Christmas 1

December 27, 2020

Galatians 4:4-7

Recently, we’ve been enjoying a show on Netflix. It’s called *The Repair Shop* and comes from England. Over the three seasons we’ve watched, we’ve seen all sorts of things be mended — teddy bears, ceramic vases, clocks, music boxes, old toys, chairs, even a sleigh for Santa.

I think my favorite was the teddy bear a woman brought in that she had received when she was 5 or 6. Her parents gave it to her when they were sending her out of London during the Blitz. The teddy bear accompanied her throughout the war, and had been a treasured companion ever since. She wanted it repaired so she could give it to her granddaughter.

Stories like that are an integral part of the show. Most of the items brought in for repair are family heirlooms, passed down for generations, and now in need of restoration before being given to the next generation. Rather than throw them out and buy something new, these items are carefully restored so that they and their stories can be passed on to future generations.

Often, people will tell about how they were given an item by their favorite aunt or a grandparent, and they sometimes talk about the responsibility that comes with having that item. Almost always, they talk about how having it helps them remember the person who gave it to them.

There’s an understanding among the craftspeople who work at the Repair Shop that what they’re doing is important. They’re helping to preserve history, not in a grand way, but in small, personal ways, making it easier to share the stories that pass down in families.

Those inherited and gifted items carry not just the right of ownership but the responsibility of care and the responsibility of sharing their stories with those who will one day inherit them.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul purposefully used language relating to adoption not just to reinforce that we are children of God, but to further demonstrate the reversals that came about through Christ.

Adoption was a fairly common practice in the Roman Empire, usually among the elite who were keen to ensure that their power and wealth remained in the family.

Childbirth was unpredictable 2000 years ago; infant and early childhood mortality rates were high.[[1]](#footnote-1) The law made it difficult — if not impossible — for women to inherit, so families who had no male children often sought an heir outside the family.

This, of course, could be used to strengthen political alliances. Emperor Augustus, who ruled when Jesus was born, was adopted by his great uncle, Julius Caesar. And he himself adopted three of his nephews and a stepson in an effort to ensure the succession of his son as the next emperor.

While adoption wasn’t unknown among common people, it was customarily something that was a business or political arrangement, and thus primarily concerned with people keeping the power they had and, if they negotiated well, getting more.

But adoption as children of God is completely the opposite. It’s not about power. It’s not about money. It’s not about status. And it isn’t something that generally benefits only a small group of people.

Adoption as children of God shifts our identity. Instead of being a slave to sin, Paul says, we’re beloved children of God through the redemptive work of Christ. As children of God, we are heirs of the promises God has made through Christ. We carry the gift of the Spirit in our hearts, and, having been freed from fear of punishment for our sin, we are invited into God’s liberating work in the world.

So why do we hear this reading in the midst of the Christmas season?

Because the birth of Jesus can’t be separated from his life, death, and resurrection.

There would be little point in celebrating the birth of the child we hear about today in our passage from Luke if it weren’t for who that child became as an adult.

By writing about our adoption as children of God, Paul demonstrates the reversals that we see throughout the Gospels. Instead of being something that benefits only a few, adoption in the hands of God is something available for everyone, something that can benefit everyone. And it’s not about power or wealth, but about grace and mercy and love.

As Paul reminds us just a few verses before our reading for today, God does not care about the distinctions we create to divide ourselves, the ways we determine who is more important and, by extension, those who are unimportant.

When we hear Mary’s song, that the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up, it’s not about putting the powerful on the bottom rung.

It’s about throwing out the ladder.

It’s about erasing hierarchies that do precious little but cause divisiveness and create the kind of inequities that can be hard to escape.

These hierarchies that are so important to us are not part of God’s plans for creation.

As children of God, heirs of the promises made to our ancestors, we have not just the gift of salvation but the responsibility of sharing that news with others, and participating in God’s liberating, redemptive work in the world.

As he held Jesus in the temple, Simeon understood that the baby “embodied the promise of God’s salvation to all humanity — the blessing to all the peoples held through the promise given to ancient Israel.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Not just for the Israelites, but for all peoples.

Simeon knew that the baby could not be separated from who he would become, what he would do.

Through that baby, we are heirs of the promises of salvation. We are called to bear witness that the Light has come into the world, and that the darkness has not, will not, cannot overcome it.

Unto us a child has been born, unto us a Savior given.

Thanks be to God!

1. The infant mortality rate — including children up to 1 year in age — was about 28%. About half of Roman subjects died by the age of 5. Of those still alive at age 10, half would die by the age of 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joy J Moore, “Dear Working Preacher” *workingpreacher.org* 12/23/20 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)