



CHRIST HAS SET US FREE:

A Lenten Journey Through
the Epistle to the Galatians

Meditations by Christopher McLoughlin

Shrove Tuesday – Introduction to Galatians

In my mind's eye, I imagine St. Paul pacing back and forth, gesticulating wildly, his hair mussed, with spit flying as he dictated this epistle. I can almost see the vein popping out of his forehead and the tears forming in his eyes. The church in Galatia, which he had only just founded, was wandering away from the gospel. Legalistic leaders, sometimes known as “Judaizers”, had infiltrated the church and convinced them that the salvation found in the cross of Jesus was not enough. Instead, they proclaimed that all Christians must keep the Jewish ceremonial law, especially in becoming circumcised. Afraid of change (and persecution), many Galatians abandoned the radical gospel of Jesus in order to fit in and to remain in comfortably-familiar traditions. Paul's epistle to the Galatians is an anguished plea to Christians to return to their first love and not to fall into stagnant complacency.

Galatia was a region in the highlands of Anatolia in modern-day Turkey named for the Celtic Gauls who had settled there. The Roman province of Galatia spread from the traditional region in the north all the way south to the Mediterranean and the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. It was through this southern part of Galatia that Paul traveled on his first missionary journey in AD 46-48 (Acts 13-14). While some scholars believe that Paul was writing to Christians in “north Galatia” at a later date, in my opinion the evidence is stronger that he was writing to the church in “south Galatia” around AD 48-49. This would be before the council of Jerusalem (AD 50) recorded in Acts 15, which would resolve the circumcision issue for good. In fact, the Galatians' backsliding may have been one reason for the calling of the Jerusalem council. That said, neither the date of the epistle nor the location of its recipients matters for Paul's message, which is for all Christians at all times.

As we enter the season of Lent, we should examine ourselves and ask if there is any area in our lives where we have slid back into old sinful habits. Christ is ready to set us free from our slavery to sin and death and to bring us into His Kingdom. So we need to ask ourselves: Have we listened to voices that tell us to conform to the world rather than to the gospel? Are we ready to allow God to change us and conform us to the image of Jesus Christ? If we wrestle with these questions honestly and seek the truth of the gospel, we will join the first-century Galatians in hearing Paul's letter as the very Word of God for our lives.

Ash Wednesday – Deliverance from an Evil Age

Read Galatians 1:1-5

On September 10th, 2022, a man in a frankly-ridiculous hat strode out onto the balcony at St. James Palace in London to a fanfare of trumpets. He unfurled a proclamation that declared that Charles III had taken the throne as “King, Head of the Commonwealth, and Defender of the Faith”. The message was delivered on behalf of both the Crown and Members of Parliament. The herald proclaimed the dawn of a new kingdom under a new ruler. Now the entire kingdom would hold its breath in anticipation of what sort of king Charles would become.

St. Paul is doing much the same thing in today’s reading. He is an apostle, a messenger, a herald from the king. He also represents the whole Church (see v. 2) in bringing this gospel, this good news. Why is it good news? Well, because our king brings with Him the grace and peace of God the Father. His grace delivers us from sin and His peace rescues us from this evil age (v. 4). If you ever wondered why God came to earth and became flesh in Jesus Christ, there’s your answer. Jesus was born to die. His incomparable love and boundless grace were lavished upon us at the cross, saving us not only from sin, but from this present darkness. Paul is proclaiming that we have been transferred from the realm of darkness into the kingdom of light (1 Pet. 2:9). When we choose to follow Christ, we receive a foretaste of heavenly glory as we receive His grace and peace. This is your invitation to proclaim Jesus as Lord and to enter into His kingdom.

We live in troubled times. Evil appears to be winning, with pride, greed, and lust on the throne. The kingdoms of this world are ruled by vindictiveness, distrust, and deceit. We are made to be at each other’s throats, divided by race, sex, class, political ideology, and so much else. Our loyalty is only to ourselves; we pledge allegiance to self-interest and self-gratification. In doing so, we unwittingly pledge allegiance to the prince of this world, who desires nothing less than the destruction of the image of God in every human being. This Lent, our herald Paul is announcing that we do not have to live in that kingdom anymore. Like Moses before him, he says: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days” (Deut. 30:19-20). Which king will we serve: the one who sows division, hatred, and death or the One who brings peace, love, and life? Jesus lives to glorify the Father and to do His will (v.4-5; John 17:4). Let us reject the usurper to the throne who has brought so much misery in his wake and pledge our loyalty to the true King of Kings (Rev. 19:16), the Head of the Church (Col. 1:18) and the Founder and Perfecter of our Faith (Heb. 12:2). May we live this Lent, and all our life hereafter, in the kingdom of grace and peace and love, the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday – No Other Gospel

Read Galatians 1:6-9

The Coca-Cola company had a problem. They were increasingly losing business to diet cola drinks and, worse still, they kept losing taste tests to their competitor Pepsi. So, on April 23rd, 1985, they introduced New Coke, a sweeter version of the classic beverage. It was a colossal failure. Those who knew and loved the original product hated the change, while it also failed to attract new customers. On July 11th, just 79 days after the launch of New Coke, the old formula was reintroduced to the shelves under the name Coca-Cola Classic. The company would run ads with the slogan “Can’t Beat the Real Thing” to reassure customers that the product was back to what it used to be and the imposter “New Coke” was not in the bottle. The new idea that was going to revolutionize soft drinks is now best remembered as a punchline and a cautionary tale.

St. Paul usually begins his epistles with a greeting and thanksgiving. Not so with Galatians. Paul is horrified that the Galatians have so quickly rejected the gospel that he proclaimed and turned to a heresy. Just as “New Coke” tried to pretend that it was Coca-Cola, so did this distortion of the good news proclaim itself to be the real gospel. But there is only one Gospel: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:4-6). The immediacy of Paul’s rebuke demonstrates how serious this issue is. To believe in a different Gospel than that which Holy Scripture proclaims does not make you spiritually adventurous, but spiritually blind, just as declaring that $2+2=5$ does not make you mathematically adventurous, but innumerate. The only way to the Father is through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ His Son, once for all. All other “gospels”, no matter how well-intentioned, will lead us astray.

