

We Are Children of the Free Woman

Galatians 4:21-31

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

Hymn: ELH #266 - "O Bread of Life from Heaven"

Let us Pray: We rejoice, O Lord, that through faith we are already members of your heavenly kingdom. Lead us to share our joy by serving others, and by sharing the promise in Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

The Text: Galatians 4:21-31

translated by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

²¹Tell me, those who wish to be under the law, do you not heed the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one of the slave woman and one of the free. ²³But the one of the slave woman was born according to flesh, and the one of the free through promise. ²⁴These things are allegorical: for they are two covenants, one from Mount Sinai bearing children into slavery, she is Hagar. ²⁵And Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; and she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is with her children in slavery. ²⁶But the Jerusalem above is free, she is our mother; ²⁷for it is written:

"Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear,

break forth and cry out, who does not suffer birth pangs; because the children of the desolate are more than those of the one who has a husband."

²⁸And you, brothers, in like manner with Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But just as then the one born according to flesh kept persecuting the one according to spirit, so also it is now. ³⁰But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son; for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit along with the son of the free." ³¹Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman but of the free.

* * *

Dear children of the free woman,

Here, smack in the middle of Lent, we discover a reason to rejoice. Think of the observances of Lent, the usual Lenten disciplines: they include fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. The idea is for all three of these to be connected. When a person fasts, he looks *outside* of himself. Also, when a person fasts, he finds that, by giving up food, he

has an increase of time and money. With the extra time, a person may concentrate on prayer. With the extra money, a person may give to those who are in need. In our Gospel text, Jesus demonstrates all three in one sentence: “Then Jesus took the loaves and, after giving thanks, he distributed pieces to those who were seated” (John 6:11, EHV). He gave up the food which he could have had, takes time to pray, and gives the food to the 5,000-plus needy people seated on the hill.

He teaches his disciples a valuable lesson at the same time. Notice how it begins, when Jesus “asked Philip, ‘Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?’ But Jesus was saying this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do” (John 6:5-6, EHV). Philip answered by trying to calculate the possibility, counting up all the people, doing some math in his head, and, confronted by the immensity of the task, threw his hands in the air and declared it impossible. Andrew, likewise, acknowledged what *was* available to them: “There’s a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish,” and yet also sees only the impossibility: “but what is that for so many people?” (John 6:9, EHV).

They could have taken it one step further: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26, ESV). How different wouldn’t this story have gone if Philip had turned to Jesus when his Lord asked the question and responded, “What will *you* do for them, Lord?” A pastor once said, “When Jesus tosses you a hot potato, he wants you to toss it back to him.”¹

¹ Will Weedon, “0623. The Season of Lent – Pr. Will Weedon, 3/3/17,” *Issues, Etc.*, podcast audio, March 3, 2017, <http://issuesetc.org/2017/03/03/0623-the-season-of-lent-pr-will-weedon-3317/>.

This is what the season of Lent is about. It begins with Ash Wednesday, when black ashes are smeared on your foreheads and the pastor solemnly tells you, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Looming up before us is the impossibility of our salvation. Death has us walled in. We already stand in the dust of our graves, and through none of our efforts are we able to climb out of them.

But those ashes are smeared in the shape of the cross. Before our eyes this Lenten season are our sins, but also before our eyes is the instrument which took away those sins. The death that has us trapped is moved onto the cross. With us, this was impossible, but with God, with Jesus Christ, all things are possible. Look again how the Gospel lesson ends: “So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with pieces from the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten” (John 6:13, EHV). The apostles, being taught by Jesus’ example to fast, to pray, to give to the needy, each receive a basketful of the leftovers: “twelve baskets,” one for each apostle. Jesus proves that through cross and trial, through loss and giving up, from God’s providence comes great bounty. It has been expressed that life is just a continual string of losses. Through our lives we lose possessions, we lose family members, we lose positions, we lose abilities, we lose memories, we lose mobility, and finally, when we come to the end, we lose our breath and life. Through this, God teaches us just what he taught the Israelites: “that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3, ESV). When he takes away from us thing after thing after thing and finally takes away our life, there he is before us, telling us, “I have never left you, I am all you need.”

