

## **“Adoption Accomplished”**

Galatians 4:4-7

Christmas Sunday 1, Dec. 28, 2014

**I am not sure that it’s necessarily a true story, but it is very much a “true-to-life story” about a 5 year old boy named Sam. He liked to run and play and get dirty; especially in mud puddles after a nice rain. Sam had two dimples; one in each cheek that especially endeared him to people when he smiled! But Sam had not smiled all that much in the past 18 months; not since his parents died tragically in an automobile accident when he was only 3 and ½ years old. Since that time he had been living in an orphanage! And while everyone at the orphanage was especially kind to him and loved him—and he had made some friends with the other boys and girls who were also residents there, Sam knew that this was not the same thing as living in a real home with real parents as he had before.**

**One day, however, when Sam playing a game of dodge ball with his friends at the orphanage, something was happening down at the County Courthouse that he had no knowledge of whatsoever; something that could change the course of his whole life forever. A young couple who had visited the orphanage, who were very much hoping to adopt Sam to be their own son, was meeting with Judge Johnson to explore that possibility. Many affidavits were submitted to the court on their behalf. Others were there giving personal testimonies that day. And shortly after that meeting Judge Johnson ruled that this young couple would become Sam’s new parents. He would go home and live with them and he was happy about that arrangement.**

**St. Paul is reminding us that the LORD God Almighty one day made a similar decision in the ancient annals of history regarding us! It is a decision of which we also had no foreknowledge whatsoever. It is a decision that we have been celebrating with millions of other people all around the earth for five days now! This decision was for **our God to send his eternally-begotten Son into our world as one of us, to take on our human flesh and blood and skin, so that we might have the opportunity to become adopted by his Heavenly Father as his own sons and daughters too**; all of us, who by nature were separated and alienated from our God because of our sin, and death, and the power of the evil one!**

**One of my favorite television programs when I was growing up on Saturday afternoon black-and-white television was that show entitled: “Dennis the Menace!”** Perhaps some of you can remember that program too! I still remember that one episode where Mrs. Wilson had baked a big batch of homemade cookies and then invited Dennis and his sidekick Tommy into her kitchen to enjoy some of those cookies while they were still warm, soft and gooey, and she provided a tall glass of cold milk to go with those cookies to each one of them!

Tommy said, “Dennis, Mrs. Wilson must think that we are awfully good boys for her to invite us into her kitchen and share these cookies with us!”

**“No Tommy, you have it all wrong!”** Dennis said, and then continued. “Mrs. Wilson is not inviting us into her kitchen to enjoy these cookies because of what’s in our hearts; it’s because of what’s in hers! It’s not because we’re so good it’s because she’s so good!”

The message of God in our Epistle lesson today runs along a similar theme. God has adopted us to be his children not because of our sterling credentials but because of his own great redeeming and unconditional love!

**(1) Many people who read the Bible do not realize that in that Roman culture of the first century world, Roman citizens sometimes put their children, whom they loved, up for adoption to be adopted by someone else; sometimes a relative, because the adoptive parents had a much better position in society.** They were, perhaps, wealthier and better educated. It wasn't necessarily because the parents giving their children up for adoption loved money more than they loved their children.

We know that the great **Caesar Augustus, mentioned in the Christmas story** we read here this past Wednesday evening, was **not actually the biological son of Julius Caesar.** Caesar Augustus was by birth Julius's Caesar's biological nephew, but Caesar Augustus birth father, Gaius Octavius died when Augustus was only four years old. Augustus mother was Julia—who allowed her brother Julius to adopted Augustus so that he might one day be heir apparent to the throne!