C.S. Lewis called this the heresy of “Christianity And”, as in “Christianity and Social Justice” or “Christianity and Gun Rights” or “Christianity and School Choice”. That is, we often treat our faith as a means to an end rather than the end itself. This can range all over the map, from those who use Christianity to justify a sort of theocratic fascism to those who declare that Jesus was a pro-choice transgender socialist. Both of those are extreme, of course, but we can all fall into a version of the “Christianity And” trap. Smooth-talking teachers and comfortably-false philosophies can so easily lead us away from Christ. What are you adding to the gospel? Is there something, either a physical thing or an idea or a behavior, that you would not give up in service to Christ? Are you actually willing to follow Jesus where He leads rather than where you think He should go? Watch out for complacency, for wide is that path that leads to destruction and narrow the way that leads to Life (Matt. 7:13-14).

Paul twice declares a curse on anyone (even an angel!) who proclaims another gospel. He is right to do so, for Scripture commands that a false prophet is to be put to death (Deut. 13:5; 18:20). If we speak for God, let us always and only point to the cross of Jesus Christ and preach the gospel of His salvation. For the true Gospel (unlike all the new “gospels” in our culture today) is the only source of life and peace. You really “can’t beat the real thing”!

Friday after Ash Wednesday – Pleasing Man or Pleasing God?

Read Galatians 1:10-14

If you are looking for a good question to ask yourself in the morning, you could do a lot worse than Galatians 1:10: “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God?” Many of us spend our days seeking out the approval of others. This can affect every aspect of how we live our lives from how we dress to how we speak even down to what we believe. The social pressure to compromise our faith is constant and we often find it easier to just silently give in than to stand up for what we believe in. Even worse, we can begin to live in accordance with the world’s standards rather than God’s simply to avoid the “soft persecution” of snide remarks or social ostracism. Make no mistake: if you stand for the truth of the gospel, for salvation in Jesus Christ alone and adherence to Biblical morality, you will be called names: intolerant, bigoted, narrow-minded, hateful, and so forth. Preaching the gospel (and, more importantly, *living* the gospel) puts us at odds with a world that glorifies self-gratification over self-denial and worships the gods of money, sex, and power instead of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As a Christian, I am called not to serve the gods of this world (especially the god of self-interest), but to be “a servant of Christ”. And Jesus is crystal-clear in His expectations: “whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father” (Mark 8:38).

Back when Paul was still Saul the Pharisee, he lived out the consequences of holding onto traditions that gained him worldly approval. He persecuted the Church violently, becoming an accessory to murder (Acts 8:1). Paul says that “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal. 1:14). This demonstrates how easy it can be to fall into old habits that feel comfortable, but lead to sin and death. Are there any “traditions” in your life that stand in opposition to the truth of the Gospel? It may be something that has given you a sense of identity or purpose. But if it leads you away from Christ, it must be cast off for the dead weight that it is. It can become so easy to get set in our ways, but Jesus wants to make us into new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). Don’t allow complacency and the opinions of others to keep you from being everything God wants you to be.

“The gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel” (v. 11). Man’s gospel says to look out for yourself first, do what everyone else is doing, find meaning in money and possessions, seek sexual gratification at all costs, and always follow your own heart. The gospel of Jesus tells us to seek first the kingdom, to obey Christ’s commands, to find meaning in His love and grace, to live in simplicity and fidelity, and to always follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God?” Let us choose the Gospel of Jesus Christ, seeking only His approval and hear, at the last day, “well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21).

Saturday after Ash Wednesday– Into the Wilderness

Read Galatians 1:15-17

Have you ever been driving down the road listening to the radio and realized you weren't sure where you were going? One of the first things we tend to do is turn off the noise so that we can give our full attention to driving. You turn on your phone's map app and discover to your dismay that, while you were belting out the chorus to "Don't Stop Believing", you missed your turn. Now you have to turn around because you got distracted from where you were going. You might say that Journey distracted you from your journey! O.k., bad jokes aside, this analogy should be clear enough. Lent is a great time to turn off the distractions that bombard us from every side and put our full attention on God and his plan for our lives. And the best way to do that is to allow God to bring us into a desert place.

St. Paul had to spend time in the wilderness before he could begin his world-changing ministry. He says that he "went into Arabia" (v. 17), which probably just means the desert area not far from Damascus (we don't have to go far to find the wilderness). Why did he do this? Today's reading tells us that Paul was called to this ministry before he was born and had experienced a revelation of Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Shouldn't he have begun his ministry immediately, or at least joined up with the other apostles in Jerusalem? No, Paul knew that he needed to get away from all the distractions and comforts of life in order to truly hear the voice of God. He may have been called to ministry, but he wasn't yet equipped. Paul wants to make it absolutely clear to the Galatians that his ministry is not from man, but from God. He had spent years rejecting the voice of the Holy Spirit in his life. In Arabia, Paul would learn to tune his ears and his heart away from false tradition and the ways of the world and toward the only Voice that matters. Only then could he join the other apostles and begin the work that God had prepared for him from before he was born.

"What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" (Mt. 11:7) Jesus asked this question of the crowds that flocked to John the Baptist. Were they making this arduous journey just to gawk at a wild man in animal skins munching on locusts? No, they were seeking something more, something we all seek. Call it what you will – meaning, purpose, direction, renewal, salvation – the crowds in the wilderness were looking for an encounter with God. Staying in our comfortable, ordinary lives will not lead to the spiritual change that we desire and need. The people of Israel wandered in the desert for forty years before being allowed to enter the Promised Land. The prophet Elijah spent forty days on Mount Horeb before he could hear the Lord's "still small voice". And the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by Satan before our Lord could begin His ministry. We too must go through times in the desert, times of deprivation and hardship, in order to fulfill the ministry to which we have been called. If you feel stuck in your life, like you are a car spinning your wheels in the mud, perhaps it is because you have left that path that God has marked out for you. May this Lenten journey be a time of returning to Jesus, whose freedom can always be found in the wilderness.

