

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.

So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as are baptized into Christ Jesus have been clothed in Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

I mean that an heir, as long as he is a child, is no different than a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

In the same way, we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law 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 3:23-4:7

"Childhood, Guardians, and the Elemental Things"

Last week, we heard Paul ask the question that modern Christians have often asked, every time it is brought to their attention that believers in Old Israel had some 605 Commandments to attend to if they wanted to stay faithful to God and obedient to the law. And the question is, if old man Abraham was able to save his soul simply by believing God's promise about a child for him and Sarah, and a blessing for the whole world that would come from that child, if all Abraham had to do was believe that, then, "Why the law?"

Why would God send Moses down a mountain, 400 years later, all loaded down with 605 commandments, when nobody at the foot of that mountain could even keep the first Ten? Why load God's people down with a burden that none of them could carry? David, 400 years after Moses would sit down with his lyre and sing these words in two different psalms: "There is none righteous, no, not one!" Although out of fairness to the law I should point out that faith, believing a promise from God is no picnic either.

Abraham believed God's promise one night, staring up at the night stars, and God forgave the old man and declared him "righteous." But it would be more than a decade before Abraham and Sarah actually got the child, and in the meantime they would make a world of mistakes and really complicate their lives trying to do for themselves what God had already promised them. The good news being that, at the end of the day, God did keep his promise, the boy, Isaac, was finally born, and best of all, Abraham was faithful, did become more and more righteous over time, sins and mistakes and all. So faith worked, faith saved, hard as it was through the years, but keeping a law, our getting anywhere near God on our own strength is impossible, Paul tells us.

So again, "Why the law?" Paul told us last week it was "because of transgressions." We need a law, we need some objective description of what God expects from us because we are so used to transgression, we are so accustomed to sin that our first natural instinct is to imagine that what works for me, what suits my gut must be right. Our Scripture Lesson opened today with Paul saying, "...before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed."

What is in view here is less the penitentiary sort of imprisonment and more something like protective custody. God didn't send a law to punish us, but to point us down a path that would evoke in us the same state of mind and heart that brought Abraham to his knees that dark starry night. Abraham and Sarah couldn't make a child, and you and I can't keep a law, can't learn what's right, and can't do what's right. So Paul says, "...the law was our guardian till Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith."

He goes on, "...for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith." In the ancient world, guardians were given to the boys of wealthy parents because Dad and Mom knew that they were prone to be soft on their sons and they didn't want their estate to be squandered by the boys they had spoiled, so they bought a slave who specialized in toughening up the boys so they could do the math, mind their manners and curb their appetites, go to bed when they needed and get up when they needed.

Only boys inherited wealth and property among the rich in the ancient world, so in this passage all Christians are all described as "sons," male and female alike. Paul writes, "...as many of you are baptized into Christ have been clothed in Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is no male and female for you are all one in Christ Jesus." We are one in Christ Jesus, but more to the point and in defiance of ancient custom, we all inherit what God promised Abraham, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, if we believe the promise then whatever Christ has coming we all equally inherit.

Paul put it this way, he said, "...if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." We believe in Christ and we inherit everything Abraham was given for believing the promise that Christ was on the way.

The same was true for believers in old Israel. Long before Christ ever appeared, real believers in Israel were the heirs to everything God promised Abraham. They were spiritually rich and prone to run spoiled, so God hired a slave to toughen them up for the day when Christ would come. The slave's name was Moses and old Israel was in Moses' care, Moses' custody, all the centuries between Sinai and the Sermon on the Mount. And it was a tough regime. Paul writes about believers in old Israel that: "...the heir, as long as he is a child is no different than a slave, though he is the owner of everything."

In a rich house, everyone knows who going to wind up with the dough, But, Paul writes: "...he's under guardians and managers until the date set by the father." The old man's too smart to give the boy the keys to the chariot when he's thirteen. There's a time when the heir to the estate comes into adult responsibility and gains adult privileges. In old Israel, it was the Bar Mitzvah, the prayer shawl, reading God's Word for the whole town to hear. In the Graeco-Roman world, it was toga day. The boy's tunic goes into the hamper and an adult toga is draped on his shoulders and he heads for the forum and takes his place in the city square.

Remember what Paul's already said to the Galatian disciples? "*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have put on Christ, clothed yourselves in Christ.*" What he's saying to them is: "When you gave yourselves to Christ, that was toga day for you!" When Jesus arrived at the Jordan to be baptized that was Bar Mitzvah day for old Israel. Time to wake up, and grow up, and become God's children in the world he wants you reach. Paul makes the same statement both about pagans from Lystra and about Jews in Jerusalem: "*In the same way also, when we were children, we were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.*"

I never understood this verse until Natalie and I went to Greece and walked up the mountain to the pagan shrine at the Oracle of Delphi. Like Jerusalem, at Delphi: there's a long winding path worshipers climbed up toward the temple of Apollo, likely singing some pagan version of the Songs of Ascent Jewish worshipers used to sing on the path up Mt Zion. On the final bend toward Apollo's temple, there was an ancient strip mall, a market similar to the one on the Jerusalem temple porch that so infuriated Jesus. Directly in front of the temple at Delphi, there was a huge altar for the pagans to offer and burn their sacrifices before approaching the oracles to learn how to appease the gods and goddesses so as to gain guidance and blessing.

Delphi was nonsense, all of it, but what Paul is saying here is that, before the appearance of Christ, the whole world was working the "*elementary principles*," moving around letters from a child's alphabet to try to wrap their minds and hearts around how they could gain forgiveness and healing and guidance from a heavenly realm that was beyond their reach. And in the centuries before Christ, that is how God taught Israel about how holy and different and real he is compared to the mirages the rest of the world worshiped. On Mt. Zion, God used rituals, symbols, prophets and priests to teach truth where in other high places people were learning lies.

But the needs were the same everywhere. People everywhere knew they needed forgiveness and so they made sacrifices. People everywhere knew they were small and needed help, and healing and guidance. "*Salvation is from the Jews!*" Jesus said to the Samaritan woman when she prattled on about her local sanctuary atop some Samaritan hill. But then he went on: "*Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father... God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and in truth.*"

Paul put it this way, he wrote: "*When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his 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 his sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*" The point being that the time for symbols and sacrifices, shadows and rituals is past. The "*sons*" of God, Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female have come into their inheritance. We can deal directly with our own Father without working through the shadows and symbols the law put in our way.