

Born under the law

“But when the 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 the full rights of sons.” Galatians 4:4-5

Each of these descriptive phrases moves us closer to the purpose of the Incarnation of God. Each has a depth of meaning difficult to fathom. We are led from the big picture of salvation history, “in the fullness of time,” to the greatest movement of love known to humanity, “God sent his Son.” Our confession moves us from “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” to “the Word was made flesh and lived for awhile among us” (Jn 1:1,14). Then the confession narrows down and focuses our attention: first, on the particular means God used to fulfill his will with the phrase, “born of a woman,” and second, on God’s specific purpose, “born under the law to redeem those under the law.” It is impossible to overestimate the density of truth packed into this little phrase. All that is meant by righteousness and justice, reconciliation and redemption is subsumed in the phrase *under the law*.

The articles I have read over the years on the subject of Mary always begin by saying something to the effect that “Protestants largely do not think about Mary.” Evangelical writers feel they have to confess to “an almost instinctive distrust of Mary,” but I have never run into that distrust of Mary. When they accuse themselves of “abandoning Mary to a kind of evangelical limbo,” I wonder where they have gone to church because I have always been taught to think of Mary as a wonderful model of humility, a great example of discipleship, and a true spiritual mentor. I’m not convinced that Mary suffers the kind of neglect these writers claim, but I am fairly certain our grasp of the significance of the law does. Of all the phrases in the apostle Paul’s confession, “born under the law, to redeem those under the law” may be the truth least understood and most difficult to explain *especially at Christmas*. It shouldn’t be, but it is.

The law of God does not seem to fit with the holiday mood and it certainly is a foreign concept in your typical Christmas letter. Every year we get this great letter from friends in San Antonio, who highlight their accomplishments. Compared to everyone else who sends us Christmas letters they blow the competition away. They go to more exotic places and do more fun things than all of our friends combined. They live in a 5,000 square foot mansion and have a beautiful lakehouse, but they love to travel. If they go to Magdalena Bay in Baja California to play with the whales in February, they return in March with extra friends for more fun. In May the wife travels to Ireland for her own personal time away and then the family spends three weeks in Australia, visiting the outback, befriending an Aboriginal community, diving off the Great Barrier Reef, crocodile hunting on the Daintree River, and attending an opera at the Sydney Opera House. In addition to being great students, cheerleaders, and confirmed in the Methodist Church, the girls

are certified in SCUBA diving, accomplished violinists, and award winning artists. The youngest is the Freshman Class President and the oldest is shopping for a college. She has visited Tufts, Harvard, Emerson, Boston College, Boston University M.I.T., Texas A&M, and Rice University. In addition to his medical practice, the husband plays piano in a bluegrass band and loves it.

Now, I ask you, where in the midst of all that excitement does the law of God come in? Who is going to break in on all that fun and say,

“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law, rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:10-20).

The Law and the Christmas Story

Everyone in the Christmas story lived under the law and they took it to heart. It was God’s revelation. To them the law was not an authoritarian task master but a special life-transforming, character-shaping word from God. The educated heart shares God’s deep aspirations for justice and righteousness and applies these convictions to ordinary life. Life is placed in orbit around a quality of being that reflects spiritual devotion, ethical discernment, and a teachable spirit. Zechariah was a priest under the law and his wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. “Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly” (Lk 1:6). They shared the psalmist’s love for the law: “I will walk in freedom, for I have sought your precepts” (Ps 119:45). “Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them” (Ps 119:140).

We may not give a lot of thought to the role of the law in the Christmas story, but Joseph did. He was the first to feel the tension between law and gospel. Mary’s concern had to do with the laws of nature, but Joseph’s consternation had to do with the moral law. He was well aware of what the law said about sexual fidelity and when he learned that Mary was pregnant he decided to divorce her quietly. When Matthew says “divorce” he does not mean that Joseph and Mary were already married, but in that culture to be pledged to be married meant that separation was much more than breaking off an engagement. Matthew tells us that Joseph “was a righteous man

and did not want to expose her to public disgrace” (Mt 1:19). By divorcing Mary quietly he sought to spare her the shame and disgrace of publicly exposing her unfaithfulness, even as he sought to save himself from disobeying the law by marrying a woman who now belonged to someone else. Under the law, Joseph’s strategy would not only have satisfied his conscience, but shown compassion to Mary. And this is the action he would have taken if the angel of the Lord had not spoken to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:20-21).

Two things can be said about the law in Joseph’s case: first, the law complicated life and second, the law was inadequate to save. Nevertheless Joseph would have found living under the law a blessing, not a burden. He rejoiced in the law and would have agreed with the Psalmist when he said,
“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward” (Ps 19:7-11).

