

THE GREATEST OF HIS GIFTS IN HIS SON

Hear the Word of God, on this first day of 2012, the last year of the ancient Mayan Calendar, on the commemoration of the Feast of the Circumcision of our Lord and The Day of the Name of Jesus:

But before the Faith came, under Law we were guarded, continually being locked in on all sides for the coming Faith which would be revealed.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Christmas Day 7/8 Sermon, part A: Today is the eighth day of Christmas. It is, according to the old song, this is the Christmas Day in which you are to give your true love “eight maids a-milking.” According to farm labor law, the girls would have to be age twelve or over. According to the laws of our State, you would have to pay them each at least the going minimum wage – \$7.35 per hour. (That is, unless you hired illegal immigrants, which as Christians you cannot do and not break the first use of the Law). In Catalina, one needs to have one acre per cow. Even if the girls teamed up, that would mean four acres minimum. Further, cows can live an average of 20-25 years, if taken care of by such “milk maids” that is, not in a factory farm setting. Therefore, we may conclude from the “eight maids a’milking” that today is a day for lifelong gifts which come at great expense. That cost we begin again to proclaim anew in this New Year, as God declares:

And when (the) eight days for (His) circumcision were fulfilled, then His Name was called Jesus, the one have been called of Him by the angel before (she) became pregnant (with) Him in the womb.²

¹ Galatians 3:23.

² Luke 2:21.

Thank God He has given us the greatest of gifts in His Son, our Savior, the One Whose Name is Jesus, who began to shed His blood on our behalf on the eighth day of His incarnate mortal life. The ultimate cost of our salvation – the death of the Son of God – is extraordinary when compared to the cost of buying and maintaining milk cows and the maids to tend them. And it is.

You have heard before, and are reminded now, from the drops of blood at His circumcision, Jesus was placed fully under the Law of Moses and the Promise to Abraham. From His baptism of you with water and the Word, Jesus' blood cleanses you from all sins. In that washing of regeneration and renewal, Jesus presented you to the Father with the pure, white, spotless robe of the saints.

From the Savior's blood-washed life which God gave to you, you have been freed to hear, and live, the words which St. Paul wrote to a congregation long ago. That community of the Faith was struggling with Gospel freedom. Men who claimed to be completed Christians came among them, to tempt them to again turn to the Law of God for their salvation. Their teaching inasmuch declared that Jesus' perfect life under the Law, which began ceremonially at His circumcision; His death to sins in the Law; and His resurrection for Christians' justification before the Father were not enough to effect God's forgiveness, salvation, and blessed eternal life. Christians are free from the Law in Christ Jesus. Even so, the Law has its place, as St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit declares:

*But before the Faith came, under Law we were guarded, continually being locked in on all sides for the coming Faith which would be revealed.*³

The Law has its divine functions. Many of you have learned to express its uses in humans by the terms *curb, rule, and guide*, or something similar. The First Use of the Law, that which God uses to keep order in society – the God-ordained right rule of governments – is not what we are hearing about today in the Church’s readings. Yes, I know, this is an election year. Iowa caucuses are about to take place, followed by elections in New Hampshire and elsewhere. The curb on behavior which God’s natural law provides will be exercised, rightly or wrongly, by whomever wins whatever elections. God will hold such rulers to account. That is not the use of the Law which God is addressing through St. Paul’s words for the Church today, when he says:

*But before the Faith came, under Law we were guarded, continually being locked in on all sides for the coming Faith which would be revealed.*⁴

Those words were written first to the Church, to the assembly of believers, not pagans, unbelievers, or idol-worshippers. That means, from their context, Paul’s words are to be applied in the Church. Since this Letter passed the Church’s test for full agreement with the rest of Scripture, its words apply in any congregation where God has gathered for Himself a holy people around His Word and Sacraments. Since the Letter to the Galatians is not speaking to secular people at this point of the Letter, what then does Paul mean when he writes of the Law acting as a guard for them? From the words themselves in their context we can understand that Paul speaks of the Law in its widest

³ Galatians 3:23.

sense: Law and Gospel. We may also determine that he is speaking of the Law in its narrow sense: its uses as rule and guide.

You may have learned to call those things the Second and Third Uses of the Law. Simply put, the Second Use of the Law works to convict people of their sins, to lead them to sorrow over them, and to want to turn from them. It is active primarily in conversion from sinner to sinner/saint. The Third Use of the Law works on the Old Adam which inheres in all converted people. It empowers the believer to daily drown that Old Nature with all its sinful desires, to paraphrase Dr. Luther's Small Catechism. Yet, no matter how we try to define them, the Second and Third Uses of the Law are still Law – that Word of God which convicts, condemns, and kills.

