

So here we are, it is Advent. Thanksgiving has passed, black Friday has already happened and the Christmas season is now in full swing. It's our Christian holiday that our culture has taken by storm and has made it the busiest time of year and the biggest retail event of the year. Are you ready? I'm not. But what does the coming of Jesus really mean? Strip away the commercialism and materialism and just look at it as a Christian holiday. Should it be the biggest Christian holiday? Western culture has made it that, but is it really? Now I will be the first to agree that the coming of Christ into this world is one of the most significant events in human history. God among us...that is a big deal. But should that be our focus? Is the coming of Jesus Christ into the world the big deal and the focus, or is it something else? Well to answer this question we go to God's Word. Both the Old Testament responsive reading we just read this morning. And now also to the letter to the Galatians, chapter 4, beginning at verse 1. Paul writes this:

Galatians 4:1-7

“What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. ²The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. ³So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. ⁴But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba, Father.*” ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.” This is God's Word for us this morning.

So, a lot goes into Christmas doesn't it? We build up to it for at least a month. And the retail stores build up to it for even longer. I remember the weekend after Halloween, the Christmas décor was already up in the Walgreens. It was November 2nd and there is was, the Christmas section. And we build up to Christmas here in the church. We already decorated the church. The deacons will make gift baskets this coming week. There will be Christmas parties. Then there will be Christmas caroling next weekend. Then the choir concert the weekend after that. And the list goes on for all of us doesn't it? It is like this long steady build up that goes and goes and builds and intensifies that then culminates with Christmas Eve services that go past midnight. And then Christmas morning arrives. And I don't know about you, but I do tend to feel a sense of arrival on Christmas morning. Ok, it's here. Phew! And there is nothing wrong with building up to a special day. But theologically, this falls short. It is OK to go through Advent as an anticipation for Christmas, but finding Christmas as the arrival point is flat out wrong theologically. So I want to look this morning at what are we supposed to anticipate during Advent and where should we arrive?

In this letter to the Galatians, one of the great letters in which Paul clearly defines what God's grace really is, in this letter he has this great short summary of what God does through Jesus. Beginning in verse 4 he says this "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship." Paul does a lot in this short set of verses. There is a lot here. The first thing he says is "But when the set time had fully come." That short phrase summarizes the entire Old Testament. All of the journey of Israel from Abraham to Exodus to the promised land and then exile, and then all the prophets, it all leads to the coming of Christ. Paul notes the time leading up to the coming of Christ and he notes that God bring Jesus into the world at just the right time. And I'm going to talk more about why Jesus came at just the right time on Christmas Eve, so stay tuned.

But for now, let's accept that Jesus comes at just the right time. So, the time has come. And then Paul notes the importance of Jesus coming into the world. He says "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law." That is what we celebrate on Christmas. God comes into the world, born to a human mother, and born during a time when the law of the old covenant is still in place. But notice that's all the time Paul spends on what we call Christmas. That one phrase. 12 words. That's it. He does not stop to expound on shepherds and angels and the manger. Paul quickly moves on because what follows is even more important. He says this; "to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship." So Paul starts with what led up to Jesus coming, then he cites Jesus coming, but then he immediately moves to what Jesus comes to do. What does Jesus come for? To redeem.

Let's look at this word "redeem." What does it mean to redeem something? In our culture today we don't tend to realize the gravity of this word. The only time we even see this word is on coupons. Right? You can redeem this little paper for a discount. And that leaves this word with a really weak and insignificant meaning that is not what was intended. What it means to redeem is to buy something back. And specifically Paul uses language regarding redemption as it relates to slavery. He is referring to what it means for a slave to be bought back. And to understand the gravity of what this means we need to know a little about what 1st century slavery looked like and how it worked.

In the time of Christ and the time of Paul in the Roman Empire, it was easy to fall into slavery. If you were a Roman citizen that fell on hard times economically, one of the main routes out of debt was selling yourself into slavery. So for starters a Roman citizen would fall into debt. Now how easy is it for any of us to fall into debt? I don't know about you but I am in plenty of debt. I have student loans I am still paying off, I have a mortgage, I have a car payment, I have credit cards....and the list goes on. For any of us right? I think everyone here can understand the concept of being in debt. Well, if you were a Roman citizen and in debt that you could not

pay off, the main way out of debt was to become the payment yourself. To sell yourself into slavery. And once this happened, it was generally permanent. You became the payment to the money collector, and then the money collector would set a price for someone else to buy you as a slave. Often it was you and your whole family. This was common. In fact a third of the population in the Roman empire at any given time was slaves.