Monday of 1 Lent – Patience and Submission

Read Galatians 1:18-21

In the movie *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke Skywalker receives a vision showing him that his friends (and his sister) are in trouble. His mentors, Yoda and the ghost of Obi-Wan Kenobi, warn him that he is not ready to face his great enemy, Darth Vader, until he has completed his training. But Luke is impatient to demonstrate his abilities and to save his friends, so he ignores the dire warnings of disaster from his mentors and sets off to face his enemies alone. In the climactic lightsaber duel with Vader, he is soundly defeated, his hand is cut off, and he barely escapes with his life (his sister Leia has to save *him*). Luke's impatience and obstinacy have almost doomed the rebellion against the Dark Side.

“Then after three years...” these words that begin our reading today demonstrate a virtue that is in very short supply these days: patience. Paul waited three years to begin his ministry. He knew that he needed to be fully-equipped by God to do the ministry to which he was called. In our instant-everything, hyper-connected world, the idea of waiting even three minutes for anything feels like torture. We must remember that God does not work on our time table. Our time in the wilderness may be longer than we either wanted or expected, but we can have faith that God is doing His silent and hidden work in us if we can just learn to be still and to trust Him. The second virtue Paul demonstrates is another unpopular one: submission. Paul goes to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and the Lord's brother James, to learn from them and be led by them. In due time, of course, Paul would be every bit their equal, but even the great apostle Paul had to submit himself to Christ's one, holy, catholic, and *apostolic* Church. Only then could he dip his toes into the waters of ministry in Syria and Cilicia (where his hometown of Tarsus was located). As we shall see tomorrow, another reason for this visit to Jerusalem was to demonstrate to the apostles, and to the whole Church, that he was truly a changed man. Christian life cannot be only a solitary, wilderness affair. We must live in communion with one another.

Attempting to practice the virtues of patience and submission puts us at odds with everything our world preaches. In fact, the upside-down values of our society would lionize those who go after whatever they want impatiently, little heeding tradition or authority or even a sense of the common good. Paul shows us a different way. He could have appeared to be more of a prophet if he'd never met with Peter and James, but Paul knew that he must do everything under the authority of the Lord's apostles. To do otherwise would be to allow the devil to gain an upper hand by picking off the sheep that had wandered from the fold. We are in a battle against evil just as surely as Luke Skywalker. Our victory will only come when we have the patience to wait on the Lord and the humility to submit to the elders that He has put over us. Only then will we see the victory of Christ's rebellion against the usurping prince of this world. Only then will we see light conquer the darkness.

Tuesday of 1 Lent – Can People Really Change?

Read Galatians 1:22-24

Jeffrey Dahmer was one of the most notorious serial killers in history. His crimes were so horrifying that I don't even want to recount them here. Suffice it to say, his actions were practically the definition of evil. Then something unexpected happened. A pastor named Roy Ratcliffe began ministering to Dahmer in prison. Ratcliffe met with the man they called the "Milwaukee Monster" once a week and, convinced that he had come to know the Lord, baptized him. Instead of rejoicing, many doubted the sincerity of Dahmer's conversion. The common attitude was summed up by one member of Ratcliffe's church: "if Jeffrey Dahmer is going to heaven, then I don't want to be there". The skepticism seems warranted: after all, how often do people really change? Can a murderer, pedophile, and cannibal really be saved? Maybe a better question to ask is this: if Jeffrey Dahmer cannot be saved, can anyone?

In today's reading, Paul admits that he had a long way to go to gain the respect of the Christians in Judea. They had only heard the frankly unbelievable news that the man who had been an accessory to the murder of Christians was now preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. You can imagine the trepidation they felt as he entered their home churches. One thinks of the reaction of Ananias in Acts: "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem" (9:13). But to their immense credit, Paul reports that "they glorified God because of me". Rather than being scandalized that God would shed his grace on such an "evil" man, the earliest Christians rejoiced just as the father of the Prodigal Son did: "this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Lk. 15:24). They did not question whether a person could change because they had seen it happen over and over again as Christ transformed even the hardest hearts. We know God can change lives because He just keeps on doing it, from St. Paul to Jeffrey Dahmer to you and me. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

We don't believe that people can change because we don't really believe in the extravagance of God's grace. We can be so quick to judge others and, like the Pharisee in the parable, thank God that we are not like them (Lk. 18:9-14). At those times, Jesus says to us: "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:5). However, I have a more personal question to ask: do you believe that *you* can change? The devil would love for you to believe that you are stuck forever in your habitual sins and addictions, that there is no hope that things could ever get better. But Scripture tells us that "Christ came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15) and "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12). We *are* changed by the blood of Christ and we are continually being transformed by the Spirit. As Paul himself puts it: "we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (1 Cor. 3:18). If Jeffrey Dahmer really accepted Christ, then I want to be in heaven with him. For all of us are being changed, day by day, into the image of Christ. Let us use this Lent to become more like Him.

Wednesday of 1 Lent – Do Not Run in Vain

Read Galatians 2:1-3

Imagine that you plan to climb Mount Everest. You train for years, purchase all the gear, and fly to Nepal. Braving unimaginable cold and barely able to breathe in the thin oxygen, you persevere, knowing that you'll be able to say you climbed the world's highest mountain when you're done. Finally, you reach the summit, but something doesn't seem right. Your heart sinks as you look across the Himalayas at the summit of Everest 900 miles away. You are standing atop K2, the world's *second* highest peak. You have climbed the wrong mountain.