Mary’s song of praise reflects a worldview based on the law of God. The Magnificat is more than lyrical poetry, it is a carefully crafted unified field theory of theology and ethics based on the law of God. Mary has a firm grasp of the reality of God and Salvation history. She speaks of “God my Savior” who is “mindful of the humble state of his servant.” He is “the Mighty One” master of everything, whose “mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.” This is the God of Abraham, “Holy is his name.” He scatters the proud, lifts up the humble, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. Clearly these are not the musings of a flighty, self-absorbed teenager but the song of a woman of God shaped by the law of God.

What Mary and Joseph did after Jesus was born is another indication of how seriously they took the law. Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day according to the law, and after Mary’s forty day purification, he was presented to the Lord as their consecrated firstborn son. They offered a sacrifice “in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons’” (Lk 2:22-24). In the Jerusalem temple Mary and Joseph were received by Simeon, who is described as “righteous and devout.” He took the baby Jesus into his arms and praised God, saying, “. . . My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Lk 2:31-32). Simeon, along with the 84 year old prophetess Anna, saw in Jesus the coming Redeemer. All of

this to say that the law of God shaped the character of everyone in the Christmas story, and more importantly, framed their understanding of the meaning and purpose of Jesus' birth.

The Purpose of the Law

Everything that is contained in the biblical concept of the law is encompassed in this defining statement. From the beginning humanity has been under the law. In the garden, Adam and Eve, were under the law. A limit was set that served to define the difference between themselves and God, between the creature and their Creator. "The balance of things is seen in the contrast between 'every tree' that is there for human enjoyment and the single tree that is forbidden. Yet in that single tree was enshrined the principle of law" (J. A. Motyer, EDT, 623). Since we are made in the image of God our humanity is most fully realized in obedience to the will of God. In other words, we are truly ourselves when we live in accordance with the will of God. A fully human life is an obedient life, for it is only when we live according to the perfect law of liberty that we become free (Psalm 119:45; James 1:25). Sin is a violation of the will of God and an attack on our true nature.

The full impact of the law came at Mount Sinai after the Passover, a sign of God's promised redemption, and after the Exodus, Israel's liberation from bondage. "The people redeemed by blood were brought by their Redeemer to the place of lawgiving (Ex 20:2). Grace precedes law; the law of God is not a system of merit whereby the unsaved seek to earn divine favor but a pattern of life given by the Redeemer to the redeemed so that they might know how to live for his good pleasure" (Motyer, 624). The Mosaic Law gave Israel a legal system to guide their administration, a moral code to guide holy living, and a ceremonial law to guide true worship. It is important to emphasize that the precepts, statutes, and commands of the law were based on redemption and rooted in a sacrificial system. It was never about rules and human merit. It was always about a way of life made possible by the grace of God. The precepts were rooted in a theology of propitiation and the statutes were based on an atoning sacrifice. Human obedience has always rested on Divine forgiveness. No one was ever meant to imagine that there was salvation in a law that was independent of God's grace and redemption.

The temptation we face is to live by a code of conduct rather than to live by the grace of God. We are egotistically inclined to believe in our own merit rather than to trust in God's mercy. Sadly, we prefer to rely on our own judgment than to follow God's will. So we are tempted to think that we are good enough, if we try hard enough. This is why the holiday season is such a burden to so many, because it seems that it is all about trying harder, when in fact, Christmas is all about receiving the gift of salvation in Christ.

In Romans, the apostle Paul spells out the value of the law, but only after he makes clear that the law did not give the Jews bragging rights on their relationship with God. The Gentiles had the law too, "since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their

consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them” (Rom 2:15). If the Jews were “entrusted with the very words of God” it was not for the purpose of showing preferential treatment, much less righteous merit, but to show that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:2, 23). The purpose of the law, Paul insisted, was “so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in [God’s] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom 3:19-20).

My best friend in middle school was Ron Goldstein. I can’t remember how we became friends, but we did. Our families seemed very different. Ron’s father dressed in expensive suits, drove a black Cadillac and owned a night club that had a dubious reputation in town. It was definitely not the kind of place my parents went to. But Ron was a good friend and we spent a lot of time together. He was Jewish and when he turned 13 he invited me to his bar mitzvah. Having reached the age of accountability, he was to be designated a “son of the law” and formally “yoked to the law.” From then on it was his responsibility to obey the law.

It was the first time I had ever been in synagogue. The solemn ceremony involved unfurling a large scroll, the Torah, from which Ron was called upon to read briefly in Hebrew. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts” (Deut 6:4-6). I knew he had worked hard to get the pronunciation correct. The large gathering of extended family, the giving of expensive gifts, and a formal meal made it feel like a wedding. I was really impressed that Ron received all this attention for turning thirteen. After the meal, the immediate family and close friends went back to Ron’s home. Then something happened that gave the day a different perspective for me. There were seven or eight of us, Ron’s cousins and friends, upstairs in his room, laughing and joking around, when Ron’s brother came in with a three foot stack of pornographic magazines. He unceremoniously dropped the stack in the middle of the room letting the glossy magazines slide in all directions. It produced an instantaneous feeding frenzy. My friend, Ron, who a few hours earlier had been ceremonially designated a “son of the law” was reduced to a drooling puppy, ogling the centerfolds. As I walked home, I tried to sort out the incongruity of this rite of passage in my mind. Paul was right. We are not saved by the law, but “through the law we become conscious of sin.”

