

Sermon #1,256: Galatians 4:21-31 (Historic Epistle)
3-26-17, Lent 4, Bethany-Princeton MN
(Hymns 263, 342; comm. 266, 321, 593)

WE ARE CHILDREN OF THE PROMISE – CHILDREN OF THE GOSPEL

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, You gave Your only begotten Son into suffering and death, that in our stead He might render satisfaction to the Law: We most heartily ask You, graciously keep us from seeking our own righteousness by the works of the Law, and enable us in true faith to put our trust solely in the merit of Jesus Christ, that by Your Holy Spirit the righteousness of the Law may be fulfilled in us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (*Collect on the Epistle for Lent 4*)

The Text, Galatians 4:21-31 (v. 28). ²⁸ Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are **children of promise.** Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, who shares His inheritance with you:

Do you know about Hagar and Sarah and Ishmael and Isaac? Yes, you learned it in Sunday School.

*Ishmael was the son of Abraham. Isaac was the son of Abraham.
But Ishmael's mother was Hagar, who was a slave in the house.
And Isaac's mother was Sarah, who was the wife God gave Abraham.
So the promised son was not Ishmael, but Isaac.
So Ishmael was not the son of the promise.
So he had to be "cast out" of the house in the end, still a slave.
And Isaac was the son of the promise.
So he stayed in the house, with the full rights of the firstborn son.*

Do you know about Mount Sinai? Yes, you learned it in Sunday School.

*On Mount Sinai, God gave the Law to Moses.
When God gave the Ten Commandments, the people were afraid.
God used the words, "You shall ... You shall not ..."
As soon as they broke a commandment, worshipped a golden calf, God became angry with them and punished them.*

Do you know about the difference between the Law and the Gospel? Yes, you do. You learned it in confirmation class.

Q: What is the difference between the Law and the Gospel?

A: The Law teaches us what we are to do and not to do.

The Gospel teaches what God has done for our salvation.

Do you know about being saved by the Law or by the Gospel? Yes, you do. You learned it in confirmation class.

Q: Is anyone able to be saved by keeping the commandments?

*A: No one is able to keep the commandments perfectly,
therefore no one can be saved by the Law.*

Q: Since no one can be saved by the Law, how then are we saved?

*A: We are saved through faith in Jesus Christ alone,
who fulfilled the Law for us and died for us.*

We call this saving truth the Gospel.

What does all this tell you? Everything in today's epistle is something you already know. But you learned it when nothing was at stake. You learned it as a child, gathering information, storing it away. You can say: "I know that Bible story," or, "I know the answer to that question."

But the questions won't always be easy ones. The questions aren't written down in a catechism or Bible story book. They come from hearing what the enemies of the church say, from watching horrified as evil people get their way, from seeing the church look worse and weaker, not better or stronger, from finding it more of a struggle, not less, to live a Christian life.

This is why St. Paul is writing this in Galatians 4. The people who had believed the Gospel of grace were now letting themselves be led by the Law, not the Gospel. It's easy to wonder: What they were thinking?!

But we do it too. We look around – or in the mirror – and don't like what we see. Christians don't look as good as they should. You don't look as good as you should. The Gospel doesn't get the results that we want. We're still falling into the same sins. We aren't getting better, but seem to be getting worse. We see the church getting smaller, not bigger.

So we conclude that preaching the Gospel doesn't work. We want more Law. More morality. More about what we should do.

St. Paul pulls out the Bible story of Ishmael and Isaac. We know who is who and who did what. But now: *What does it mean?* A good Lutheran question.

This is what St. Paul tells us the Ishmael & Isaac story means:

The promised son was not going to come from Hagar. Hagar, the slave woman, could only give birth to a slave. Hagar, and Mount Sinai, and the earthly Jerusalem (the Jewish religion) are all the same, then. They all give birth to “children” who are slaves. St. Paul is saying this is what the Law does. It’s all the Law can do: keep us in slavery to sin, death, and the devil.

