

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.⁶ Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4:4-7)

When the Time had fully Come

Did you get everything done on time this year? Christmas is a time of family traditions and of activities that children and adults remember and look forward to. But it's also a time of deadlines. Christmas comes whether we're ready or not. So did you manage to have everything done that you wanted to this year? I don't think we did. I know we put up our Christmas tree a little later than we usually do. I know we were playing catch up on some of our holiday shopping and activities. I don't think we got every single thing done that we had hoped to. But Christmas Eve is here. Everything that's going to get done is done and I hope we have the good grace to celebrate what God has done for us without beating ourselves up about the details we didn't get to this year. So what about you? Did you take care of all the little details? Or did you come up short on anything? God did not come up short on anything when he was preparing for the first Christmas. He was on a schedule, too, a schedule of his own making. For thousands of years God had planned and prepared for the night when Christ was born. Only when everything was ready did that birth take place. **When the time had fully come** God sent forth his Son.

I.

Now, what was involved in God's planning and preparing? What had to happen for the time to fully come? So many things that I can't list them all for you tonight. But I'll try to hit the highlights. Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Augustus was not Jewish. He was the Roman emperor. His empire stretched from Egypt around through Palestine and Syria all the way to Spain and Germany and Britain. The Roman Empire was united by a system of roads and sea travel. The *pax romana*, the Roman peace kept things quiet throughout that enormous empire with its hundreds of different ethnic groups. So you could move in relative safety and speed from one end to the other. Within that Roman Empire, Greek culture reigned supreme, so if you learned Greek you could get by anywhere. All that meant that Jesus' parents could go to Bethlehem as the Roman government commanded and then return to Nazareth afterward. It also meant that the gospel could rapidly spread throughout the Roman world.

But there was more to God's plan than the Romans. God had chosen Israel to be the cradle for his Son. Jesus was born from the descendants of Abraham and of David the King. But he was not raised in a palace. Joseph worked as a carpenter. His family didn't even live in Jerusalem the capital or even in the ancestral city of Bethlehem. Joseph lived in Galilee in the fishing village of Nazareth, in the hinterland away from the movers and shakers of that time. The royal line of David had been reduced to a stump that appeared to be dead. All that was part of the plan, too. God had foretold it all.

Only when God had everything in place did he move forward. St. Paul said, **"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son ..."** Jesus was God's Son. Before the universe began, the Son of God was there. He is eternal – he has always existed and he always will exist. Yet in a mystery that we cannot understand, he is truly the Son of God. He was begotten or born from his Father. Yet he was always there.

God sent his Son into this world and Jesus was born. When I was a child, I used to wonder why the name Jesus is never used in the Old Testament. I understood that the Old Testament was written before Christ was born, but I also understood that the Son of God was always there, even in the Old Testament. So it seemed to me that the name should be there, too. But it isn't. Why not? Jesus is the name that God gave to his Son when he came into this world. **"When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman ..."** Paul said. Jesus was born as a real, human being. But, he was not always a human being. At a very specific moment, when the Holy Spirit descended on Mary and caused her to conceive, the Son of God entered our lives and our humanity. Already in the womb, God gave him the name Jesus, which means Savior.

So we confess in one of our creeds that Jesus is the Son of God, eternally begotten from the Father – he was always there – and he is the son of Mary, fully human, born at a specific moment in history, just as each of

us was born at a specific moment in history. Jesus is the name we use for God made man, for God come in human flesh.

Why did God make himself man? Paul said that he was **“born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law ...”** God made himself man so that he could pay the price that sets us free from death and hell. To do that, he had to be one of us, because we human beings are responsible for our own thoughts, our own feelings, our own words and actions. We live under law. We are responsible to God for every casual, off-hand, nasty comment and every selfish action. We owe God death and hell for every greedy thought and for every whiny, self-absorbed feeling. We are doomed to an eternity in agony because it’s our nature to love ourselves first and foremost when God commands us to love him more.