And not only was this status of being a slave permanent, but it also meant you had no rights as a citizen anymore. You lost all your rights. Rights to a legal process, rights to own property, etc. All that was gone once you became a slave. Now, say on the rare chance that you had a wealthy relative that heard of your situation and wanted to come help you and buy you out of slavery, the person that owned you would charge extra. They would not just sell you for what they had bought you. They would sell you at a profit to them. That is how significant and unusual it would be for someone to be bought out of slavery.

Now with all that in mind, look at Paul's words. Paul is referring to redemption in this way. He says at the end of these verses in verse 7 "So you are no longer a slave, but God's child." What does all of this language about slavery mean translated into what Christ does for us? Well, first we are created by God. We belong to God at the beginning. We are citizens of God's creation. But we fall as slaves to sin. We have a debt we cannot pay. In the Old Testament God instituted the law and sacrifices to repent of sin and be forgiven, but there were always more sins than sacrifices. So that was not enough to save us. So God sent Jesus into this world to buy us back, with interest. He is the ultimate sacrificial lamb that pays for our debt of our sin and buys us back.

And not only does Jesus buy us back, but he makes us heirs to the inheritance of the Holy Spirit and eternal life. We are heirs. Paul says in verse 7 "God has made you also an heir." How many of you are heirs in this life? Any of you have an inheritance coming your way or had an inheritance from your parents at some point? Some of you, but not all of us right?

There was a lawyer who was reading out the will of a rich man to the people mentioned in the will: and the will said this

"To you, my loving wife Rose, who stood by me in rough times, as well as good, I leave her the house and \$2 million."

The lawyer continued, "To my daughter Jessica, who looked after me in sickness and kept the business going, I leave her the yacht, the business and \$1 million."

The lawyer concluded, "And, to my cousin Dan, who hated me, argued with me, and thought that I would never mention him in my will - well you are wrong. Hi Dan!"

Some of us don't come from families with money and so there won't be an inheritance. And some of us might be like Dan in the joke and left out of the will. But when you are God's child,

when you accept Jesus Christ as the payment for your sin and claim him as your Lord and savior, you do receive an inheritance. And it is not based on who you were in this life. It does not matter if you are from a rich family or a poor family. As a child of God you become an heir. Jesus Christ pays for our sin, he buys us back, and then he makes us heirs in his kingdom. Pretty amazing.

Now why am I focusing on the sacrifice of Jesus at the beginning of Advent? Shouldn't I be focused on the birth of Christ, the coming of the Messiah that we celebrate? This anticipation of his coming that we recognize in Advent? Well, as I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, if Christmas is the destination point, the end point, then our theology is wrong. Because without the cross and the death and resurrection, Christmas doesn't mean anything. It's just another day. Yes, the coming of God into this world is exciting and amazing. Yes, the life of Christ is important and teaches us so much. But without the death and resurrection, nothing really happens. It is the death and resurrection of Jesus that buys us back. We are slaves to our sin with no hope without the cross.

So as we enter advent and as we come to the Lord's table this morning, we are going to focus on an ancient acclamation called the mystery of our faith. And we are going to focus on one line each week these first three Sundays of Advent. The acclamation goes like this: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. (repeat). In fact we will say this when we celebrate the sacrament in a few minutes. And the reason we are focusing on this is because of what I just explained. Advent and Christmas alone do not mean anything. Without a savior that dies and pays for our sin, rises again to bring us life, and is still coming again to claim us, without all that there is no Christian hope. Without that Christmas might as well just be a retail holiday and an excuse to eat too many cookies. The Christian hope, and today we lit the candle of hope, the Christian hope is in the death, resurrection, and second coming. Not in a manger. Christmas was necessary. But it is not what saves us. It is not what redeems us or buys us back. Jesus had to do that on the cross.

Now you might be thinking that the cross is not pretty to think about. We much rather look at scenes of shepherds and angels, right.? And you are right, the cross is not pretty. But it is necessary, not just for Jesus Christ but for us as well. If we are not willing to look at our own sin, if we are not willing as Jesus put it in Matthew chapter 16 to pick up our cross, we can't be saved. Jesus says this there; "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." We have to look at the cross. It is the only way. When we go to the table today we need to recognize it represents Jesus taking on the weight of all of our sin. He suffered to buy us back.

Friends, I promise I am not trying to ruin Christmas for you. You might be thinking this is not the advent message you were hoping for. But really what I am trying to do is make Advent even more special. I want you to really anticipate what God is going to do. I don't want you looking just in the past and what God did coming into the world. I want you to look forward. I want you to have hope as we light this candle of hope. As we anticipate in this season of Advent, let's anticipate what God is doing for us ultimately. Let's anticipate what the cross and forgiveness mean for us. Let's anticipate what it means that we worship a risen and living God. And let's anticipate what it means that he is coming again. That he is coming back and that the next time there won't be cute little manger scenes. He will come back in glory and establish his kingdom forever and there will be no more tears. Friends, that is what we await and anticipate this Advent season. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.