But whom did Sarah give birth to? The **“CHILD OF THE PROMISE.”** It was impossible for Isaac to be a slave. St. Paul says this is a picture of what the Gospel does. Children of the Promise are Children of the Gospel.

The Gospel frees you from slavery to sin, death and the devil. It frees you from the condemnations of the Law. Put another way: Ishmael had nothing, Isaac had everything. Likewise, the Law gets you nothing, the Gospel gives you everything. Because you can’t keep the Law perfectly, it can only give you hell. The Law tells you what to do, but gives you no ability to do it. The Law can only say to you: Guilty!

But the Gospel tells you Jesus has done it all for you. The Gospel gives you everything Jesus has in the heavenly kingdom. All the Gospel says is: Forgiven! Righteous! Not guilty! So “help yourself to the blessings!” [*Apol. IV: 47*].

We already know this, of course. We learned the difference between the Law and the Gospel long ago. But we are seeing how challenging it is to be a Christian. We are learning why we come to church: not to learn something we don’t know (although you might), but to learn the same thing, which we already know. We don’t come to learn the Gospel as new information. We come because we already know the Gospel, and we have learned to love the Gospel, and we need to hear the Gospel, God’s “I-love-you,” again and again.

Now, whom do you suppose is not happy that you know the Gospel and that you love the Gospel? That’s right. The devil. Martin Luther, in his comments on these verses from Galatians, said: “*As soon as the Word of God appears, the devil becomes angry; and in his anger he employs every power and wile to persecute it and wipe it out completely.*” The devil doesn’t want you to know the Gospel or love the Gospel. So he will try to make you forget it and not love it anymore.

This is why we have to re-hear it. Luther tells what the struggle actually is:

“The difference between the Law and the Gospel is very easy so far as the words themselves are concerned. For who does not see that Hagar is not Sarah and that Sarah is not Hagar, or that Ishmael neither is nor has what Isaac is and has? But in profound terrors and in the agony of death, when the conscience struggles with the judgment of God, to be able to say with firm confidence: “The Law does not apply to me at all, because my mother is Sarah, who gives birth, not to slaves but to free children and heirs” – this is the most difficult thing there is.”

This is the true persecution, when the devil accuses you in your conscience and makes you unsure of yourself or unsure of God and how He feels about you. Even though we are not as good as we should be even in our faith, and although we must admit our sins and nod yes to the accusations of the Law, God uses our failures for our own good in the end. For we end up hungry.

When you say, “I am a poor miserable sinner” – as we do here every Sunday – you’re ready to hear the Gospel that forgives you totally and frees you from the judgment of the Law and the burden of your sin. Although the church does not seem victorious in this life, although your life doesn’t feel victorious, you struggle with your sins and weaknesses, you don’t always feel forgiven, you look in vain for outward signs that the church is making progress, Luther says that because the Gospel is preached and people receive faith and trust that they are good in God’s sight not for what they do but for Jesus’ sake, therefore *“in the eyes of God [the church] is very prolific, giving birth to an endless number of children, and free ones at that,”* freed from sin, death and hell!

The Gospel says to you: you have a Savior, the promised Son! God’s only Son whom He loves. You are co-heir with Him. Whenever the Gospel – the forgiveness of your sins – is spoken to you, you’re hearing that like Jesus you are also God’s own child whom He loves, and He is well pleased with you for the sake of His Son. Jesus the Son gives you everything, like He did in the wilderness. Like the multitude, when we’re hungry then we’re ready.

- Your overwhelming guilt makes you love to hear God’s forgiveness.
- Your sadness makes you love to hear the unbounded joy God has for you in heaven.
- Your alone-ness in the world makes you love to hear that you are loved, God’s love for you in Christ will never disappoint you.

Where do you hear this most clearly? In the Lord's Supper, the miracle in our wilderness, where Jesus' words tell us only Gospel and no Law. There is not one word of Law in the Lord's Supper. Why? The Lord's Supper is a preview of what we have at the heavenly marriage feast. Think, what St. Paul says here in Galatians 4 will come true in heaven: the persecution of Isaac by Ishmael will be ended, all that hell can do is kept outside the gates of heaven.

