Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare)
14 March 2021

Born through Promise

Text: Galatians 4:21-31
Hymn: "Jesus, Priceless Treasure" (*LSB* 743)

"You are not the same person I married." If these words are said in a conversation between husband and wife, rarely is it meant as a compliment. People change and the danger in any relationship is that this change is a moving apart, where there is no longer harmony in the relationship.

"You are not the same congregation I left." That is what Paul is saying in the Letter to the Galatians. That is his frustration. False teachers from Jerusalem have invaded the congregations in Galatia. And what the people in Galatia see as spiritual growth, Paul sees as falling away from the Gospel, as something that is destructive for the relationship between the apostle and congregation and ultimately of the relationship between the congregation and Christ.

In the verse just before this, Paul says that when he was last with them, things were so different. How so? Well, he reminds them of when he first came to them he had taken ill. He was stuck in Galatia and decided he might as well use the opportunity to preach. And though the natural reaction to a stranded, sick stranger claiming to be a messenger of God would be to dismiss him ("God's messenger, huh? Can't God take care of you?"), the Galatians actually welcomed him. They received the message he preached, the Gospel—the free forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake. And they loved the messenger for having brought it to them.

But things had changed since then. Now it's "Paul? Who's Paul? We've got the teachers from Jerusalem now; they know what they're talking about." And so much for

their for Paul. And what was it the Galatians turned their backs on Paul about? Well, they weren't offended by Paul's preaching of the Law. It wasn't his "Do this"s and "Do that"s that they were sick of. They rejected his preaching the Gospel! They grew tired of hearing that for Jesus' sake God forgave them and loved them!

Now, we can imagine people leaving Christianity over the preaching of the law, over the Church's stance on abortion or homosexuality, hot-button topics like that. But this is not the kind of thing that got Paul in trouble with the Galatians. The rift between them was over was the Gospel! They became convinced that there was something better, more fulfilling, more spiritual than the good news that they were justified—forgiven of their sins—for Christ's sake. And the message they found more attractive was this: To be saved, one must keep all the laws of Moses.

And Paul isn't just a little upset by this. He is devastated. He describes the Galatians' falling away in terms of losing a child. How could Paul's beloved Galatians exchange God's free gift for a legal scheme, a life lived under the burden of keeping laws? Who has bewitched you? he says (Gal 3:1).

The Galatian Christians had fallen for the lie that Jesus was not enough for their salvation; that to be saved they had not only to believe in Jesus but also to keep all the Old Testament laws. And as crazy as this sounds, it's essentially what happens to any Christian who has tasted the goodness of the LORD, who has known the joy of being a ransomed child of God, but over time falls for a version of Christianity—a false version—that teaches the way to heaven depends to some extent, whether entirely or even just a little, on their own obedience. God will bless you *if*... God will do this for you, but *you* must... Jesus has done His part; now you have to do yours.

This then is what Paul is getting at when he says, "Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" The Galatians were basing their salvation keeping all the laws God had given ancient Israel, the civil and ceremonial laws, yes, but also those moral laws that apply to everyone ("Don't murder," "Don't steal," "Don't bear false witness"). But where did those laws they were putting themselves under come from? They came from the Torah, the first Five Books of Moses, known in Greek as "The Law," capital "T", capital "L." In other words, you Galatians want to put yourselves under the laws of the Torah? Well, what does the Torah itself say?

Because the Torah is more than just laws. It also contains the story of Abraham and Sarah. You know the story. Abraham had a wife, Sarah, who was barren. Yet God promised to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, out of which the Savior of the world would be born. It was a promise on which Abraham and Sarah rested their faith. But after so many years, it looked to Sarah and Abraham that God wasn't going to keep this promise. Sarah was past childbearing age and God still hadn't given her a child. So she devised her own plan. She offered her slave, Hagar, to Abraham so that he could father a child through her. The child would be Abraham's legal son and heir. And so Hagar bore him a son that they named Ishmael.

