

Sermon for Lent IV (March 18), 2007

Saved by Faith

Today's Epistle, taken from the 4th chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, is not one that is easy for us to understand. Part of the reason for this is that St. Paul uses a method of interpreting the Bible that is very strange and foreign to us. He calls it "allegory." It was a method quite common to the devout and scholarly Jews of Paul's day, and especially the rabbis, who believed that Scripture had more than one meaning, and that the literal meaning was often the least important one.

The rabbis of Paul's day—and we have to remember that St. Paul was thoroughly trained in the best rabbinic schools of his day and by the great rabbi Gamaliel—these rabbis would take a simple piece of historical narrative from the Old Testament and allegorize it. They would come up with some pretty fantastic inner meanings for a passage of Scripture; and while we tend to find this method very unsatisfactory today, the people of the NT period found it very convincing.

This method of allegory is essentially what St. Paul is doing with the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac found in Genesis 16, 17, and 21. We have to remember that Abraham had two sons: Isaac and Ishmael. In Gen. 15 God promises Abraham that he would be the

father of a great nation, and that he would have more descendents than the stars in the sky. At the time God promised this, Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless.

And as time went by, Sarah and Abraham still did not have any children. And so, in a practice that was quite common back in those days of the Old Testament patriarchs, Sarah offered Abraham her maidservant, Hagar, to serve as the mother of a child and heir to Abraham. This was the Old Testament version of surrogate parenting. And so, Abraham took unto him Hagar and had a son by her, and his name was Ishmael.

Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born. And some 13 years later, when Abraham was 99 years old, God appeared to him again and promised that he would have a son through Sarah. And by this time, Sarah was 90 years old. And both Abraham and later Sarah laughed at God for saying this.

But then Sarah soon after became pregnant and had son and they named him “Isaac,” which means “he laughs.” So it was really God who got the last laugh!

Now Hagar, maidservant of Sarah and mother of Ishmael, had previously taunted Sarah and made fun of Sarah for being barren. And it

was because of this that Sarah got Abraham's permission to kick Hagar (and Ishmael) out of their house.

And all of this is the background for what St. Paul is saying in today's Epistle about Abraham and his two sons, one the son of a slave (Hagar) and the other the son of a freewoman (Sarah).

Then there is actually a second allegory in Galatians 4. It is the allegory of the two Jerusalem's: the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem. The earthly Jerusalem represents the attempt to win salvation by keeping the Law (works), while the heavenly Jerusalem, "which is above" and "the mother of us all," represents the salvation won for us by Jesus Christ (grace).

One other thing that makes it hard for us to understand this passage is the situation that Paul was addressing in his letter to the Galatians. You see, almost all of St. Paul's letters are occasional and addressed to a specific situation; and we don't always know all the details of the situations he was dealing with.

Paul founded the church at Galatia during one of his missionary journeys. Later, apparently some Jewish Christians from the Jerusalem Church came over and insisted that the Galatians, who were Gentiles,

would have to follow the 600+ Jewish dietary and other laws that had been developed over time and also be circumcised in order to be Christians and saved. Paul's letter to the Galatians was his answer in which he said that salvation was by Christ alone and not by any keeping of the Mosaic and Jewish laws.

Okay, so what does all this have to do with us? How can it possibly have any relevance to us and our situation today?

I think part of the answer lies in whole matter of God's covenant with Abraham. In Gen 15, when God is promising Abraham that he will become the father of many descendents and that God would give these descendents the Promised Land of Canaan, we hear the following: "And [the LORD] brought [Abraham] outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' And [Abraham] believed the LORD, and [it was] counted it to him as righteousness." (15:5-6)

As St. Paul points out on several occasions, it was Abraham's act of faith that made him right with God (justification), and not his keeping of any law, which had not yet been given. That would come some 400 years later with Moses.

What that means is this: it was not the things Abraham did or didn't do that made him right with God; rather, it was the fact that Abraham completely and totally trusted in the LORD and the LORD's promises that made him right with God.

The question for us is, do we believe and trust completely in God's promises to us through His covenant with us in the blood of Jesus? God has made that covenant of salvation and grace, rescue and healing through the action of Jesus Christ. Do we truly believe that and trust that, or do we instead try to do things that we think will cause us to be accepted in God's sight?

It is certainly not easy to come to this kind of faith and trust—and in fact, the Bible tells us that God Himself has to intervene and give us this faith; we can't acquire it using our own powers.

And so I want to challenge each of you this morning. Do you truly believe with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength that you were a completely lost soul unable to achieve any kind of genuine relationship with God, let alone eternal salvation, except through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ? Or do you believe that when you die, you're going to go before the judgment seat and convince God that you weren't such a bad person; that you did your very best, and that you ought to be

allowed into heaven because, on balance, your good deeds outweighed your bad deeds?

You must repent and believe the Gospel, the good news that you are saved only through God's infinite love and mercy through Jesus Christ.

To come to this realization is the most exciting and liberating thing you can ever experience. This is why St. Paul says, in the verse that comes immediately after this Epistle passage, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (5:1).

God deeply desires to set you free from every fear and anxiety, but this can only happen when you let go of the illusion that you can do anything to merit or win His acceptance. You cannot. Instead, you must repent of any such illusions and steadfastly believe that you are lost totally and eternally were it not for the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross for your salvation.