But Jesus came to redeem us from that fate. To do that, he had to be all that we are. An ancient teacher of the church, a man named Gregory of Nanzianzus, once observed that if Christ didn’t take it, he didn’t pay for it. What he meant was that Jesus had to be all that we are so that all that we are is bought and paid for. If the Son of God did not have a real human body, then after Judgment Day our bodies will burn in hell forever. If the Son of God did not take a real human soul, then our souls will go to hell when we die. If he didn’t take a real human mind and heart then our sinful minds and hearts still are not paid for. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, true God, begotten from all eternity, to be born of a woman, to be a real and complete human, so that all we are is bought and paid for.

The baby born that night and wrapped in strips of cloth was the Son of God come in human flesh. The human flesh is the part that’s easy to see. The angels did not tell the shepherds to look for the glory of God radiating from a manger. They said, **“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”** Look for a human child, because you are humans. Bu know that this child is more, because God has now come to save you. **When the time had fully come God sent his Son to be born into this world.**

II.

St. Paul ties that divinity and humanity to a payment, to redeeming us. He’s thinking of slavery. Earlier in the chapter, he talked about slaves and even minor sons. He made the point that in the ancient world a minor son was no better than a slave. Even though he owned everything – and even if his father was dead – he could not access his money until the time set in his father’s will. He was forced to obey trustees and executors until he came into his own.

To Paul, Israel was that minor son, waiting for the time to fully come. But we weren’t. To Paul, we gentiles were slaves. The son owned us. He could do whatever he wanted to us, even kill us. But when the time came for Israel, it also came for us because in that will God made a payment. He redeemed us from slavery to sin. Under God’s law, everyone who sins, dies and goes to hell. Whether we know it or not, we live in that slavery. Our natural fear of death is a sign of that slavery. The guilt we feel is a sign that we’re born slaves doomed to hell.

But God himself paid to set us free. He shouldn’t have – he was the banker. During this past year, we’ve heard endlessly about the mortgage crisis and people losing their homes because they’re underwater – they owe more than their house is worth. Spiritually speaking, we’re all born underwater. We owe our lives and more to God for our sin. With houses, the solution is refinancing. But that’s not what God did. God paid off the debt. God brought a suitcase of money into the bank branch and he paid for every debt that anyone owed there. And he did it with the blood of that baby who slept in the manger that night in Bethlehem. Jesus grew up to redeem us.

Paul was thinking of slaves, not houses. In the ancient world, if you bought a slave, that slave belonged to you. But God didn’t buy slaves. He bought freedom for the slaves. He took slaves on his own estate, slaves who were doomed to suffer forever in hell, and he paid to set them free. More than that, he adopted them. He brought them into his own family to live with him forever as masters on his estate. That is perhaps the greatest wonder of all in God’s plan. He sent his Son into this world to make us his sons, to make us his children. When Jesus was born that night, the Son of God joined himself to us and now we are his brothers and sisters. His life, his death, his resurrection give us a new life, a new family, a new place in God’s world.

Paul reminds us that we have that new place by faith. Lots of people, even during this Christmas season, blithely live as slaves of sin. They follow their own evil desires. They party. They sleep around. They do whatever they please thinking they’re free. On Judgment Day they will discover that they always belonged to

the devil. Jesus was born for every human being who ever lived. He died for all of us. He rose again for each and every one. But do we depend on this birth, this life, this death and resurrection to take us to heaven? Or do we still think that somehow we can make it on our own? Every unbeliever throws away the payment Jesus made for him because he thinks he's a good person and God should let him into heaven. But he's wrong and that sinful pride costs him everything Jesus came to give us.

God sent forth his Son to save us. And God had to make sure we trust what Jesus did. So he sent forth his Holy Spirit to work in our hearts. The Spirit teaches us to say, "Abba" – which is not a Swedish rock group, it's Aramaic for "Daddy." We are God's own children now, bought and paid for by Christ and claimed by the Holy Spirit who put faith in our hearts. All that is why Jesus came in Bethlehem. **When the time had fully come, God sent his Son to make us his children.**

That's what we have come here to celebrate tonight. God carefully planned it all. And he pulled it off without a hitch. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem. The time came for the baby to be born. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger. Then God began that very night to announce what happened – to send the Holy Spirit to work faith. Angels told shepherds, who told everyone they could find what they had seen and heard. We are still hearing that message tonight. God sent forth his Son for us. Celebrate his birth as the means to give you new birth into God's family. Celebrate his birth as the greatest miracle and gift of God's grace. Amen.