When Paul began his ministry in Jerusalem, he brought a secret weapon: Titus, a Gentile Christian. He and Barnabas brought Titus with them as a sort of case study of the gospel. Titus was living proof that Jesus saves the Gentiles even if they are not circumcised and do not practice Jewish customs. Paul presented this crucial revelation in private to the apostles to make sure that the gospel he preached was in accordance with the teachings of Christ. Not that Paul had any doubt that he was in error, but he wished to demonstrate that he was not preaching a different gospel. He did not want to "run in vain". In other words, he did not want to commit his life to a hopeless cause. On the contrary, Paul will show us in Galatians that those who try to add extra stipulations to the gospel are those who run in vain. Following empty tradition and pursuing earthly success and the approval of man is to spend your life climbing the wrong mountain.

What are you living for? How you spend your time is how you spend your life. Are you climbing a mountain in pursuit of success, worldly wealth, and the acclamation of others? Are you pursuing a spouse because you believe that marriage will give your life meaning? Are you just waiting until the kids are out of the house or until you can move to a new town or until that one family member gets their act together? Do you find yourself saying "if only I can [fill in the blank], everything will get better"? Perhaps you are climbing the wrong mountain, or, to use Paul's analogy, running the wrong race. Anything we seek ahead of God, no matter how noble or worthwhile, will be in vain. That is what the writer of Ecclesiastes meant when he said "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity...I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind" (Ecc. 1:2, 14). Pursuing wealth or romance or power or security without God is as useful as chasing the wind. Living in the traditions of our lives that have never worked just because they are traditions is to climb the wrong mountain. Let us remember today the words of our Lord: "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Mt. 6:33). Living for anything less than the glory of God is to waste our life on vanity, to run a race with no prize. We often won't even get what we want, and, if we do, it won't satisfy. Let us rather say along with St. Paul: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14).

Thursday of 1 Lent – Do Not Submit to Slavery

Read Galatians 2:4-6

According to the National Institute of Justice, almost 44% of criminals in the U.S. released from prison are arrested again before the end of their first year out. There are, of course, many reasons for this, but one of the biggest is the problem of freedom. In prison, your day is tightly regimented, every decision is made for you, and the consequences for misbehavior are unmistakable. Once on the outside, the number of decisions an ex-con must make can become overwhelming, requiring a self-discipline that prison did nothing to inculcate. Thus, many fall easily back into old patterns of behavior and reacquaint themselves with the very friends who got them in trouble to begin with. For some of these men and women, “three hots and a cot” (meals and a place to sleep) and the orderly life of prison become strangely comforting. Worse still, many people in their lives lionize the criminal lifestyle, making prison a sort of badge of honor. In this way, prisoners can learn to love their cage and embrace slavery as if it were freedom.

Freedom in Christ can be similarly daunting. If we’re honest with ourselves, we would much rather have some sort of formula we could follow that would lead to holiness and get us to heaven. Thus we see the bestseller lists full of books that promise that if you just follow this one foolproof plan, this one step-by-step process, you will experience freedom. These sorts of preachers have always existed and Paul encountered them in both Judea and Galatia. False apostles told believers that they had to keep up Jewish traditions in order to be Christian. They offered the comfort of a cage to people who had been given the fearful promise of perfect freedom. Paul was having none of it. He says that they “did not yield in submission even for a moment” to this false teaching. It should be noted that the Galatians were mostly formerly-pagan Gentiles, not ex-Jews. Even so, there was a temptation to submit to a system of belief that seemed more “religious”. But a change of masters is not an escape from slavery. Whether submission is a virtue or a vice depends upon whom you serve.

What comfortable slavery are you submitting to? Are you listening to "influential" voices that preach salvation by works? As Paul says in verse 6, it doesn't matter how esteemed a false prophet is, because God shows no favoritism when it comes to the truth of the gospel. Or are you just more comfortable with the slavery of familiar sin than the freedom of a righteous life? Let us choose today to submit "not even for a moment" to the world, but rather serve Christ. Remember our Lord's promise: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Mt. 11:28-30). In Christ's service is perfect freedom and "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36). Do not return to your cage; do not submit to slavery. The only obstacle to freedom is our willingness to let go of our chains.

Friday of 1 Lent – Fellowship in Christ

Read Galatians 2:7-10

Today's reading covers three aspects of our fellowship with other believers in Christ. Let's jump right in...

Fellowship in the Spirit (verses 7&8): The Lord's disciples, being Jews themselves, had focused their evangelism on the Jewish community around Jerusalem. However, Paul's powerful demonstration of Christ's work among the Gentiles made it clear to the elders that he had been called to a ministry among the uncircumcised. Although these ministries would be separate, the ministers were united in receiving their call, their authority, and their empowerment from the Holy Spirit. The Church is capable of supporting more than one ministry at a time and adding one ministry does not diminish another. God can chew gum and walk at the same time. Just because you are doing one ministry does not make it more vital than any other ministry – we are all working to advance the Kingdom of God. As Paul himself puts it, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:4-7).

Fellowship in Submission (verse 9): "You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:20-21). Everything we build in the Church, every ministry, must have a sure foundation. Remember our Lord's parable about the fate of the house built on sand versus the one built upon the rock (Mt. 7:24-27). Paul's ministry succeeded because he had the "right hand of fellowship" from the "pillars" of the Church, that is, James, Peter, and John. In turn, those three received their authority from Christ Himself, having been called by him as disciples. For any ministry to be successful, no matter our calling, it must be done under the authority of the Church and in submission to the apostles that God has put over us. The Christian life is not a solo affair. We will only be successful (or, rather, faithful) if we walk hand-in-hand with our brothers and sisters in Christ as the Church.

