

Galatians 4:4-7 “God Incarnate”

While the rest of the world is cleaning up from Christmas, the church is just getting started! Now technically, last Sunday *morning* was still Advent. Christmas season doesn't *officially* start in the church until the Christ candle is lit, and that happened at our community Christmas Eve service Sunday night. Once that Christ candle is lit, the church launches into a huge birthday party that lasts 12 days. We've been intentionally stingy on the Christmas carols during the four weeks leading up to Christmas. Some church traditions are *firm* about not singing *any* carols or having *any* sort of decorations during Advent. Not so much with our church, but we do our best to lead us up to a point where we can say, “Okay ... *now* it's Christmas, and we're going to talk about *why* Jesus' birth is such a big deal to Christ's followers all over the world!” Becky asked me what we should sing this morning, and I said “Christmas Carols, and lots of them.” Let the celebration begin!

Now you would expect that since we've finally reached our destination ... since we are now in full Christ-celebration mode, I'd turn to one of the gospels that gives us the story of Jesus' birth. Well I picked Galatians this morning. “Well thanks Jesse, we want to hear about Jesus' birth and you give us Paul.” But remember, the gospels aren't the earliest writings in the church. The Epistles, those letters to churches found in the *middle* of the New Testament are the earliest. That's not to say that the oral tradition of the gospels that we know weren't around before the epistles, I'm just saying that this letter that Paul wrote to the Galatians was circulating in the churches before any of the written gospels that we know of. Which means some of the things we read in books like Galatians give us a clearer picture about people's understanding of Jesus and what it meant when they confessed that he was the Christ ... the son of the Living God.

What we know about this church in Galatia is that they were struggling with their identity. Please remember that Christianity didn't just come into being on the day Jesus was born. Jesus was not the first

“Christian.” Jesus was a Jew. And Jesus’ first followers were Jews as well. They read Jewish scripture. They practiced Jewish rituals. They followed Jewish traditions and observed Jewish law. And it all started in the Jewish homeland which just happened to be a province in the greater Roman Empire whose territory included all of the Mediterranean coastline and branched into places like Egypt, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, and Turkey. The Roman Empire, for all of its “assimilate or die by the sword” policies created trade routes that allowed people to move around easily from region to region. And that’s why we see so many of Jesus’ followers so far north of Jerusalem up in places like Turkey and Greece. The problem was, the farther away from Jerusalem you got, the more you ran into non-Jewish folks who may not have been fully-participating Jews, but the Jewish way of life and Jesus’ teachings were appealing to them. The Holy Spirit grabbed hold of them and led them to follow Jesus. Which, to us sounds perfectly reasonable. Well of course they’d want to follow Jesus, especially if it’s the Holy Spirit that led them to this decision!

But I want you to put yourself in the shoes of those devout, Hebrew-born, law abiding, folks whose whole identity was connected to *being* Jewish. You’ve spent your whole life studying the law and the prophets, you’ve worked hard to maintain your identity in a religion that’s more than just a religion ... it’s a way of life ... it’s a birthright ... it’s something that distinguishes you and separates you from *everyone*. You are the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. You are a part of God’s chosen people ... an heir to God’s legacy. And let me tell you, it’s not easy to maintain this in a world that seems to want to dismiss your uniqueness, swallow you up and re-shape you into something ... *other* than what you were born to be. And one of your fellow children of Abraham, Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, who you now call the Christ, came into your life and showed you a new way to live your life as God’s chosen people. And now some pig-eating, patchouli oil smelling, toga wearing Gentile wants to be in the club because they think Jesus is cool? To heck with that buddy! You want a piece of Jesus? You want to follow Jesus’ path? Then you become one of us first. You learn the

rituals, you study the laws and the prophets, you adopt our dietary restrictions, you mark yourself in the way we mark ourselves (wink-wink) and *then* we'll talk about whether you get to sit at the table.

Welcome to First Christian Church of Galatia where item number one at their first Board Meeting was, "Who's in and who's out." This is where Paul jumps in and reminds these folks why Jesus' birth is so important to the gospel story and why it is so joyfully and passionately celebrated in the church:

"When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children."

When we celebrate Christmas, we talk about "incarnation," which by definition, is the act of becoming present in a body. So in the church, when we speak of the incarnation of God in Jesus, or of God becoming incarnate in Jesus, we're talking about God becoming present among us in the body of *a human being* named Jesus. Since God exists without a body, then to become incarnate in Jesus means that God has become fully present in a human body, in a form that is not only touchable and seeable but which is subject to all the limitations and vulnerabilities that we, as incarnate people, are subject to.

Even before we begin to think about *why* God would ever do such a thing or what *impact* it might have on us, this is an *extraordinary claim*. The biggest miracle of the Christmas story is *not* that a virgin became pregnant. The biggest miracle is that *God became incarnate*. With today's technology, it's not hard to make a virgin pregnant. Any gynecologist can make that happen. What a gynecologist *cannot* do is turn into an unborn baby and place themselves in a womb and bet the farm on the hopes that the mother doesn't miscarry.

When God becomes a human being — becomes incarnate — God is voluntarily exposed to the same fears and risks and dangers that the rest

of us face. In birth, God is exposed to the risks of a fatal complication. In childhood, God is exposed to the risks of childhood accidents, or growing up in poverty, or child abuse. Throughout an incarnate life, God is exposed to the threat of violence, to the humiliation of living under the heel of hostile forces, to the fear of terrorist attack. Throughout a human life in relationship with other human beings, God is exposed to the risks of being misunderstood, of being rejected, of being betrayed, of being falsely accused and eliminated. When God becomes one of us, God takes on life in all its beauty and ugliness, *just like we all do*.

Now *that* is utterly amazing in and of itself. But the next question is “why?” Paul addresses that question in his next verse, and then elaborates on it in the rest of the passage. He says that God sent the Son into such circumstances so that he could get everyone else out of them. And then in elaborating, he puts it in family terms. The Son did what he did in order that we might have the opportunity to be adopted into God’s family.

What we have here is the most extraordinary exchange of gifts. We give Jesus our humanity, and he accepts it and offers us his divinity in exchange. He becomes a child of human beings, in order that we might become children of God. He becomes what we are, in order that we might become what he has always been. Because you are now God’s children, the Spirit of God’s child — Jesus — has been placed into your hearts.

And, he says, this changes everything because as God’s children, you are no longer at the beck and call of the things that once dictated your every move. We no longer have to go with the flow and slavishly do whatever the world around us says we ought to do. We no longer have to be paranoid isolationists when it seems that the powers that be tell us we need to fear the outsider. We no longer have to compulsively consume when the powers that be tell us that it’s our duty to buy things in order to strengthen our economic standing in the world. We no longer have to destroy ourselves and our loved ones by trying to conform to the

impossible images of youth, beauty and success that are constantly bombarding us. It's different now. It's different because we have become children of God, and as God's children we will receive from God all that has been kept in trust for God's children.

Jesus was born under the thumb of very similar pressures and constraints that we face today. The culture he was born into expected him to conform too. But he came into such a life to enable us to find a way out. When God became incarnate in Jesus, God was put in our hands, and at our mercy, so that we could put ourselves into God's hands and receive God's mercy. And at this table, Jesus continues to put his body into our hands, so that we might continue to put ourselves in his hands and know ourselves as God's beloved children.