In heaven, Ishmael no longer persecutes Isaac.

In heaven, unbelievers no longer trouble Christians.

In heaven, no longer do we have sins.

In heaven, no longer can the Law accuse us and no longer do we listen.

In heaven, we are no longer weak in our faith.

In heaven, there is no devil to get us to carry the burdens of the Law.

In heaven, we only look to Christ in pure, perfect love.

In heaven, we only have perfect confidence, trust, love, and joy in Jesus.

Let this be what you are hungry for. You experience this by faith in the Lord's Supper, and you'll see it with your eyes and feel it to the full in heaven.

Aren't Jesus' body and blood given "*for you ... for the remission of sins*" ?

What we will see in heaven is already true. Believe it! Amen!

MARTIN LUTHER ON GALATIANS 4:21-26

It is as though Paul were saying: "You have forsaken grace, faith, and Christ; and you have defected to the Law, wanting to be under it and to gain wisdom

from it. Therefore I shall discuss the Law with you. I ask you to look at it carefully.”

The difference, Paul says, is ... that Ishmael, who was born of the slave, was born according to the flesh, that is, apart from the promise and the Word of God, while Isaac was not only born of the free woman but also in accordance with a promise.

The old covenant is from Mt. Sinai, **bearing children for slavery**; she is Hagar.

Thus the mystical Hagar, that is, Mt. Sinai, on which the Law was given and the old covenant established, gave birth to **a people for God**, yet without a promise, that is, a physical and **enslaved people, not an heir of God**. For the Law did not have promises ... The promises of the Law are conditional. They do not promise life freely; they promise it to those who keep the Law. ... But the promises of the new covenant do not have any condition attached; they do not demand anything of us ...

Therefore Hagar the slave gave birth to nothing but a slave. ... What was lacking [in Ishmael]? The promise and blessing of the Word. **Thus the Law given on Mt. Sinai**, which the Arabs called “Hagar,” **gives birth to nothing but slaves** ... For Hagar does not give birth to a child of promise or an heir; that is, the Law does not justify, does not grant sonship ... Therefore he says: “The present Jerusalem, that is, the earthly and temporal one, is not Sarah but belongs to Hagar; for in it the reign of Hagar is exercised. In it there is the Law that gives birth into slavery.”

The Jerusalem that is above [is] the spiritual Jerusalem ... She is our mother, giving birth, not into slavery, but into freedom. Now the heavenly Jerusalem above is the church. ... Therefore the Jerusalem that is above, that is, the heavenly Jerusalem, is the church here in time. ... [It] has been divinely established to be the mother of us all, of whom we have been born and are being born every day. Therefore it is necessary that this mother of ours, like the birth she gives, be on earth among men; **yet she gives birth by the ministry of the Word and of the sacraments, not physically.**

Therefore this allegory teaches in a beautiful way that the church should not do anything but preach the Gospel correctly and purely and thus give birth to children. ... Therefore just as Isaac has the inheritance from his father

solely on the basis of the promise and of his birth, without the Law or works, so we are born as heirs by Sarah, the free woman, that is, by the church. She teaches, cherishes, and carries us in her womb, her bosom, and her arms; she shapes and perfects us to the form of Christ, until we grow into perfect manhood (Eph. 4:13). **Thus everything happens through the ministry of the Word.**

MARTIN LUTHER ON GALATIANS 4:27-31

The one who was prolific will be barren, and the one who was barren will be prolific. ... It is as though he were saying: "The Law, the husband of a prolific woman, that is, of the synagogue, gives birth to very many children." ... Therefore anyone who teaches or urges either the Law of God or human traditions as something necessary for righteousness in the sight of God does nothing other than give birth to slaves. **And yet such theologians are regarded as the best; they earn the applause of the world and are the most prolific mothers, that is, have an infinite number of disciples. Since reason does not understand what faith and true godliness are, it neglects and despises them.**

Sarah, the free woman, on the other hand, that is, **the true church, seems to be barren** ... The Gospel, the word of the cross, which the church preaches, is not as brilliant as is the teaching about the Law and works, and therefore it has few pupils who cling to it. Besides, it has the reputation of forbidding good works, making men idle and faint, stirring up heresies and sedition, and being the cause of every evil. Therefore it does not seem to have any success or prosperity; but everything seems to be filled with barrenness, waste, and despair. Hence the wicked are fully persuaded that the church will soon perish along with its doctrine.