The law was put in charge, Paul said, “to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (Gal 3:24). Righteousness is not a competition to see who can keep the law. If it were, everyone would lose, because everyone falls short of the glory of God. We are all powerless to meet God’s standard. Some of us may seem more powerless than others, but we are all powerless! This is why Jesus said “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20). Jesus did not simply set the law aside or ignore it. He fulfilled it. As he said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mt 5:17). To fulfill

the law, Jesus not only kept the law perfectly—the only person to do so, but he stood in our place and received the punishment that we deserve for not keeping the law. The author of Hebrews wrote, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Heb 4:15). Righteousness is not a competition; it is a gift! Because “God made him [Jesus Christ] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Under the law or In Christ

Last Christmas my family went all out to surprise me with an incredible gift. Around Thanksgiving Ginny and Kennerly picked out a seven week old Golden Retriever puppy. The breeder was a wonderful Christian woman who truly loves dogs and cares for them well. They left the puppy with its mother for a couple of weeks and conspired as to how they were going to pull off this surprise. Since my family knows that I tend to be preoccupied through Advent, they decided that this was a gift that would have to wait for Christmas morning. They picked up the puppy about a week before Christmas and Jim and Lori Meals volunteered to keep it at their home. Meanwhile I had absolutely no idea of what had excitedly preoccupied the minds of my family for almost a month. On Christmas morning when I drove downtown to pick up Mom, Kennerly got the puppy from the Meals and hid him so I wouldn't see him when we returned home. We all opened our gifts like we normally do and then I was told to close my eyes because I had one more surprise. So I closed my eyes and seconds later a warm ten-week old puppy was dropped into my lap. I was shocked. Ginny said I turned white. In the moment I couldn't recall ever having asked for a puppy, but there he was, an adorable, wide-eyed Golden who looked up at me quizzically. We named him Frodo.

I'm getting a little old for these kind of surprises, but it was a wonderful Christmas present and it had all the features of a family story that will be told for years to come. The whole experience evoked the kinds of feelings we associate with a great family Christmas. Then, the week after Christmas, Ginny took Frodo to the vet for a second set of shots and came home in tears. The vet listened to Frodo's heart and said, “I'm sorry to tell you this, but this dog's heart could stop at any moment. It has a serious defect. If I were you I'd take the dog back to the breeder and ask for your money back.” Ginny and Kennerly were crushed and so was the breeder. The breeder's vet checked Frodo out and came to the same conclusion. The puppy didn't have long to live.

The Frodo experience is a parable for me that fits the Christmas season well. Try as we might to get around the harsh realities of life, Christmas only seems to accentuate them, not deny them. We knock ourselves out trying to please our loved ones. We shop until we drop, send out cards, decorate our homes, sing carols, travel great distances to be together, and dress up in red. But

thankfully! Christians can't forget the purpose of the Incarnation of God. The Bible will not cooperate with Bing Crosby's "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." "Jingle Bells! Jingle Bells! Santa's on his way" doesn't hold a candle to "Joy to the World, the Lord has come, let earth receive her King." The sentimental, seasonal Holiday Spin Cycle is optional, but the meaning of Christmas is not. Our lives depend on Christ for time and eternity. The Holy One is our Redemption and our Righteousness.

Singing Christmas carols, more for their meaning than their melody, makes us conscious of our sin and our need for redemption. The carols are sung sweetly and with a familiar lilt, but their message is serious and their meaning critical. They are more like battle hymns against sin and death than sentimental carols. They identify the Savior and define the purpose of the Incarnation of God. *Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.* The carol asks, *What child is this who lays in such mean estate? The reason given is anything but gentle: for sinners here the silent Word is pleading. Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you. . . . This, this is Christ the King. . . . King of kings salvation brings.* Silent Night! awaits *the dawn of redeeming grace* and O Holy Night sings, *long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.* In hushed tones we sing, *I wonder as I wander, out under the sky, how Jesus the Savior did come for to die* and we sing triumphantly *God and sinners reconciled!* in Hark the Herald Angels Sing. These anthems of adoration keep the redemptive purpose of Christ's coming in clear view. The source of Joy to the World is not in doubt, *the Lord has come! No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found.*

The apostle Paul could not have stated the truth more clearly, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13). One year in Bloomington, Indiana, during a Sunday evening service in Advent, we took a Christmas tree, removed the ornaments and lights and cut off the branches one by one, and added a crossbeam with some fishing line on the narrow trunk to form a cross. All we had left was the crude form of a cross. We took everything away and we were left with the Christmas message.