

LENT IV – GALATIANS 4:21-31 – MARCH 27, 2022

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

²¹Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³ But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. ²⁴ Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵ Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶ But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷ For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband." ²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹ But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. ³⁰ But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." ³¹ So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

There are basically two religions in this world – those who believe that they are saved by God's grace, through faith, and those who think that their works have some role to play in whether or not they are ushered into God's gracious presence. They may have different names, they may be presented differently by people in their preaching and teaching, but these are the two camps in which we find ourselves here on earth. Certainly non-Christian religions are based upon adherence to the Law – that's

all they've got, because they don't have a Savior. They don't know Him; they deliberately look the other way when the Gospel is preached to them. These false world religions include modern-day Judaism (which bears little resemblance to the faith of the Israelites in Jesus' time), Buddhism, and even Islam. More on Islam in a minute! However, there are many within the Christian church that don't go all the way to denying the Savior and His work, but try to "save face" and insert something that they can do to contribute to their own salvation. These folks believe that there must be SOMETHING that they can do to work with God the Holy Spirit, no matter how small.

This difference, as Luther labels it, between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross, has been going on since the fall into sin of Adam and Eve. We're made familiar with it in our text with the difference between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, otherwise known as Jerusalem above. Even though these two mountains are not far apart geographically, the purpose of each being mentioned in Scripture is completely different. Mount Sinai is where Moses was given the Law of God, etched with the finger of God on stone tablets, because the Law of God written on their hearts was obscured by their complete and utter rebellion against God. Mount Sinai is associated with mankind being unable to keep the Law of God on our own, and having no hope of salvation under the Law.

Mount Zion, on the other hand, also known as the City of David or Jerusalem, is completely different. Paul distinguishes Mount Zion as where God came to His people, where Jesus gave His own life as a ransom for many, and that which was set aside by God as the sanctuary for His people, in the Temple. Mount Zion is where God acted on our behalf, and did what was necessary to save us from our transgressions against His Law. There's nothing we can contribute to this objective, God-driven, once-for-all sacrifice that paid the penalty for our sins. The death that our Savior died, and the Resurrection that He enacted, paid the entire debt of our sin. There had to be a death, and God supplied it for us, just like He provided the ram in the thicket when Abraham was standing ready to slay his son, at the

command of God. However, this comes a little bit later in the narrative than where we're focusing today.

Abraham and Sarah were blessed in many ways by God (they had land, they had animals, they had maid servants and man servants – however, they were still lacking one thing – children. They were advanced in years (at the time that Isaac was born, Abraham was 100 years old, and Sarah was 90 years old) – no one believed that they would be able to conceive a child, carry it to term, and raise him up to be a man – it just didn't make sense.

We have a similar situation today in the church – everyone knows that we don't have as many children in the church than we did just 50 years ago. Now, there are exceptions, and thanks be to God for all the children we do have – they present an opportunity for us to teach and pass on the faith entrusted to us as a gift. Pres. Harrison told the story a few years ago that the problem isn't that the LCMS has too many children, the problem is that we don't have enough Sarah's and Abraham's! God acted miraculously during the time described in our text to preserve His line to the Savior; there's nothing to say that He won't intervene in our present problem. We don't know His plans, nor would we understand them if we did. He has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against His church, and that there will always be a faithful remnant, until Judgment Day comes. So, we leave the accounting, the planning, and the means to the Holy Spirit, and we just continue to be His willing feet, arms, hands and lips. Don't be like Sarah and Abraham, and try to solve the problem with your own innovation, or try to come up with a backup plan to enact God's promises – when He promises, He also gives the way for it to happen

Sarah had the bright idea that she wasn't able to conceive a child, so she should have Abraham lie with his maid servant, and have her conceive and bear an heir for the family. This might seem a little extreme to us, because we can read ahead and see the troubles that this would cause – enmity between

Hagar and Sarah, to the point that Hagar had to leave the family for her and her son's own safety. I can imagine that Abraham probably didn't have a problem with this plan – after all, it would solve the problem of having God's promise come true, and Sarah didn't have an issue with it (it was actually her idea!)

What was the problem? This wasn't according to God's will – He created the institution of marriage for one man, and one woman, for a lifetime – despite what we might think today, even though polygamy was common throughout the Old Testament, it never bore the approval of God. Rather, it shows how God causes His will to be done, despite us human beings and our sin getting in the way. God's promise to Abraham of many children wasn't limited by Abraham's ability to understand it. Things were getting desperate – at least Abraham thought – God promised to give him children, but they weren't appearing. As we know, God can cause water to come out of a rock, He can cause the Red Sea to part for the Israelites to cross over on dry ground, He can cause manna to appear out of nowhere, He can cause His Body and His Blood to be really and physically present in the Body and the Blood of the Lord's Supper. Our understanding doesn't limit God's power or His imagination.