Fellowship in Service (verse 10): Ministry done for self-aggrandizement or evangelism for the sake of "putting numbers on the board" are not in accord with the Spirit of Christ. Jesus' ministry was not just about saving souls, but about the whole person. He did not preach in king's palaces or hobnob with the rich or influential. Rather, Our Lord served among the least in society: prostitutes and tax collectors; shepherds and farmers; lepers and cripples. So it is not surprising that the apostles gave Paul only one admonition: remember the poor. And it is to the poor of this world, to the least of these (Mt. 25:40), that we too are called to minister. To be a minister is to be a servant, to put ourselves at the feet of those on the very bottom of our society. If you want to know how to follow Jesus, here's one safe bet: no matter what you do or where you are, look for the person who is most in need (physical, emotional, or spiritual) and serve them. That is how we love our neighbors as ourselves (see Luke 10:25-37).

Saturday of 1 Lent – The Mask of Hypocrisy

Read Galatians 2:11-14

One day in Ancient Greece, a man by the name of Thespis walked out from the chorus on stage, donned a mask, and gave an answer in character. In doing so, he became the first actor in human history (hence the word “thespian”). Ancient Greek actors would play multiple characters, switching masks as necessary to take on the different roles. Since they were giving “answers” to the chorus the Greek word for answer, *hupokrinomai*, was applied to them and a word for actor was soon coined: *hupokrités*. The word was borrowed by other languages to describe anyone who pretended to be someone they were not. Such a person is a “hypocrite”.

Antioch was the center of Gentile evangelization in the early Church and had a thriving Christian community when Paul arrived. However, he was shocked to see that Gentiles were segregated from Jews at meal time so that Jews could keep their kosher customs. Worse still, Peter had approved of this and had taken to eating with his fellow Jews and excluding the Gentiles. This could not stand. There are no second-class citizens in God’s kingdom and forcing Gentiles to accept Jewish customs or be excluded from the fellowship betrayed the message of the Gospel. As an apostle, Peter was leading the Christians under him (even Barnabas!) astray and thus Peter’s public sin merited Paul’s public rebuke. While there was nothing wrong with observing your own cultural customs (1 Cor.9:20; Rom. 14:1-12), Peter was motivated not by piety but by cowardice (see v. 12). Those of the “circumcision party” (which does not sound like a fun party) cowed this “pillar” of the Church into wobbling on the truth of the gospel message. To top it off, Peter himself did not live by Jewish customs anymore (Acts 11:1-18), yet he expected the Gentiles to do so. Peter’s hypocrisy was a far graver sin than his cowardice.

It has been said that the sins we despise in others are those that tempt us the most. In other cases, certain sins that are socially unacceptable can be seen as “worse” than the socially acceptable sins that “good” Christians commit. Either way, there is a temptation to lump others into a second-class category while ignoring our own grievous errors. The desire to be part of an inner circle or special caste runs strong in all people and we must be on our guard against this temptation. As we shall see later in Galatians, God breaks down all barriers between people be it culture, race, sex, or class. We are all one in Christ Jesus. Christians are often accused unfairly of being “hypocrites” by the world because we do not live up to our own standards (even though that is the whole point of the gospel of grace). But we ought to ask ourselves: in what way am I being a hypocrite? In what ways do I hold others to a higher standard than I hold myself? What masks do I wear in order to hide myself from God and others? Much of our hypocrisy comes from wanting to be conformed to the culture around us rather than being formed into the image of Jesus Christ. We may write it off as good manners or “go along to get along”, because cowardice always has plausible justifications. Let us instead stand for the truth of the Gospel: that Jesus is the only Way to the Father, that he gives his grace equally to all people, and that no sin can separate anyone from his love. If we are to be “hypocrites”, let us wear masks that look like Jesus so that the world may see and know His love and grace.

Monday of 2 Lent – Justification by Faith

Read Galatians 2:15-16

Major League Baseball player Terrance Gore is a below-average hitter and a below-average fielder. But, boy, is he fast. His speed allowed him to make the playoff roster of the 2021 Atlanta Braves as a pinch runner. However, he only appeared in one playoff game and never came up to bat. Even so, when the Braves went on to win the World Series, he received exactly the same ring as the superstars who hit home runs or struck out opposing batters. He earned the ring not because of any particular contribution he made, but because he was a member of the team. Simply by being a 2021 Atlanta Brave, Terrance Gore is a world champion.

Today's reading introduces the main theme of Galatians: justification by faith. This concept can seem sort of heady and academic, but it is actually the most practical (and revolutionary) idea that Christianity offers to the world. Paul is saying here that even though the Jews followed the Law (unlike Gentile "sinners"), no amount of obedience could ever make them right with God. Sin isn't just a bunch of bad things we do – it is a corruption of who we are, and this corruption is so complete that we cannot ever escape it. As the Psalmist prays, "no one living is righteous before you" (Ps. 143:2). By accepting Jesus' sacrifice on their behalf, Jewish Christians were admitting that they needed something more than the Law. What we need is faith (*pistis* in Greek), which has the sense of confidence, trust, and reliance. In other words, we lean not on our own ability to keep the commandments, but on Christ's work on our behalf. Faith isn't something we conjure up out of ourselves, but rather is an indication of where we put our trust, which team we play for. We receive faith as a gift, and by that gift our sins are forgiven and our relationship with God is restored.

Despite all this, we often find ourselves asking the question the jailer asked Paul and Silas in Acts: "what must I do to be saved?" (16:30) Paul's answer was simple: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (16:31). Do you believe this? Do you trust that Jesus has already saved you and forgiven your sins? Are you still striving to earn the love of God that is already yours in Christ? All we have to do is accept the fact of our justification and live out our lives as new creations. There is nothing you have to do. There is nothing *you* have to do. There is nothing you *have* to do. There is nothing you have to *do*. Salvation is throwing yourself at the feet of a mystery, the mystery of Jesus, and saying: "I believe that you love me, though I can't imagine why. I accept that you save me, though I'll never understand how. I put my faith (my trust, my reliance, my confidence) in you alone, for what other hope do I have?" In this, we become "more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37), not because of what we have done, but because of who He is. We are champions not because of anything we accomplished, but because we are on the winning team. Christ's victory is our victory. Let us live in that victory and share it with others today.