This is likewise what St. Paul teaches the Galatians: “we are not children of the slave woman but of the free.” Confronted with our mortality, with our damnation, with the tasks set before us, we are truly in bondage – Bondage to sin, bondage to death, bondage to works that amount to nothing but more sin. But we are “free through promise.” This means we are free from this bondage.

I. Free from Bondage

When Moses confronted Pharaoh about the people of Israel, bringing the Word of the Lord: “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness” (Ex. 5:1, ESV). Pharaoh’s response is telling:

But the king of Egypt said to them, ‘Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens.’ And Pharaoh said, ‘Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!’ The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen, ‘You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them, you shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle. (Ex. 5:4-8, ESV)

In bondage, Israel was promised release if they could do all their work, if they could perform an impossible task, making bricks without straw. Meanwhile, God was releasing them from their bondage, freely.

Our former bondage is depicted by the people of the old-covenant Israel, those who rejected the Christ and his Gospel message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, and instead preferred to maintain the law: as Paul wrote earlier in his letter to the Galatians, “yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but

through faith in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified" (Gal. 2:16, ESV). This is thinking, "I'm a good person," or, "I go to church every Sunday," or any number of similar things. If we think that we have our salvation dependent in any way on something we do, then we are relying upon the works of the law for our justification, and "if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Gal. 2:21, ESV). This is what Paul throughout his letter to the Galatians calls being "according to flesh." For the Jews, it is claiming, "We have Abraham as our father" (Matt. 3:9, ESV). Literally, "according to flesh," this is true. But as Paul proves, this was true also of Ishmael, a child of Abraham "according to flesh," but an heir of bondage.

So we, if we seek any of this good in ourselves, then we are seeking our own good "according to flesh." But Paul writes elsewhere what comes to us "according to flesh": "sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12, ESV). This is impossible for us to understand. By nature we think we can do things ourselves. We think we have a free will to choose good and not evil. But after the sin of Adam the free will of man was lost and extinguished, so that every person is bound in the chains of sin, even "dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature *children of wrath*, like the rest of mankind" (Eph. 2:1-3, ESV). We *by nature* think we can accomplish our own

salvation. Even if we don't phrase it that way, we think that way "according to flesh," not comprehending the grace of Christ, coming through the promise of the Gospel.

But because of that grace of Christ, because of that promise, we are taken out of our nature "according to flesh" and adopted, made children of the free woman. "But the Jerusalem above is free, she is our mother," says St. Paul. He cites a passage from Isaiah's prophecies, then, a paradoxical statement:

*Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear,
break forth and cry out, who does not suffer birth pangs;
because the children of the desolate are more
than those of the one who has a husband.*

This is absurd, if we are thinking "according to flesh." But it becomes clearer when we see this prophecy in context. It comes from Isaiah chapter 54, immediately after a great song in which Isaiah sang of the "servant" of the Lord who "was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed," and who "poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors" (Is. 53:5, 12, ESV). *Therefore, understand, therefore the barren one sings and rejoices, and therefore, as the Introit for this Sunday instructs: "Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all you who love her. Rejoice with her, all you who mourn for her. I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'"*² The "barren one," this is man by nature, cannot bear children, which means gain salvation, by himself. But by divine power, by grace, "through

² *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (Mankato, MN: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1996), 143.

promise," "according to spirit," the fruit is given. "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26, ESV). Paul describes our mother, the "free woman" as "the Jerusalem above." Of course, he means "spiritual Jerusalem," the "new Jerusalem" that St. John witnessed in Revelation, the Jerusalem which replaced the Jerusalem "according to flesh," as Jesus prophesied, "the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21, 23, ESV). And how to become a worshiper in spirit and truth, how to be a child of "the free woman," a citizen of "Jerusalem above"? Jesus said this, too: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, ESV). And the Greek is interesting here, because to be "born again" also may literally be translated, "born from above" (John 3:3, Beck). Yes, we are born again from above, from our mother, Jerusalem above, and this is by Baptism, by conversion, by the work of the Spirit of God through the means he has ordained: "by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 3:5, ESV), and "the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15, ESV).

