

Lent 4

I take as my text this morning, from St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians:

*So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman,
but of the free.*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable
in Thy sight O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.*

In today's Epistle to the Galatians, we see St. Paul drawing upon his rabbinical training to draw attention to and differentiate two dispensations or methods of religious experience — the Law and the Gospel.

Indeed, he uses the rabbinical method of scripture interpretation to put forth a truth, that **it is the Christian** who is truly free and the heir of God's promise. Without Christ, there is only bondage to sin under the yoke of the Law.

By all accounts, Paul wrote this Letter to the Galatians about the year 53.

We should understand that, at the time Paul was writing to the churches in Galatia, there was a great conflict within from those who were called Judaisers. At the same time, there was persecution from without by the Jews.

Perhaps, we should be more specific and say, rather than the Jews, the Jewish leadership. In particular, the Pharisees not only challenged Jesus from the theological perspective but also attempted to discredit him among the populace. Their issue was not so much with Jesus' claim to be the Messiah but with what kind of Messiah he claimed to be.

As the Church came into existence, the first Christians, of course, were Jews, and they continued both in their worship in the Temple as well as their new-found worship of Jesus Christ. As St. Luke recounts in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles:

*And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,
Praising God, and having favour with all the people.*

The Judaisers were an element of those Jews who had accepted Christianity, and who wanted to force upon the gentile converts the full requirements of the Jewish law. In their mind, the Gentile converts must first become Jews before they could become Christians in the fullest. To do that, the Gentile converts must submit to circumcision, and they must adhere not just to the Ten Commandments handed to Moses on Mt. Sinai but also to the minutia of the Law as it had evolved.

We are not talking specifically about the Ten Commandments, but the minutia of laws derived from the Ten Commandments, more than 600 precepts governing every aspect of a person's life.

This is the law, in the mind of Paul, to which the Jews had become slaves and through which there was no promise of salvation. It was part of the Old Covenant that God had made with the Hebrews and had been fulfilled with the New Covenant through Jesus Christ.

To demonstrate the bondage of the Old Covenant and the freedom of the New Covenant, Paul uses the history of Isaac and Ishmael in an allegorical sense: it is the familiar story of Abraham, Hagar the bondswoman, and Sarah his barren wife.

If we recall the story: Sarah was barren and of old age, so she offered to Abraham her servant Hagar. This was not uncommon in that time.

Now, Hagar bore him a son. This son was named Ishmael. But Hagar lorded over Sarah because she was barren and unable to conceive, undermining Sarah's rightful position as matriarch and creating considerable tension between the two.

Then, Sarah, in her old age, as promised by God, conceives and bears a son, Isaac, who is the legitimate heir of Abraham.

The account of Isaac's birth is recorded in Genesis 21, verses 1 and 2:

And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.

Subsequently, Hagar is forced to leave, of course taking Ishmael with her.

We read in verses 9 and 10, how Sarah made her demand to Abraham:

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.

Again, in the mind of Paul, we find this important concept: Ishmael's was a natural birth; Isaac was a supernatural birth. One born of bondage, the other of freedom. One born of a relationship that was merely carnal; the other born in a relationship that fulfilled a special promise of God.

So, we may begin to understand Paul's allegory.

Hagar represents the Old Covenant; Sarah the New Covenant.

Hagar also represents the Law, symbolized by Mt. Sinai and the old Jerusalem. Since her descendants are born into bondage, so then are those who adhere to the Old Covenant.

Sarah represents the spiritual Jerusalem, and together they are the mother of freedom, for by God's promise was Isaac conceived and born. And we are his spiritual descendants, free from the bondage of sin and the law. We are God's heirs through his gracious promise.

Moreover, we see in Paul's argumentation the revelation of God's truth: apart from Jesus Christ, **there is bondage** to sin; through Jesus Christ, **there is the promise** of eternal salvation.

The law — the Old Covenant — was encumbering, truly a yoke; it was based on a sacrificial system of worship, the offering of one life for another in the animal sacrifices.

Under the New Covenant, Christ lifted the yoke, and offered the one sacrifice that could remove the bondage of sin, himself as the sacrificial lamb, and in the words of St. John, *the Propitiation for our sins*.

In St. Paul's words: *So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.*

Indeed, we, in Christ, are the spiritual seed of Abraham by promise, and heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven by adoption. Yes, we are adopted children of God, adopted through baptism.

Paul tells the Galatians and, specifically, the Judaisers that they should take heed of the law.

Tell me, he says, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?

Do ye not hear? meaning that they DO hear the law, for it is read in their assemblies every Sabbath. He is somewhat dismayed that they would court and desire to be under that which could lead only to their condemnation and ruin.

For Paul, this adoption of Jewish Law, and observance of its fasts and feasts was a denial of the efficacy of faith in Jesus Christ; it was substituting the doctrine of justification by works of the law for the truth that had been revealed through Christ, that is, justification by faith alone.

In response to this apostasy, Paul writes to the Galatians in a manner that reflects anger. His apostleship has come under fire, and his anger is directed at both the seducers and the seduced.

So, Paul points out to the Galatians that history was repeating itself. Just as in the past, when the descendants of Hagar, the Ishmaelites, were hostile to Israel, we find now both the Jews and the Judaizes persecuting the Christians.

Paul's vivid allegorical interpretation of scripture provides an historical narrative that, taken in the literal sense, *half reveals and half conceals* a spiritual meaning.

Here, in Paul's interpretation, we have Hagar and Sarah representing, respectively, the Law and the Gospel. We have Sinai and the spiritual Jerusalem meaning, respectively, the same thing: bondage under the Law and freedom from the bondage of sin through Christ.

We have Hagar corresponding to the earthly Jerusalem, and Sarah corresponding to the ideal, heavenly Jerusalem, that is, the City of God.

And, we have the Christian believers: they are God's true freemen and heirs of his promise.

The message from St. Paul is clear to us even today. As Christians, the yoke has been lifted and we have been set free from the old dispensation and its bondage. We are free by God's Love. We are no longer under the Law, the Old Covenant, for it has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and we are now subject to the Law of Love, the Gospel.

In the Mosaic Law, as defined and expanded over the centuries, there was no hope. It was not humanly possible to adhere to every minutia of the Law. But, through God's gracious gift to us, we have a New Covenant, a new Law, Jesus Christ having lifted the yoke, freeing us not only from the bondage of the Old Covenant, but also from the bondage of sin.

This freedom could only come about through an act of Divine Love. That act was the sacrifice of Jesus Christ Who took the sin of the world to the Cross, and there defeated Satan by an act of love that was unconquerable, through which death and sin were overcome, and by his Resurrection has paved the way to eternal life.