Hagar was a slave. She wasn't Abraham's true wife. She was his wife's slave. But after she had borne a son, Hagar acted as if she were superior to Sarah. She despised her mistress. She looked down on Sarah for being barren. (Someone fact-check me on this, but I'm pretty sure this is why to this day Hagar is known as "Hagar the Horrible.") At any rate, by all appearances God had blessed Hagar instead of Sarah. It appeared as if God favored the slave woman over the free woman.

But appearances are deceiving. God did not need Sarah's intervention nor did He need Hagar's fruitful womb to keep the promise He had given to Abraham. God had promised an heir to Abraham. God would fulfill the promise He had given. He would do it His way. He would do it by means of a miracle. He came to Abraham and promised him that his wife Sarah would have a son. The son was born and named Isaac.

As Ishmael and Isaac grew up, Ishmael despised and persecuted Isaac even as his mother had despised Sarah. Like mother, like son. Sarah patiently endured Hagar's haughtiness until finally her patience came to an end. She told Abraham to get rid of the slave woman and her son. They were thrown out. They had no right to what God had promised. They may have had a *legal* claim based on who was the firstborn, but that meant nothing when set against the *promise* of God. God chose Sarah and God chose Isaac. Ishmael was born in a natural way, according to the flesh. Isaac was born by God's promise.

Paul shows the Galatians the symbolism of this. The Galatian Christians had been set free from the curse of the law. They had been made children of the promise, heirs of heaven. Why the heck would they want to make yourselves slaves to the law again? Christ having run the race already, what would possess them to want to step back on the treadmill of works again? Why would anyone do that?

And yet life under the law has its attractions. One of the biggest ones is that it flatters our sinful egos. If salvation is a matter of my doing, then while some may better than me, surely there are also going to people who are worse, which means I can look down on them and feel better about myself. In this way, we are all naturally born Hagars, despising the ones whose only hope is in a promise from God. But God's Law

says to each of us individually, "Do this and you will live." No matter what anyone else has done, *you* haven't done and so *you* shouldn't live. And God has no qualms about going nuclear. He's not concerned about not being re-elected.

Another great attraction living under the law offers is it gets things done. Herod's magnificent temple in Jerusalem, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome—all made possible by believers bewitched by the notion that their salvation depended on how many copper coins they put in the offering box or how many indulgences they purchased.

God's law is good. It is His holy will for us. But it does not save us. Instead it reveals our need for the One who does and to the promise He makes, "I forgive you all your sins." It's just a promise, not nearly as impressive as a bunch of shiny good works. But it's everything. Speaking of buildings, for the last three years Our Redeemer's boiler has depended for its successful operation on the power of prayer. To the Hagars out there this is clear proof that we should start guilting people into giving. But God does provide. And we, His free people, do give, but not to earn God's favor. We have that already. It's just a promise, not nearly as impressive as the Mormon Tabernacle. But that promise is everything.

You, dear members of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, are not the Galatians. You haven't left. You're still here. Just a few minutes ago, you presented to God not all the ways you've kept His law and deserve His blessing but your sin—all of it, right down to your *being a sinner*. And then you received by faith the promise—I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And so the Word for you is not, "Who has bewitched you?" Or, "You are not the same congregation I began serving so many years ago." No, the Word is, well, it's like

the song for Jill's and my wedding dance, Frank Sinatra's "The Way You Look Tonight." The lyrics capture what St. Paul was telling the Galatians and what those same words tell us: "Lovely….never, ever change / Keep that breathless charm / Won't you please arrange it? Cause I love you / Just the way you look tonight."

You are lovely in God's eyes, have been ever since your baptism into Christ. He gave you His perfect life to cancel out your sinful one. He gave you His death to take the sting out of yours. He gave you His resurrection so you might the strength to walk in faith and hope each and every day until the one in which you'll be raised and revealed as who you really are, God's dear children. Hagar's "I did it my way" is a dead end. You are not Ishmaels. You are Isaacs. Born through promise, children of the free woman, of the Jerusalem from above, not working to earn rewards but simply receiving an inheritance that comes down to you from heaven. To you Jesus says, "Never, ever change! You are lovely, just the way you look right now."

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