So when asked, How will you be saved? toss the question back to Jesus: How will you save me? This is a question he has already answered, for he, the suffering servant, has taken our sins upon his back, and placed his righteousness upon us, "so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:5, ESV). He has redeemed us from the law, freed us from bondage, so that now we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works,

which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10, ESV); that is, we are free to serve our neighbor.

II. Free to Serve

In the account of Isaac and Ishmael, the slave-born boy was cruel to the free-born. Paul repeats this, and demonstrates what it means in allegorical terms: "But just as then the one born according to flesh kept persecuting the one according to spirit, so also it is now." The world hates Christians. There's a very simple reason for this: we claim to have the truth, the *exclusive* path of truth. We claim what Jesus said in John 14: "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6, ESV). The world hates that, because it thinks that we place ourselves higher than the world.

In fact, we must acknowledge of ourselves that, according to flesh, we are no different from the rest of the world. We share the same father: as Isaac and Ishmael shared their father Abraham, so we and all others in the world, believers and unbelievers alike, share our father Adam, the sin-father. When people talk about the brotherhood of man, that is true in a very literal sense. We are all brothers, and we are all likewise lost in this terrible pit of sin and death. But because we are adopted into spiritual inheritance, and we are born again from above, we are rescued from this world and are given the way of life. Those who reject this salvation are, like Ishmael, "cast out...for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit along with the son of the free."

Because we have this newfound freedom, and we know how deep and infinite is God's forgiveness and mercy, we are equipped to do what Jesus commanded: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father

and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20, ESV). The power to serve our neighbor in every way, especially in service for his salvation, is given to us, because we are *free*. We are reborn, born from above, and crafted into the image of Jesus Christ, therefore we emulate him, we imitate him, we present *him*. This is as St. Paul wrote elsewhere: "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:3-8, ESV).

During the Lenten season, that last sentence sounds familiar. In the Divine Service Rite 2, instead of singing the triple "Alleluia" before the Gospel, we sing how Christ humbled himself and became obedient unto death on a cross. We are, during Lent, to be reminded of Jesus' great sacrifice on our behalf, as well as the great cost he paid. In Rite 3, there we sing: "Lord, by Your cross and resurrection You have set us free. You are the Savior of the world."³ Again, this is what Lent is all about: we are to see our own incapacibilities "according to flesh," and to see what Christ has done for us, setting us free, so that we are children "according to spirit."

³ Ibid., 94.

Think again of those Lenten disciplines: Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Whether or not you formally “give something up for Lent,” it is a season to remember our role in this world. We humble ourselves, “giving up” our own comforts, and placing our focus outside ourselves. This is also accomplished by prayer. Rather than talk to ourselves, as we are inclined to do, we spend our time speaking to God, taking to him our needs, complaints, and thanksgiving and praise. Almsgiving likewise removes the center from ourselves and places it into others. There’s a man on the corner who asks for money or food. If you’re fasting, why not give him the bread that you would’ve eaten, or the money you would’ve spent on going out to eat? You can ask, “What Would Jesus Do?” But the better question is, “What Has Jesus Done?” He has *died* for you. God himself paid divine blood to purchase your souls from hell, and by his resurrection, which we will see in just three short weeks, and which was hinted at in that Lenten sentence, he set us free. He set us free to serve others. We imitate him so that others may see him. The cross on our foreheads at Ash Wednesday was not so that our “fasting may be seen by others” (Matt. 6:16, ESV), but, just as Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21, ESV), and, “whoever sees me sees him who sent me” (John 12:45, ESV). Therefore, we present ourselves to the world clothed in Christ—just as I your pastor wear these robes during the service, so that you see not *me*, but the Gospel I preach, the Christ I preach. So you also go into the world in service to the world, sacrificing yourself, so that they may see Christ and be saved. We are free. This is a cause to rejoice aloud, so others may also rejoice.

Amen.

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