Hagar represents our way of keeping God's Law – we don't do it very well. Ishmael, the son of Hagar and Abraham, would never be Sarah's blood son, no matter how much she clung to the promise that He would be the line to the Savior. He was a daily reminder of how Abraham and Sarah didn't trust in God to provide for their needs – He represents the fact that if salvation were dependent upon us keeping the Law of God, we would fail every time

Thanks be to God that He didn't leave Abraham and Sarah in their unbelief and sin; rather, He provided the Savior to come from their lineage, just as He had promised that He would. He caused Sarah to conceive a child at 90 years old – some might think that God was just showing off at this point, but He wanted to make sure that they and the people knew that this was not just a fluke thing – it was a God thing. Isaac would be the line-bearer to the Savior. Much like the other women of the Bible, dating

back to Eve, Sarah had at least a fleeting hope that this son would be the Savior – it would certainly fit with God’s ways by taking a situation that appeared hopeless, and instilling a future in its place.

However, He didn’t choose to act in this way, but continued to promise that the Savior would come, when the time was right

He gave them the Gospel, to fulfill the Law – that One would come as the Savior, fulfill the Law in the place of sinful man, die and shed His blood to pay the penalty for sin, and rise on the Third Day to show His victory over death and the grave. The text before us mentions this as Mount Zion, the promised Jerusalem above, the City of David – different from Mount Sinai. This would change everything – there would be a time of strife and arguing for a time, but it would be resolved by sending Hagar and Ishmael away, and it being made clear that Isaac would be the line-bearer to the Savior.

We, too, make up our own ways of trying to earn our own way into heaven. We forget that we are children of the promise, and try to make ourselves to be children of the slave. Why do we do this? Because we cling to that which we know, instead of looking ahead to what is promised by God. It’s hard to wait – we don’t like waiting – especially for something that we know is so important that it determines our existence for eternity. We secretly crave the bragging rights that would come with us contributing something to our salvation. We look down upon those who do nothing to help themselves in life – as being lazy, not motivated, squandering the blessings that they have been given, etc. We mistrust anything that comes for free – it’s hard to get people to come to a luncheon at the church, unless we charge something. Subconsciously, people think that if it doesn’t cost anything, it must be terrible. We want to think that we can keep the Law of God, at least closely enough so that He will reckon us righteous on the Last Day. Even if the Holy Spirit has to do some catching up for us, at least we did something, had something to do with our own salvation

We live as if we are children of the slave woman, born into the slavery of sin, with no hope of being redeemed. We don’t recognize that this is not what God intended us to be, and that He has done

everything to transform us from children of slavery to children of the promise. God keeps His promises – He makes us sons of God, inheritors of eternal life – not because we deserve it, not because we keep the Law of God as children of the slave woman – but because we are born according to the Spirit of God, not of the flesh. How does this happen? Through the work of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, where we are transformed from being enemies to God to being His children, from being steeped in sin to the core, to being redeemed by Him, having our sin removed and washed away. There’s a complete difference in lineage – between natural born sons and those who are not of the family – we are of the family of God, because He has made us part of it.

The strife between Muslims (who trace their lineage to Ishmael, the son of Hagar the slave woman) and Christians (who trace their lineage to Isaac, the son of Sarah, the legitimate free woman) has been going on for centuries, even millennia. We shouldn’t be surprised at this – we’re told in this passage that the son of the slave woman will persecute the son of the free woman. One of the reasons for this persecution is because those who follow the demands of the Law know deep in their heart that their striving aren’t enough, and lash out in anger. Or, they think that somehow by their deeds of wiping out those who won’t bow the knee to their law-based religion, they will earn more points in heaven. Whatever the motivation, the fact that this warfare continues over and over until the end of time makes sense when you understand the background given here in this passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

We think that we live under the Law, and that it’s on us to at least make an effort to keep the Law of God in order to be saved. We even keep track of our good works, and either arrive at one or the other of the two extremes that a theology of glory leads us to – either we’re arrogant, and think that God will have no choice but to let us into heaven; or we’re led to despair, and think that there’s no way that we can earn the favor and blessing of God because of our sin. We must learn from Paul’s writing here, drawing on the lessons that Moses presents in Genesis, that the Law is not the way to eternal life.

The Law has only one function – to kill. The Law kills our false faith in what we do; the Law kills any semblance of trust in our own deeds. Mount Sinai is not where we were created to stay, and was only introduced to us in order to lead us to Mount Zion, the new Jerusalem, where the promise of God resides.

Thanks be to God that He leads us to the heavenly Jerusalem, the forgiveness of our sins, the Gospel, the Promised Savior, the only hope for sinful men. He encourages us that we are children of the promise, not children of slavery to sin. Once we are brought into an understanding of this permanent status as children of God, He then rushes in with the blessings that are only merited by Christ, but God has decided to give to us. The distinction between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, between Ishmael and Isaac, between the child of Hagar and the child of Sarah, help us understand the difference between the Law and the Gospel of God. We must become familiar with this distinction and cling to the truth, and the Holy Spirit comes to our aid and causes this to happen. Jesus has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.