**Two times the biological father/mother would buy back their son, but on the third time around the offer would not be repeated.**

**(2) The Jewish people in Paul's day, however, had no such practice of adoption. When they thought about God adopting people, they looked back to their own ancestors' exodus experience 1200 years before this.** Though they were descendants of Abraham and were benefactors of a great covenant God made with Abraham too—God renewed that covenant for his people when he sent Moses to liberate them from 400 years of bondage in slavery to the Egyptians, and in the covenant that he established with them at **Mount Sinai** too. And you remember what God reveals to his people at that time; words that some theologians believe are the Old Testament equivalent to **John 3:16.** In **Deuteronomy 7:7** we read: *“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the dearth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt!”* (Deut. 7:6-8)

**(3) And thirdly, St. Paul never forgot that his own conversion experience that took place many years before this on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9) was much like an act of adoption on God's part towards him as well!**

St. Paul never tired of praising God for the undeserved mercy that God had one day showered upon him personally, as one who was a former, violent persecutor of the church, but had now not only become a Christian but was convinced by God the Holy Spirit that God was calling upon Paul to become a great mission of the Gospel to the Gentile world. In **Ephesians 3** we hear Paul say, **“OF THIS GOSPEL, I WAS MADE A MINISTER ACCORDING TO THE GIFT OF GOD'S GRACE, WHICH WAS GIVEN ME BY THE WORKING OF HIS POWER. TO ME, THOUGH I AM THE VERY LEAST OF ALL THE SAINTS, THIS GRACE WAS GIVEN, TO PREACH TO THE**

**GENTILES THE UNSEARCHABLE RICHES OF CHRIST, AND TO BRING TO LIGHT FOR EVERYONE WHAT IS THE PLAN OF THE MYSTERY HIDDEN FOR THE AGES IN CHRIST WHO CREATED ALL THINGS, SO THAT THROUGH THE CHURCH THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD MIGHT NOW BE MADE KNOWN TO THE RULERS AND AUTHORITIES IN THE HEAVENLY PLACES!” (EPHESIANS 3:7-10)**

St. Paul's **first celebration of Christmas took place on the day of his own conversion**, and he never forgot it. For this reason he also wrote to a young pastor named **Timothy** one day: **“THE SAYING IS SURE AND WORTHY OF FULL ACCEPTANCE THAT CHRIST JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD TO SAVE SINNERS, OF WHOM I AM THE FOREMOST. BUT FOR THAT VERY REASON I RECEIVED MERCY, SO THAT IN ME, AS THE FOREMOST, JESUS CHRIST MIGHT DISPLAY HIS UTMOST PATIENCE, MAKING ME AN EXAMPLE TO THOSE WHO WOULD COME TO BELIEVE IN HIM FOR ETERNAL LIFE. TO THE KING OF THE AGES, IMMORTAL, INVISIBLE, THE ONLY-WISE GOD, TO HIM BE HONOR AND GLORY FOREVER AND EVER!” (I TIMOTHY 1:15-17)**

Paul is saying to us too: **“Don't think for one moment that you are incapable of receiving Jesus Christ as your own personal Savior and Lord too, because God's offer of grace is not dependent upon our meeting a certain standard of righteousness before him that is based only on the law, but upon the fact that Christ fulfilled the law of God perfectly for us on our behalf that we too might receive adoption into God's new family called the church.**

**“WHEN THE FULLNESS OF TIME HAD COME, GOD SENT FOR THIS SON, BORN OF A 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!” (GALATIANS 4:4-7)**

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, the Prophet Isaiah also sees God's act of divine salvation in this very same way. He prophesies: **“HE HAS COVERED ME WITH THE ROBE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS. I WILL NOT KEEP SILENT, AND FOR JERUSALEM'S SAKE I WILL NOT BE QUIET, UNTIL HER RIGHTEOUSNESS GOES FORTH AS BRIGHTNESS AND HER SALVATION AS A BURNING TORCH. THE NATIONS SHALL SEE YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS!” (ISAIAH 61, 10-11)**

When St. Paul says, **“THE FULLNESS OF TIME HAD COME,”** it is helpful to distinguish between two different Greek words that both are translated with the one English word “time.” In Greek there is the word **“chronos,”** from which we get the word “chronological” which means a specific point in time. But here Paul uses the word **“kairos.”** Paul means when all the conditions necessary, were now ripe. This designates a “quality” of time, not just a “quantity” of time. **When a piece of fruit hanging on a tree reaches its zenith of sweetness, firmness and tastiness, we say that it is ripe. God never rushes things but waits under the time is ripe, as when he sent his Son. We also much be ready to pick the fruit of God in our own lives when it is ripe.**

Paul argues that through our Savior's death and resurrection, the followers of Jesus are no longer slaves to sin, held captive under the law, but have been granted the gift of being God's children, we have been gifted with the Spirit of his Son, which is also the Spirit of the father. The Holy Spirit comes as a familial Spirit and is shared by all who belong to Christ's family!