Tuesday of 2 Lent – Crucified with Christ

Read Galatians 2:17-21

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor and theologian who resisted the Nazis and died in a concentration camp, knew that even though grace was free it was never cheap. In his own words: “Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjack’s wares....Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, it can be had for nothing.... Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate” (*The Cost of Discipleship*). Bonhoeffer calls this cheap grace a “grace we bestow on ourselves”. When we use grace to justify our sins (because God will forgive us, free of charge), we miss the entire point of the gospel and endanger our souls.

Paul addresses objections to justification by faith in today’s reading. Doesn’t grace make Jesus a party to our sin? Certainly not! (v. 17). If we return to our old way of living after we have been saved, we are still living in sin (v. 18) and we have not apprehended our salvation. We are victims of cheap grace. What is the solution to this problem? Bonhoeffer summarizes Paul’s response succinctly: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die”. Grace may be free, but it also costs us everything. We must say with Paul “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (v. 20). If we refuse to die to our old way of living, the “law” that enslaved us, we will never experience the freedom of a new life in Christ. What we need instead is “costly grace”. Bonhoeffer again: “[Grace] is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.... Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.” If Christ is to be incarnate in the world today, His life must be lived in each of us individually as we die to sin and in us corporately as we become the Body of Christ.

“[Grace] is costly because it cost God the life of his Son” (Bonhoeffer). Our sins are serious enough that Jesus had to die to set us free from them. He bought us with the price of his own blood (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; 1 Pet. 1:18), and if we continue to disobey Him then His death will be “for no purpose” (Gal. 2:21). We cannot truly say we love God if we continue to knowingly live in habitual sin, for our Lord plainly told us: “if you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn. 14:15). Yet we cannot please God simply by following the Law and playing by the rules. In that case, *we* are the ones in charge; *we* are paying the price; *we* are on the throne. But that seat can only be rightly occupied by one person: Jesus. And His call to us is simple: “Follow me”. We must die to ourselves, die to our sin, die to our desire to be in charge, and let Christ have absolute authority in our lives. His grace can only become effectual in our lives if we allow Him to bestow it on us and if we allow Him to lead us where He wills. We can only take hold of His love for us if we let go of all the other things that we try to cling to. This Lent, by the grace of God, let us be crucified with Christ so that we can take on His perfect and holy life, and, in so doing, draw others into His loving arms.

Wednesday of 2 Lent – Who Has Bewitched You?

Read Galatians 3:1-2

Witchcraft is all the rage these days. Go into any bookstore and you'll find a whole section just for spellbooks, "manifesting" things into reality, connecting with your "spirituality", and so forth. Most of these books are just self-help or "empowerment" books with a New Age gloss, but some veer into the occult. It can be easy, when searching for answers to life's thorny questions, to wander down some pretty dark paths. Attempting to save ourselves can lead us to people who offer ideas that are at best useless and at worst dangerous. It can be so easy to fall under the spell of a charismatic speaker or eloquent writer who says just what our "itching ears" want to hear (2 Tim. 4:3). We can even come to believe that we have control over the spiritual realm, that we can call on "spirits" to help us in our need. But the Holy Spirit cannot be manipulated (Jesus said that the Spirit is like the wind that "blows where it wishes" [Jn. 3:8]), so any spirits that respond to occult practices do not mean us well. Even if we don't go that far, we can be so easily led astray by the seductive lies of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Paul cannot believe that the Galatians, who accepted the truth found in Christ and Him crucified, had turned back to their old ways. You can almost hear the sarcasm dripping from the words. Did they actually think that the Spirit would show up if they kept on doing the very works of the Law that Christ had nullified on the cross? Can a person reborn by the Holy Spirit be made perfect through human effort? The only explanation for such foolishness was that someone had cast a spell on them. They were "bewitched" (the only time this Greek word appears in the New Testament). I can't help but think of the Sultan in Disney's *Aladdin* who is mind-controlled by the evil Jafar into giving up his throne and marrying his daughter off to the villain. Perhaps this is why Scripture is so concerned with what we put into our minds: "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). If we do this, we will be transformed by the Spirit, as Paul says elsewhere: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). The voices that we listen to always shape our thinking and our thinking always shapes our actions. We must be on guard against the devil, the "roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8), and "test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn. 4:1). We must only listen to those who are themselves obedient to Christ and proclaim Him as Lord. Any person or spirit unwilling to declare that Jesus is Lord should be ignored or, if necessary, rebuked.

Practically speaking, the best way to avoid "bewitchment" is to learn what the voice of God sounds like. Reading Holy Scripture and prayer, especially liturgical prayer, can be powerful tools. Daily repetition of the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the St. Michael's Bidding, and so forth can act as a sort of incantation. Don't let that word scare you, as C.S. Lewis said, "remember your fairy tales. Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us" (*The Weight of Glory*). May we only ever be enchanted by the truth of the gospel and may the Holy Spirit break the spell of lies that holds so many in its thrall.

Thursday of 2 Lent – Perfected in the Spirit

Read Galatians 3:3-5

When Amanda and I were preparing to get married, we went on an “Engaged Encounter” weekend. The motto for Engaged Encounter sums up the purpose: “A Wedding is a Day; A Marriage is a Lifetime”. Many engaged couples get so caught up in preparing for the wedding that they forget the more important task of preparing for the marriage. They forget that the wedding is not the finish line but the starting blocks. In much the same way that graduations are called “commencements”, so should a wedding be merely the start of a journey of love. Thus, Engaged Encounter forces these love-struck young couples to buckle down and discuss how they will live together and make their marriage work. It's an attempt to translate the intense fire of young love into a steady flame that will bring warmth and light to the rest of their life together.

