. But one day the preacher said the benediction so fast I got caught and had to walk out with the crowd. I felt like every eye in the church was on me. Just about the time I got to the door I felt a big hand on my shoulder. I looked up and the preacher was looking right at me. 'Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?' he asked. I felt this big weight coming down on me. It was like a big black cloud. Even the preacher was putting me down. But as he looked down at me, studying my face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. 'Wait a minute!' he said. 'I know who you are. I see the family resemblance now. You are a child of God.' With that he slapped me across the rump and said, 'Boy, you've got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.'

The old man looked across the table at Fred Craddock

and said, "Those were the most important words anybody ever said to me, and I've never forgotten them."

With that, he smiled, shook hands and moved on to another table to greet old friends.

And as he walked away, Craddock--a native of Tennessee himself--remembered from his studies of history that on two occasions the people of Tennessee had elected as governor men who had been born out of wedlock. One of them was a man named Ben Hooper.

We all want to know that there is a place where we belong—a place where we are loved and accepted as we are. A place where we are special. Christmas says, "You

belong to God.” Do you know how much God loves you and longs for a relationship with you? Christmas is an invitation to a relationship with God. When we say “Yes” to this invitation it changes everything. We know whose we are. We know to whom we belong. We know our worth. We know he wants to be with us and will never leave us or forsake us.

Christmas is God’s ways of saying “You belong to me. Come claim your inheritance.”