

Sermon Laetare  
March 6, 2016  
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Galatians 4:21-31  
Children Born of the Promise

God promised Abraham that he would give him a son. But Abraham's wife, Sarah was too old to have children and even in her youth she was barren. So Sarah came up with a plan that Abraham would take her younger slave Hagar as his wife, so that he could have a son. It worked. Hagar gave Abraham a son and they named him Ishmael. But that wasn't what God meant when he *promised* to give Abraham a son. God promised to give Abraham a son through *Sarah*. Never mind that Sarah couldn't physically conceive a child. So at God's right time Sarah did conceive a child and bore Abraham a son. They named him Isaac. Ishmael was a child of the flesh, born of a slave woman. Isaac was a child of promise, born of a free woman. Ishmael was cast out with his mother. Isaac inherited his father's estate.

We are all born Ishmael. That is, we are naturally born of the flesh. And as Hagar was a slave, we are born into slavery. God's Law promises us freedom *if* we do what it says, but since we are born sinners, we become slaves of the Law. King David said in Psalm 51, "Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." So, because we are naturally *sinners*, the Law doesn't help us. Saint Paul says, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in God's sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:20) So, as natural Ishmaels, we have no inheritance according to our natural birth. As Jesus says, "That which is born of flesh is flesh. That which is born of Spirit is spirit." (John 3:6)

Yet, you Christians have a second birth. Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” And “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he will by no means enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, 5) This second birth is not like the first one of the flesh. It is a birth according to the promise.

You Christians are Isaacs. That is, you are children according to the promise. You have been born again, not of the flesh, which is under the Law, but of the will of God. Isaac was not the heir of his father’s household, simply because his mother was the free woman. Isaac was the heir, because he was born according to God’s promise. Abraham and Sarah’s works had nothing to do with God’s promise. God fulfilled his promise despite their weakness and despite their best efforts to do it themselves. And so you are Isaac, a child of promise, not because you accomplished something according to the Law, not because your biological parents are really good people, but because God has made a promise to *you* and God keeps his promises.

By nature you are an Ishmael, a slave-child of the Law. Yet by God’s grace you are an Isaac, a child of promise and heir of your heavenly home. Your new birth is from the Church, your mother. Many people are not comfortable with calling the Church their mother. But it’s true. St. Paul writes, “But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.” How is the Church your mother? Well, just as Sarah received a promise and she delivered a child; the Church has received a promise and delivers children according to that promise. God promises to forgive all sins for the sake of Christ’s innocent suffering and death. God promises to make children of promise, not by works that they do, but by

his grace through the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he pours out on them generously through Jesus Christ their Savior (Titus 3:5-8)

When we call the Church our mother, we are not confessing that some human organization is our mother. The Roman Catholic Church is not our mother. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is not our mother. Our mother is the one, holy Christian Church. How do you identify the Church? The Church is where the Gospel is preached in its truth and purity and the Sacraments are rightly administered. The Gospel that God forgives sins for Christ's sake is a promise. The Sacraments are promises. Baptism promises to wash away sins and regenerate the Christian through the Holy Spirit and give eternal life. Through the Lord's Supper, God promises to feed us Christ's true body and blood for our forgiveness. These promises are given to Christ's Church. And through these promises children of promise are born.

Some don't think that the Church is really important. But you can't have a good relationship with Jesus without having a good relationship with His Church. The Church is Christ's bride. St. Paul writes, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:25-27) St. Paul also says, the Church is Christ's body. Our Lord Jesus spoke to St. Peter, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." That rock on which Christ's builds his Church is God's promise to pardon all sins for the sake of Christ's death and

resurrection. It is only by this *promise* that the Church can withstand the attacks of the devil, the world, yes, even the gates of hell.

Christ's Church is not defined by the Law. His Church is defined by the Gospel. The Law commands and threatens eternal death to all who fail. The Gospel is God's promise of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus. The Law makes all sinners slaves. The Gospel frees all sinners from the bonds of sin, death and hell, and give them a holy residence in heaven. St. Paul says that Mount Sinai, which is where God gave the Ten Commandments, is Hagar, bearing children for slavery. But Sarah represents the free Jerusalem above, she is our mother according to the promise.

Hagar and Ishmael were cast out of Abraham's household? Do you know why? Because Sarah said to her husband, "The son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." (Genesis 21:10) You see, Hagar and Ishmael were persecuting Sarah and Isaac. Hagar thought Ishmael should be the heir. He was born first. But Sarah clung to God's promise, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." (Gen. 21:12) It was wrong for the heir to the household to be persecuted by the slave.

According to God's promise, you are an Isaac. You are a child of promise through faith. That means that you are free from the Law's condemnation. You are not a slave to sin. The Law cannot deny you God's love or gifts. And you have an eternal home waiting for you, prepared by Christ Jesus himself. Yet, by nature you were born an Ishmael. And that child of the flesh persecutes the child of the promise. Your old self wants to keep you a slave to the Law. He wants you to depend on your works to save you. Yet the works he wants you to trust in are weak and riddled with sin. So he drives you to strive more to fulfill the Law, yet drives you deeper into debt of the Law. Like that old song, "You load

16 tons and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt.” And that is what slavery to the Law does. Each day closer to the grave. Each day more indebted to the Law.

But what does Saint Paul say? “So brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.” Paul is telling you to not let Ishmael persecute you. Don’t let your old self try to enslave you by trusting in your works, by doubting your inheritance through grace. “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.” You either earn your way to heaven (which is impossible) or you inherit it by grace according to God’s promise. You cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven using both your works and faith in the promise. If you accept that you must fulfill some portion of the Law to get to heaven, then you reject the Gospel. St. Paul writes, “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.” (Gal. 5:4) The child of the flesh cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven. Only the child of promise inherits the kingdom of heaven. So we must daily cast out the child of the flesh and rise as children of promise.

You cast out the slave woman and her son by repenting of your sins, refusing to glory in your works, but acknowledging that they are imperfect. This must be done daily. The sinful flesh does not want to accept the promise. It wants to earn its own way. When you cast out Hagar and Ishmael then cling to Sarah. That means cling to the promise given to Christ’s Church. Listen to the Gospel that Jesus bore the curse of the Law for you. Hear that God freely forgives your sins by grace for Christ’s sake. Receive the Sacrament of the Altar. Remember your baptism and believe that you are a child of God, not born of the flesh, but of the Spirit.

Like Isaac, you are a child of promise. You were not born of a slave woman, but a free woman according to God's promise. Do not return to a yoke of slavery, but trust in God's promise for you. God promises that you are an heir of eternal life, because Jesus took away your sins. It is only through God's *promise* that you enter eternal life. And the promise is sure, because God's promises are irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

Amen.