St. Paul seems to be focusing on the “rule” of the Law – that is, to guard one from sinful thoughts and behaviors so that one is prepared to hear the Gospel. Yet, except academically, and that not well at all, one who preaches or teaches God's Word cannot really separate the “rule” from the “guide.” For example, St. Paul says, as you have heard repeated:

But before the Faith came, under Law we were guarded, continually being locked in on all sides for the coming Faith which would be revealed.⁵

It sounds like he is reminding Christians, Jewish Christians, about their time in the Church before Christ came. And, he is. He is also declaring to believers that the Law and Promise they had are fulfilled in Christ. Yet, through St. Paul, the Holy Spirit is

⁴ Galatians 3:23.

also speaking to the old natures in those same Christians, who, after their conversions, seemed to desire to return to the Law as a means of maintaining their salvation. Yes, he goes on to make this point:

Just so, the Law disciplined us, to become (us) into Christ, that from Faith we may be declared righteous.⁶

That sounds a bit weird to our ears. But, it is the closest approximation to that which St. Paul is communicating. That is, the Law, those who were under the Old Covenant Law and Promises were being kept until they could become into Christ. That is to say, the Law and the Gospel of the Old Testament stood until they became what they were meant to declare – Jesus Christ, and His blood shed for the forgiveness of the whole world, and most especially for we who believe. So, for the person who has heard the Word of Promise, the Word that of Law that accompanies it acts as a “curb, rule, and guide” until the revelation of the Christ and His death. Then, the Christ who shed His blood for us, Who gives His Name to sinners in the water and Word of Holy Baptism is declared. From that God gives the fullness of the Faith. St. Paul continues, *but, the Faith having come, no longer under discipline we remain.⁷*

That sounds like he is saying, when the Faith is given, the Law no longer applies. The word, translated, “discipline,” is for our ears. It really should be translated in variations of the word, “pedagogue,” which is a term we rarely use in our day. A pedagogue in the first century Roman Empire was a male household slave. He was

⁵ Galatians 3:23.

⁶ Galatians 3:24.

appointed by the household owner or manager to accompany young boys. He was to train them in appropriate behavior, to even to go to school with them until they reached the age of sixteen. The pedagogue was more than a man to mete out discipline in the father's stead. He was coach, encourager, and trainer in all things that "good men" of the era needed to succeed in their adult world. The good pedagogue was both lawgiver - bringing the lash when needed, and gospel-bearer - consoling, encouraging, and uplifting the boy in right behavior.

So, when Paul says that with the Faith we are no longer under discipline, we are to understand that we have been given all we need to conduct our lives as mature men and women of the Faith. St. Paul in no way is negating the convicting, condemning, killing functions of the Second and Third Uses of the Law. He is, rather, declaring that we are free to keep them, to rule and guide our old natures that our new natures in the Gospel might rise and live before God in righteousness and purity forever. This tie is made clear as the Apostle declares: *For all sons of God you remain through the Faith in Christ Jesus.*⁸

If you are of a son of God, you have been set free from your pedagogue, then God has determined you are a mature man of the Faith. He declares, through the Word of Paul, that, since you are in the Faith, you are freed to live through the Faith in Christ Jesus. That means, dear Christian, you do not need rules for Christian living to be

⁷ Galatians 3:25.

⁸ Galatians 3:26.

mature in the Faith. You do not have to follow pop-Christian fads to live a devout life, to find purpose in your callings. Because your pedagogue of the Law and Promise has been taken away, you are free to live in the Faith of the Christ.

That is why this reading is tied to the Circumcision of our Lord. When Jesus shed His blood in that little snip, He was placed under the Law of the Old Covenant. He had to keep all the ceremonial laws perfectly to remain right with the Father. And, the eye-witness testimony of more than two or three witnesses who agree, declare that Jesus did so all of His life.

Then, so that His perfect keeping of the Law would apply to you, Jesus provided the means, His means, God's means, with which to grant you His perfect obedience. That comes through the Water and Word of Holy Baptism, as you have heard before. In that washing, you also were given the Name of Jesus, the Name of God. From God's placing His Name upon you, and Jesus' perfect keeping of the Old Covenant for you, you have been declared free and complete before the Father. That is just what St. Paul means, when he declares: *For, as many of you as into Christ have been baptized, Christ you have put on.*⁹

To be clothed in Christ is to bear Him, and all His work, and all His ways, into your life. It means that, when the Father in Heaven looks at you, He sees Jesus. Jesus covers you with all He is, and all your sins, uncleannesses, and lawlessnesses are gone from the Father's sight. Holy Baptism does so much, and yet, Christians often think

of it so little! Repent, turn, live under the washing you have received. Recall that Jesus' blood has washed away all your sins. He has joined you with all believers through all time. You are one in Christ, even as the Word proclaims:

There is not Jew nor Greek, there is not slave nor free, there is not male and female; for all of you remain one in Christ Jesus. And if you all are of Christ, then of Abraham's seed you are, according to (the) promise, heirs.¹⁰

We who bear the Name of God in Christ Jesus are one in the Father's household. That text speaks of salvation, of justification, and of sanctification. It does not proclaim service or roles in the Church.

All of that is good news for the New Year. It means that, no matter what government we get – the one we deserve, or the one we need – we are all under God's rule, and He has brought His justice to us in Christ Jesus. Whether the world ends on December 21, 2012 with the termination of the Mayan calendar or not, we Christians have a home with our Father. This home is open to all, and it was won by the active obedience of Jesus on our behalf. That is God's precious gift to you anew in this New Year of our Lord. That brings us to declare this will all hope and favor:

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, to you who bear Jesus' Name!

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Circumcision of our Lord (*LSB* One-year series)

Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 2:21

January 1 2012

Pastor Michael A. Morhouse

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⁹ Galatians 3:27.

¹⁰ Galatians 3:28-29.