

## “God Wraps Himself in Human Flesh”

Galatians 4:4-7

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### We Enslave Others

Today's text reflects on the meaning of Jesus' coming into the world. Half of the New Testament is letters written by Paul. Paul writes today's letter to a particular community, an oppressed people waiting for their liberation. Those of us who call Middle TN home might not understand Paul's audience. Let me remind you about one group of people who are very familiar with oppression. To begin with, Guatemala is the second poorest country in our hemisphere. And the Kekchi indigenous are the equivalent of India's untouchables. While both we and their fellow country men drive cars and have roofs which do not leak, wood floors in our homes, good health care, clean running water, and good schools, the Kekchi campout 24/7 under different conditions. Instead of asphalt shingles and wooden floors, their homes have leaky thatch roofs, and their floors are bare dirt. Instead of travelling in cars, they walk barefoot on ground trod by pigs, chickens, and dogs. Instead of enjoying good health, they are all infected by round worms and other parasites from bad water and poor health habits. Although the illiteracy rate in the rest of their country is only 30%, 90% of the Kekchi are illiterate. They are considered well educated if they have a third grade education.

Those who live in poverty or under political oppression know they are the pawns of a system too powerful to fight. Paul tells the Galatians, the Kekchi, and us, the joyous news of Christmas, that God sends Jesus to share our plight and loose our chains.

Those of us who call Middle TN home might not understand Paul's audience. You might say you have never knowingly experienced overt oppression, and never knowingly worshipped false gods. Like Jesus' interrogators in the Gospel of John, you might say, you have never been slaves to anyone or anything. But there are hidden philosophies that enslave us without our knowledge.

### We Enslave Ourselves

There is another kind of enslavement. Remember the commercial about the potato chips? Its catch phrase was, “Bet you can't eat just one!” Indeed, the chips taste so good, the ad says, you cannot put the bag away. You keep eating them one at a time until the bag is empty. They taste that good, or so the commercial says. We are captive to the gustatory entertainment provided by the potato chips, and powerless to put the potato chip bag away. The advertisement seems to say we are slaves to pleasure. And so we are.

Paul characterizes life outside Jesus' power as bondage to powers that hold us captive. Those who suffer from addiction to drugs, alcohol, and other compulsive behaviors confess they are in the clutches of a destructive force that overpowers them. And there are other hidden, subtextual, subconscious, and subliminal philosophies. Like materialism and hedonism. There is nothing wrong with material things and nothing wrong with pleasure, but when we worship things and when we worship pleasure, we entangle ourselves in a subtle form of bondage. We can see this only in light of Jesus' words, ministry, and sacrifice, and we are helpless by ourselves to overcome our bondage. Our enslavement to either oppression or to our addictions make us less than slaves. Make us nobodies.

But in Jesus' birth in a feeding tray for animals, God comes to liberate us from our lowly status as nobodies.

## God Reveals God's Adoption of Humankind

In today's Christmas message to the Galatians, and to us, Paul says Jesus is fully human. Paul says Jesus is born of a woman.

But the primary actor is God, who waits for the right moment, sends Jesus, and then sends God's Spirit. The human situation, desperate as it seems, is not helpless before God. For Paul, Christmas is a story about God.

I have told you before about one of my pastor colleagues. One Sunday during a sermon, a mentally challenged adult interrupted and told her quite loudly he wanted a blessing. She was humanly irritated. But even more so when the mentally challenged man persisted in his demands during the rest of the sermon. Finally, she told him fine, she would give him a blessing at the end of the worship service. After the benediction, and after the postlude, the mentally challenged adult came forward for his blessing. She closed her eyes, put both her hands on the man's head, and blessed him. She told God the man is a child of God, and asked God to give him assurance that God loves him more than he can possibly imagine. She prayed like this for about 5 minutes. When the pastor opened her eyes, she was stunned to see the entire congregation lined up behind the mentally challenged man, each also wanting a blessing. We all want affirmation from God. God knows this.

Paul tells us Jesus reveals God has adopted us. We are adopted but nevertheless full heirs. Jesus' ministries and words rescue us by revealing our adoption. This revelation transforms us from thinking we are nobodies into realizing we really are children of God. As children of God, we are heirs to the abundance of life God promises us. We who thought we were nobodies are actually somebodies.

Orphans brought into the home of an adoptive family mistrust their reception. We are like those orphans. We need a special gesture to feel truly adopted. God coming down from heaven into a manger is that gesture.

But God in Jesus is not just born into human flesh. God in Jesus is also born into human culture, with all the things which enslave us.

## Jesus Liberates Humankind from All Slavery

Paul tells us the Christmas story is how God changes our hearts from works righteousness to an understanding of grace righteousness. Imagine you are behind a dump truck on the interstate. That dump truck is traveling at the speed limit. You notice stones being thrown off the truck, hitting other cars behind the truck. You have a choice. Stay behind the truck and risk a stone hitting your windshield, cracking it, possibly causing you to have a wreck. Or breaking the speed limit for a minute or two so you can pass the truck. On a very simplistic basis, this is the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees who say you ought not to exceed the speed limit for any reason, and Jesus, who said there are weightier matters than the law. The Pharisees, who say you ought not harvest grain or heal people on the Sabbath day, and Jesus, who said the Sabbath was created for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. The Pharisees, who said you ought not eat pork, and Jesus, who said what matters is not what comes into the body by way of the mouth, but what comes out of the heart by way of the mouth. The Pharisees, who said men ought to be circumcised, and Jesus, who said circumcision of the heart is more important than circumcision of the flesh. Jesus rescues humanity from our sense of "oughtness," by working within the systems of his time. He does this by first entering our flesh, and then by entering our culture.

Jesus throws no stones from a distance. Jesus is born into a particular culture, in solidarity with Judaism. Jesus works within and through this tradition, through this culture. In today's text from Luke, Simeon holds the infant Jesus tight, symbolizing his birth under the law, under the particular culture of his time. Think about it. God in Jesus is circumcised, and as the first born, is dedicated to God in the temple. Because of his family's poverty, they are allowed to sacrifice doves instead of livestock according to their culture's special provision. His trip to the temple at age 12, public life at age 30, worshipping at the synagogue as was his custom, all point to his obedience to his particular culture's traditions. God in Jesus overcomes enslaving powers not from outside the space – time continuum, but from within, in the form of human flesh. By entering human flesh and human culture, God in Jesus frees from all our slaveries.

### Conclusion

Kekchi indigenous and blessings. Dump trucks and potato chips. Imagine old Simeon in the temple. Stooped, wrinkle faced, white bearded, hand knarled, Simeon. Holding infant Jesus. Old man Time holding in his hands the New Year.

Jesus did not come to us as a warrior, but as a baby in a feeding tray for animals. Born in humility, Jesus came to rule over all with love, tumbling down the walls of hostility which divide us. Helpless as an infant, Jesus showed the power of God's love. Poor in things of the world, Jesus brought the wealth of God's grace. Rejected by many, Jesus welcomed all who sought him.

Christians everywhere proclaim the truth that God our loving parent is for us, that God through Jesus is with us, and that God through the Holy Spirit transforms us individually and communally into the very body of Christ.

God's adoption of you and me at Christmas, changes forever the way we look at our relationship to God.

All glory be to God, hallelujah, and all God's people say ...