

Text: Galatians 4:4-7  
Title: Fear and Belonging  
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For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON  
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### **Well, here we are.**

The tree is looking a little emptier without all the presents underneath it. And the family Zoom calls are over and done.

Maybe your house, like mine, has a whole host of new toys and books strewn everywhere because they haven't found a home in the playroom yet. (The evidence that if grandparents cannot be with their grand-kiddos, they will guilt-buy even more presents than normal.)

Maybe you are regretting all the Christmas cookies you made....and then without family coming over to share them, you are regretting that you ate all them all yourself.

Maybe you're still enjoying this oddly quiet Christmas spent in one place rather than travelling all around and living out of suitcase for a week.

Or maybe the silence is starting to get to you now that the excitement is over and we're looking ahead to saying good-bye to 2020...only to begin 2021 in lockdown.

### **Well, here we are.**

This Sunday between Christmas and New Year's is always a bit of an odd one even in normal years. The excitement and anticipation of Christmas is over and the significant shift of New Year's isn't here yet with all its resolutions. And we're here. In this in-between place. And I've always found in-between places a good opportunity for reflection. For pausing. For taking a breath and stopping for a second to take in what is happening around you.

**So here we are on this in-between Sunday, let's pause and breath and reflect on just what happened a couple days ago. Let's stop and take it all in...**

While we've spent a lot of time with the gospel stories of shepherds and angels, pregnant women and confused fathers-to-be, today Paul joins us, sharing his understanding of just exactly what happened on that First Christmas. And why it matters.

Our portion of Paul's letter to the Galatians that we read this morning is lovely. Really. Words of promise and belonging. Sheer grace and joy.

You are no longer a slave, but God's child.

But, in context, when placed in the larger letter the apostle wrote to this congregation, well, Paul is not really suited for quiet reflection on a still, snowy morning with a cup of coffee or a hot chocolate. In fact, he's more of the loud, angry uncle at the dinner table pounding his fist on the table, disrupting the flow of conversation, and making everyone look around with embarrassment. Paul is angry. Livid. The best way to read this letter is out loud with your voice raised and rage-y.

### **So what's got Paul so heated?**

This particular congregation, here in Galatia, seems to have forgotten the very reason for Christmas in the first place. These teachers are encouraging the Jesus-followers in Galatia to follow the law more closely - to observe circumcision, to keep the festivals, and to follow Jewish customs - and then they will be saved. Apart from the rules and regulations, they won't be.

And this congregation was listening to these new teachers. It's human nature to love easy distinctions. To know who is in and who is out, what matters and what doesn't, with an easy list of do's and don'ts. Getting something for nothing doesn't always sit easily with us. And it didn't for the Galatians either. This new teaching was something they could really understand - here's a list of religious chores, follow it to the letter, and you'll be okay.

And Paul is irate. And for him it's not just theological, it's deeply personal, too. Paul preached the gospel personally to this Galatian community. But even more than that, this new teaching was a denial of all that Jesus had done and accomplished. There are new teachers in their midst that are promoting a version of Christianity that really doesn't need Jesus. Doesn't need his birth or his death or his resurrection. Jesus could be a new Moses but in so far as he promoted the Law, not its fulfillment. Jesus could be born under the law but only as a good righteous person following the law, not transforming it for our sake.

The Galatians began to believe a twisted gospel where:

Redemption meant religious rule-following. Not divine rescue.

Redemption meant obedience first, belonging second.

Redemption meant fear of not measuring up. Not the joy of being loved as adopted children.

Now before we get all judgemental on the poor Galatians, we may not all be clamouring to make circumcision a requirement for redemption, but throughout our history as God's people, we have a continual inclination to make our redemption about something we're able to achieve rather than a gift to simply receive.

I've witnessed this tension especially around our baptism practices. More and more folks push away from the idea of extending baptism to our covenant children because, well, they can't really "mean it", can they? They haven't done anything to make them Christian yet. Baptism should be earned when you can believe the right things, say the right things, and be the right kind of person. Rather than understanding one's salvation and redemption as a gift to be received, not earned.

But there are less overtly theological ways this kind of Galatian-thinking creeps up in our own relationship with God:

I belong to the family of God because I'm a pretty good person and I mean well. Sure I could do better, but all things considered, I'm doing pretty good as is.

I belong to the family of God because I don't have any obvious big sins in my life. Not like "those folks". Name whatever group you are quick to point fingers at when it comes to big sins.

I belong to the family of God because I know the right answers and can recite Scripture for any occasion. (This is a particular weakness for us Reformed folks...)

But here comes angry Uncle Paul, pounding his fists on the table, and wagging his fingers at our wrong-headed notions of deserving or earning our way into God's family. And he points us to the nativity sets in our homes, whether they're wood or felt, porcelain or pottery, sits us down on our couch, next to our drooping Christmas tree, and glares a little at us, as he returns us to the lessons we learned in Sunday School:

When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his on into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child...

Paul's summary statement of Christmas is all God. God sent his Son. God made us his children. God sent the Spirit into our hearts. God the Spirit empowers us to call out to God as a child calls for a parent. God declares we're no longer slaves but children. Not us. At all. We're no the main actor here, God is.

Paul points us to our nativity sets, keeping our eyes focused on the baby in the middle of it all:

You belong to the family of God because of Jesus. Full stop. No additions. So subtractions.

You belong to the family of God because God sent his Son to redeem you. To rescue you. And through him, to gather you to himself as adopted children. Beloved and redeemed.

**This gospel of Jesus Christ is grace all the way down. This gospel of Jesus Christ is pure gift. Meant to be received with gratitude, not earned through achievement.**

Traditionally there are 12 days of Christmas. Not just one. 12 days that stretch from Christmas Day to Epiphany on January 6. 12 days to absorb and reflect and wonder and ponder and try to take in exactly what happened on that first Christmas under a star in Bethlehem.

When God sent us his only Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to rescue us.

To make it possible to belong to the family of God.

Not because we earn it.

Or followed the rules perfectly.

**But as pure gift.**

God's son wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. For us. Because we desperately needed him then. And we desperately need him now.

**In this in-between time, do not be afraid.**

For the Son was come, the Spirit has been sent, all so that you and I can belong in body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Saviour, Jesus, our Emmanuel God. Our gift given.

**Thanks be to God.**

**Amen.**