Regardless of how barren and deserted the church of Christ seems, or of how much it is said to teach heretical and seditious doctrine, it alone gives birth to children and heirs, through the ministry of the word.

Therefore the prophet [Isaiah] grants that the church is engaged in a conflict; otherwise he would not urge it to rejoice. **He grants that in the eyes of the world it is barren; otherwise he would not call it a barren and desolate one that does not bear. But he says that it is prolific in the eyes of God. There-**

fore he tells it to rejoice. ... Therefore the church of the new covenant is completely without Law so far as its conscience is concerned. In the eyes of the world, therefore, it seems to be deserted. But even though it appears barren, without Law or works, yet in the eyes of God it is very prolific, giving birth to an endless number of children, and free ones at that. How? Not through the husband Law but through the Word and Spirit of Christ, given through the Gospel, it conceives, bears, and rears its children.

Seeing that Paul set this forth with the greatest care, we are very careful to show the difference between the Law and the Gospel clearly. This is very easy so far as the words themselves are concerned. For who does not see that Hagar is not Sarah and that Sarah is not Hagar, or that Ishmael neither is nor has what Isaac is and has? This can be determined easily. But in profound terrors and in the agony of death, when the conscience struggles with the judgment of God, to be able to say with firm confidence: "The Law does not apply to me at all, because my mother is Sarah, who gives birth, not to slaves but to free children and heirs" - this is the most difficult thing there is.

[Paul] is arguing against the righteousness of the Law in order to establish the righteousness of faith. ... Paul calls the church barren because her children are not born by means of the Law or works or any human efforts of powers but in the Holy Spirit through the Word of faith. This is purely a matter of being born, not of doing any works. Those who are prolific, on the other hand, labor and strain greatly in travail; this is purely a matter of doing works, not of giving birth. ... "We, like Isaac, are children of promise, that is, of grace and faith, born of the promise alone."

This passage [verse 29] contains some **very powerful comfort. All those who have been born and live in Christ, and who boast of their birth and inheritance from God, will have Ishmael as their persecutor.** We are learning this today from our own experience. ... [It is] sweet comfort, that in the world the godly must bear the name and reputation of being seditious, schismatic, and troublemakers. ... It cannot be otherwise, therefore, that Ishmael will persecute Isaac; but Isaac does not persecute Ishmael in turn. If someone does not want to endure persecution from Ishmael, let him not claim that he is a Christian.

They are attacking not our lives but our teaching. And this is not ours; it is Christ's. Therefore it is Christ's fault that they attack us. ... We shall com-

mend this cause of His to Him. ... We boast of our afflictions, both because we know that we are not bearing them on account of our sins but are bearing them on account of Christ, whose goodness and glory we illuminate, and because Paul fortifies us here and says that Ishmael must taunt and persecute Isaac. ... Whenever the teaching of the Gospel flourishes in the church, there is always this persecution, that the sons according to the flesh persecute the sons according to the promise. Today we endure persecution from our Ishmaelites.

As soon as the Word of God appears, the devil becomes angry; and in his anger he employs every power and wile to persecute it and wipe it out completely. ... As long as the Gospel flourishes and Christ reigns, it is necessary for such acts of perdition to arise and for everything to be filled with the raging of murderers who persecute the truth. Anyone who does not know this will be very easily offended; he will forsake the true God and true faith and will return to his old god and his old faith. Therefore Paul is fortifying the godly here, so that they are not offended by persecutions, sects, and scandals.

In addition, it is very comforting that **the persecution of Isaac by Ishmael will not last forever** but will continue only for a short time, at the end of which the sentence will be pronounced, as follows: Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the slave shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.