The words of the Gospel lesson this morning comprise some of my very favorite words about Christmas. Here Luke tells us that in obedience to the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph bundled up their six-week-old baby boy and made the trip that day from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, where they planned to present their firstborn son to the Lord and to make a sacrifice for Mary's purification, all at the same time!

**We do not know whether they walked or rode to the temple or where they bought the birds, but we do know that they took advantage of the poverty clause, because instead of purchasing a lamb which they could in no way afford, they purchased two turtle doves instead.**

**Luke does not say that Simeon was old, but that is how most of us no doubt picture him; perhaps an old man with a long-white flowing beard and dark eyes; eyes maybe that were even a little bit clouded over by cataracts,** who shuffled up to the young couple, the way that Tim Conway used to shuffle across the floor when he played the part of an old man on those old Carol Burnett's shows. And what does he ask this very young mother, remembering that young mothers of newborn babies are often times every bit as protective of their newborn babies as a lioness is with respect to her cub! He asks her, **"Excuse me, may I hold your baby!"**

**And what does Mary do after she must have sized this old guy up for at least a few moments, as she "eyeballs" him and gives him the once over!** She untucked her newborn son who was nestled so closely to her under her breasts and holds him out to Simeon, who takes the Baby Jesus in his arms and says the most startling thing: **"LORD, NOW LET YOUR SERVANT GO IN PEACE, ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD; FOR MY EYES HAVE SEEN YOUR SALVATION THAT YOU HAVE PREPARED IN THE PRESENCE OF ALL PEOPLES, A LIGHT FOR REVELATION TO THE GENTILES AND FOR GLORY TO YOUR PEOPLE ISRAEL!" (LUKE 2:29-32)** This was such a beautiful thing to say that the early church turned it into a song, the **Nunc Dimittis**; Latin for **"Dismiss Us Now!"** If we have seen the salvation that God offers to the whole world in Jesus Christ and to each of us personally, then we are ready to depart this time whenever God says it is time for our car to pull out of the station!

There are those piercing words too that Simeon speaks to Mary, predicting her place at the foot of the cross during the final hours of our Lord's Passion: **"AND A SWORD WILL PIERCE THROUGH YOUR OWN SOUL ALSO, SO THAT THOUGHTS FROM MANY HEARTS MAY BE REVEALED!" (LUKE 2:35).** For all the people in this world who would come to rejoice in the gift of Mary's Son, the same number would one day grind their teeth against him! **Then an older lady, a widow, who was constantly at the temple, worshipping, fasting and praying, also comes up and gets into the act!**

So how important is it—to be faithful in one's church attendance! What would Simeon had missed out on if he had decided not to go to church that day, but to stay home? Of what if Mary and Joseph decided to postpone their sacred duties at the temple, until her sister could come down three months later from Nazareth to Bethlehem too? Of if Anna got really upset and skipped church that particular Sabbath Day, for the first time in 60 years, because it seemed that no one ever listened to her prophesies either.

**From a human standpoint, God would have had a much harder time arranging a revelation; that is what!** But the God in whom we move and live and have our being is always trying to break through the darkness of sin and death to us through his Holy Word and blessed Sacraments. **Revelation requires people who are looking for God, and better yet, people who are looking for God to speak to them together on some kind of regular basis and designated place ahead of time.** When all of us put our pieces of the puzzle together,

as is often done in Sunday school and in the magnificent adult Bible studies that take place in the church, by the grace of God, every Sunday—people become enlightened to the real presence of God in our world and of the grand design he has put into place for every one of us as well.

**Every time we come here, the LORD God Almighty himself, according to his very own promise, continues to provide us with gatherings like this where he still purifies us from sin, doubt, and fear today!** He brings us the forgiveness of our sins through his Son's shed blood on the cross for us, not by our bringing to his altar a lamb we have purchased, or even two turtle doves. He brings us himself---the ONE who first entered our world as God's own precious Baby boy, who grew in stature and in the favor of both God and people, Luke tells us, inviting us to come and fellowship with him at his Table again today! Amen