Paul continues to ask pointed questions in today's reading. The Galatians accepted salvation by grace, but now they were trying to live out their Christian lives through the works of the Law. If the Spirit could bring salvation, why were the Galatians seeking perfection in the flesh? The word for this perfecting process is “sanctification”. While we are justified by faith and saved in a single moment, becoming more like Christ is the work of a lifetime. Salvation is a process, not an event. Paul points out that the Galatians have seen miracles and experienced the presence of the Spirit in their lives without the benefit of works. Why would they think that the Spirit required something different in the process of sanctification than in justification? Just as a wedding is a precursor for the marriage to come, so is salvation merely the first step in the Spirit's work in our lives. We cannot just “walk the aisle” (literally or metaphorically) and then live in the same way we used to in our own power. The same God who justifies is He who sanctifies. The book of Hebrews expresses the paradox of grace well: “[Christ] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (10:14). We are perfect from the moment of our baptism – we can't get any more “saved” after that. But God loves us too much to leave us any less than perfect (Matt. 5:48). We must ask for the grace of God and the indwelling of the Spirit daily, for each day we are called to take up our cross (Lk. 9:23). We can only bear our cross by faith, which is a gift from God. No amount of Bible study, moral improvement, or service to others can fill this gap. We must recommit to our relationship every day.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you that life involves suffering. But the only thing worse than suffering itself is doing it for nothing (v. 4). If we offer up our suffering to God, if we allow it to grow us closer to God, He can redeem all of it. As Paul reminds us: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). In a good marriage, times of trouble bring a couple closer together because they are committed to their love. If a couple commits to love each other every day, their relationship will succeed. In the same way, we must decide to love God every day and offer up all of it, the good and the bad, to Him in faith, trusting that His grace will see us through. If we try to do it on our own, we'll make a shambles of everything. If we trust Him and follow where He leads, He can transform our lives into something beautiful and transform our souls into the image of Christ.

Friday of 2 Lent – Children of Abraham

Read Galatians 3:6-9

Abraham wasn't a Jew. His faith was not based in the Law because there was no Law until long after he died. He wasn't even circumcised when he received the incredible promise that his descendants would outnumber the stars (Gen. 15:1-6; Rom. 4:9-12). God chose Abraham and Abraham believed in the promises of God and that was enough. It was "counted to him as righteousness". This blessing of righteousness is not just for one group of people, but for "all the nations" (see Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18), that is, for all people who put their faith in the God of Abraham. In other words, we are blessed for the same reason that Abraham was blessed: by faith.

If we are blessed with Abraham's faith, as Paul tells us in today's reading, then what sort of faith was it? What exactly did he believe in, given that there was no Law and there were no prophets? I think the offering of Isaac in Genesis 22 gives us a clue. Remember that Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son on the holy mountain, giving the miracle child, the child of promise, back to God. But Abraham acts strangely for a man who supposedly believes he is about to kill his son. He tells the men who travel with him that "I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you" (Gen 22:5). And in verse 8 Abraham tells Isaac that "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son". Isn't Abraham, our supposed paragon of faith, just lying or at least engaging in the worst sort of wishful thinking? No, Abraham is demonstrating the true nature of his faith. He knows that God is good to His promises and that He never turns His back on those who trust in Him. Abraham had seen God work a miracle by giving Isaac to him long after it was physically impossible for Sarah to conceive. Now he waited to see God do the impossible once more. As the book of Hebrews puts it, "[Abraham] considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (Heb. 11:19). God *did* provide a lamb for the sacrifice and saved Isaac. The child born miraculously of woman was sacrificed upon the holy mountain by his father and returned to life again. Sound familiar? In some mystical way, Abraham believed in Christ and the power of His resurrection. As Hebrews puts it: "he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (11:10). That is the faith of Abraham.

We are children of Abraham just as surely as Isaac was. We too must sacrifice ourselves in faith, trusting that God will provide the Lamb in our place. Then we shall be restored to new life in Him. This isn't about religion or rules or rituals. We are children of Abraham because God has adopted us and grafted us into the true Vine (Rom. 11:17). We need only to accept our new identity and live out lives of faith just as Abraham did. It was never smooth sailing for poor Abraham and we should not expect it will be any easier for us. But the call and the promises of God are irrevocable and, like Abraham, we can put our trust in Him. We are blessed, justified, forgiven, and redeemed. Now let's live like it.

Saturday of 2 Lent – Christ Takes the Curse

Read Galatians 3:10-14

Can you tell that St. Paul was a lawyer? In a courtroom, a lawyer makes connections between different pieces of evidence in order to tell a story that will win the case. They often do this by closing off alternate options first (“my client was out of town when the murder occurred”), building their case carefully one piece at a time, before closing in on a single theory which they want the jury to see as inescapable (“the jealous and underpaid butler with an anger-management problem and a collection of shotguns did it”). This is what Paul is doing in today’s reading, which can be a bit intimidating at first glance. Let’s unpack his argument and see what it might mean for us today.

Paul uses the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) to make his case for justification by faith because the “Judaizers” were trying to use those same Scriptures to convince the Galatians that they had to follow the Law. **First**, Paul demonstrates that the Law could not save a person, but rather brought about a curse (Deut. 27:26). This curse results from the fact that no one has ever been able to keep all of the Law all of the time and anyone who breaks even part of the Law breaks all of it (Jas. 2:10; Mat. 5:19). **Second**, Paul shows that the Hebrew Bible teaches justification by faith by quoting Habakkuk 2:4. Yet those who live under the Law must live in obedience to the Law (Lev. 18:5) rather than by faith. You can’t do both. Either you try to obey the Law through your own power (which nobody can do [Ps. 14:1-3]) or you live by faith. But how does faith save? Well, **third**, Paul argues that someone had to take the curse for us and Jesus became that person by hanging on a tree (Deut. 21:23; Acts 5:30). He ended the rule of the Law “by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). **Last**, Paul ties his argument back to yesterday’s reading by showing how Christ’s sacrifice allows everyone to experience the blessing of Abraham’s faith through the Holy Spirit promised to all people (see, e.g., Is. 44:3; Joel 2:28). Gentiles can be reconciled to God because the punishment required by the Law has been paid by Jesus Christ at the cross and He has given us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of the inheritance that He paid for (1 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14).

Do you ever feel like you’re cursed? Like nothing you ever do goes right and all your attempts to live for God just end in disappointment? Paul understands: “so I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand” (Rom. 7:21). But know this: we are not cursed, for our Lord Jesus took the curse laid against us and nailed it to the cross. “There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). To live by faith is to live in confidence that we have already been forgiven, that God is not mad at us, and He will never leave us nor forsake us. We need not be afraid of God the Judge, because we have the best possible lawyer on our side: “if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:1-2). Our debt is paid, the curse is lifted, and we can live in faith and freedom. Walking by faith means to really believe this and to live in joy and gratitude. May the truth of the gospel become real to all of us today.

Monday of 3 Lent – Inheriting the Kingdom

Read Galatians 3:15-18

In a pivotal scene in the 2019 movie *Knives Out*, the Thrombey family gathers to hear the reading of the will for the family patriarch Harlan, a fabulously-wealthy crime novelist who had just died by suicide (or was it murder?). Each child and their family expect that they should receive the inheritance. Instead, the entire estate is given to Marta Cabrera, Harlan's beloved nurse. The Thrombeys are horrified. They scream at the man reading the will, demanding answers and vowing to get the terms of the will changed. Someone who isn't even a member of the family could not possibly be receiving the inheritance! But there is nothing they can do. A will cannot be changed after the death of the one who made it. The poor, immigrant nurse has inherited the entire Thrombey empire.

Paul helps us out in today's reading by giving us an analogy. God's covenant with Abraham was kind of like a will. He promised the kingdom to Abraham by faith and nothing that came afterward could alter that promise. The Law cannot annul the covenant of faith because God does not go back on what He says He will do. This is why Jesus, the ultimate inheritor of the promise to Abraham (v. 16), 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" (Mat. 5:17). Each successive revelation of God does not negate the one that came before it. Rather, the Law helped us see the need for faith just as Jesus helped us see the purpose of the Law (more on that tomorrow). The entire kingdom belongs to Christ and, upon His death, He gave that kingdom to everyone (Lk. 12:32). And I mean everyone. Jesus tells us in a parable that he's going out into the road to invite literally anyone to come into the wedding banquet (Mat. 22:9-10). He invites in "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" (Lk. 14:13) and even says that the entire kingdom belongs to little children (Mat. 19:14). Madness! When His own family, the Jews, rejected Him, Jesus invited the Gentiles to receive the inheritance instead. He has sealed this promise by His death and it cannot be changed. "So the last will be first, and the first last" (Mat. 20:16).

When life gets tough, it can become easy to think that God has forgotten His promises. We can grow discouraged and believe the lies of the devil when He tells us that God has forgotten us. But God is *always* good to His promises, His mercy never fails, and His victory is already accomplished. If God has made a promise to you, He will fulfill it, even if things look grim now. What promises of God, either from Scripture or personal prophecy, do you need to remember and believe today? Have you given up on something that God told you to do because you believe that He has changed His mind? If the promise or the call was from God, it hasn't changed: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). By His death He has made us heirs to the kingdom and His will cannot be altered. Though we were outsiders, He has invited us to feast in the kingdom as sons and daughters of God. Let us hold fast to the promises of God and live in His kingdom from this day forward.

Tuesday of 3 Lent – The Purpose of the Law

Read Galatians 3:19-22

In Arizona, it's illegal for a donkey to sleep in a bathtub. You can't ride a horse above ten miles per hour in Indiana, and you'll get pulled over for driving blindfolded in Alabama. Don't you dare send a friend a surprise pizza in Louisiana or wear a sleeveless shirt in a public park in Maryland – those are both illegal. And I regret to inform you that your plan to wrestle a bear in Missouri would make you an outlaw. Worst of all, for us in North Carolina, it's illegal to get drunk while playing bingo. I'm sure these laws all had some reason for being enacted, but they are now out of date and absurd. Many laws are passed for arbitrary reasons that have nothing to do with public safety or the betterment of society. When we aren't laughing at them, we just ignore them and pretend they don't exist.

The way Paul talks about the Law of God, it can seem that he has a similar attitude towards it as we do toward our obsolete laws. If the Law could never bring salvation, why did God bother with it at all? Well, the Law is not some arbitrary set of rules that God made up one day on a whim. The Law represents the very nature of reality, the objective moral truth of right and wrong. It was given by angels (Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:2) through an intermediary, Moses (Ex. 20:19-22; Lev. 26:46). The Lord is One and His Law is a singular expression of His character. Paul says the Law was “added because of transgressions”. In other words, God gave the Law to show us our own sinfulness, that is, how far we had strayed from His holiness. The Law was never intended to reconcile us to God, but exists to show us our need for a Savior. To break the Law is not to violate an arbitrary guideline, but to betray our Maker. Every sin we commit mars the image of God within us and divorces us further from reality, from that which we were made to be. Morality is not something humans created – it is something we discovered, or rather, something which God revealed to us. It just *is*. We will have no more luck defying the moral law than we would defying the law of gravity by stepping out a sixth-story window while saying “I won't fall”. Pretending that sin isn't sin won't make it go away. Indeed, we are all imprisoned by sin and we have no alibi because Scripture clearly shows us our transgressions. Beyond that, even nature itself reveals right and wrong so we have no excuse (Rom. 1:20).

Do you tend to make excuses for your sins? Do you think that God's commandments seem arbitrary or silly (at least in your special case) so you have justification when *you* do it? God is calling all of us to repentance today. “For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all” (Rom. 11:32). God loves to shower his mercy and grace on those who confess their sins, but first we must admit our fault and take full responsibility for the ways we have hurt ourselves and others: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:8-9). The Law is a prison we can never escape on our own. But thanks be to God, Jesus has freed us from that prison if we will but turn to Him in faith. Let us do that today.

Wednesday of 3 Lent – