

SERMON- Christmas 1 (C)

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Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

December 29, 2024

John 1:1-18

Psalms 147

OPENING:

On this last service of the year, we get the beginning.

Somehow, it's fitting, this close to Christmas, and this close to a new year, that we land all the way back at the beginning.

In John's Gospel, we go all the way back to the "In the beginning" of Genesis and even before.

The reading from Galatians is likewise "old"—Galatians might be the FIRST of Paul's letters, which makes it the oldest surviving Christian writing, having been written decades before the Gospels.

Reaching even further back, Paul in our passage itself is quoting from a baptismal service that itself happened in an early, early Christian liturgy.

So ball park, if Jesus' died in the 30s, the earliest Gospel was written in the 60s, Paul's earliest letter was written in the 50s, maybe this is quoting something from the 40s!

Biblical scholars go "Goo-goo gah-gah" over this sort of thing because it provides an understanding not just of the doctrine, but the practice of the early church.

And, amazingly, today we still use some of that same ancient language:

We say "In the fullness of time" every week in Rite II, Eucharistic Prayer B.

I know this is 8 AM but ponder those "10 AM" words for a moment: "Fullness of time"—an expression so pregnant with meaning. It means something like "finally" or "after it all" but it might mean something like "when things were good and ready."

GALATIANS 4.4:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,

This beautiful section shows up on the 1st Sunday of Christmas every year and it's sometimes called "the Good News of Paul's Letter to the Galatians."

The letter, as a whole, has a lot going for it.

Right in the midst of this passage, we hear Paul's *tour de force*:

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."¹

Later there is the famous line from it which the King James translates as "God is not mocked."²

Finally, Galatians is also one of the shortest letters...
so theoretically one of the easiest to read.

EIGHT AM:

You should be waiting for a "BUT" by this point.

And be thinking "When he only has an 8 AM sermon to preach, sometimes is Charles chooses to preach the more difficult scripture in our Lectionary."

Paul's letter to the Galatians indeed also has a lot going AGAINST it.

In it, Paul is anxious about the state of the church, and he spends most of the letter yelling at the Galatians.

For example, earlier in Chapter 3, he writes:

"You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?"³

Talking about his theological opponents, Paul takes it further, writing

"As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves."⁴

And, at the end of the letter, Paul literally writes:

"See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand."⁵

You can imagine Paul grabbing the manuscript from his scribe and says, "let ME finish drafting this memo."

People, Christians, start to slowly back away to the door when they read this type of Paul... angry Paul, passionate Paul.

Especially when some vague Biblical knowledge bubbles about Paul being anti-women, anti-gay, antisemitic, might bubble up.

You might even the summon a physical description of Paul from apocryphal texts: bald, with a curved nose, and an unknown physical malady that gave him sores.

"Paul manages to offend virtually everyone" it has been said.⁶

¹ Galatians 3.26-29.

² Galatians 6.7

³ Galatians 3.1

⁴ Galatians 5.12

⁵ Galatians 6.11

⁶ Charles B. Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, James D. Newsome, eds. 1994. *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year C*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 396–98

Regardless, we are a long way from the beatific Jesus of Nazareth, in other words, not to mention the pleasant scenes of the manger and the Christmas story.

GALATIANS

If you might want to avoid Paul, that puts you in good company, the Galatians, his former missionary community, also had fled from his teaching.

And that's maybe the most important thing about Galatians is that it's useful because it's written in the context of a community in conflict, politically and religiously, as we are, and because it's written in a context that is tough and uncompromising, like we are not.

So to address just a few of those points of conflict in our text:

Sometimes when you hear "Born of a Woman"—it SOUNDS sexist, as if Paul is trying to say that Jesus was human and therefore sinful because "all woman going back to Eve" are sinful. Or something like that.

But it's not... instead it's emphasizing Jesus' humanity.

It's elevating womanhood and motherhood and humanity by saying Jesus was "born of a woman" like all people are. And that's important

You might WISH that Paul would say something about the Incarnation that included Mary or Joseph or the donkeys and the manger, but he doesn't. He skips it entirely, not only Jesus birth but also his life.

(But that's a sermon for another day.)

Another way of thinking about this comes from Eucharistic Prayer C, again I know you are 8 AM, this is an 8 AM service, but in Rite II, Prayer C, there is a section that goes:

*Lord God of our Fathers: God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*⁷

Some parishes, including this one, have changed that formula and added the matriarchs, "Lord God of our Mothers; God of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel"

The instinct there is sound, that you need to balance the patriarchs out with the matriarchs. Maybe we should.

But that's not the point of the prayer, the point of the prayer is to recognize Jesus' place in salvation history, to recognize that God has always been working through

⁷ BCP pg. 372

this world and through God's chosen people, the people of Israel.

That leads to Paul's other point of conflict.

It's the oldest argument in Christianity, again we are going to back to the very beginning. What is the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

This passage can *sound* like Paul is saying: well, the Jews thought of things this way, then Jesus came and Christianity started and we figured everything out.

That's actually the exact opposite of what Paul is saying, or what Jesus was saying.

Here's where it starts to get really hairy.

We want to believe that the story goes like this: we were doing all right then and now, but God sent Jesus as a kind of Quality Control, to adjust the knobs on our autonomous selves and then together we can figure this out.

BY NO MEANS;

Paul is saying:

God invaded the world because it suffered from a universal condition of slavery. Not just one part of the world, to redeem some. It was an invasion that came from humanity for the sake of all humanity.

It was not one religion to replace another. But rather something entirely different. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who has been our guide throughout Advent, talked about it this way: "God has founded his church *beyond* religion."

The desperate quality of that saving act is highlighted by Paul's citation of that moment where the baptized come out of the water. God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, The words that those who had been baptized were said to have uttered as they emerged from the cleansing water of Christian initiation were "Abba! Father!" in both Aramaic and Greek.

We were never so dead when they are submerged in that water, never so alive when they come out of it.

In order that we might understand Paul's thinking in a contemporary context, try this metaphor, staying in World War II and Europe. This metaphor compares that apocalyptic "invasion" to Europe's liberation by the Allies in 1944. So the Allies come in and invade and sweep the Nazis from power. But our new baptismal identity does *not* correspond to the event as experienced by the Germans' captives, in other words but, rather, as experienced by the *Germans* themselves.

CONCLUSION

Such a stark understanding of the power of baptism casts a long shadow across the faith landscape.

What Paul seems to be saying is that we don't mature gradually into a state of knowing God, from adolescence into adulthood, instead our Baptism is a punctiliar moment, that effects liberation with the suddenness of the baptismal submergence.

Paul attacks any sort of observance, condemning a "ladder theology" as not only unnecessary but a backwards step into enslavement under the Law.

Paul has no confidence in repentance, equally disdainful of conversion.

This is why Galatians is so hard. Even the cherished *metanoia* this "turning" of the synoptics comes under attack.

What should we do, according to Paul?

Good question!

I struggle with this all the time! And might only have the courage to preach it at 8 AM.

"Human reason has the Law as its object. It says to itself: 'this I have done; this I have not done.'

But faith in its proper function has no other object than Jesus Christ.'

Thus the question NOT "what have I done?" RATHER: What has Christ done for me?

Capon: "People hate the law, but are *terrified* of the Gospel, of grace, and of good news."
But in the "fullness of time" maybe we can begin to understand that.

AMEN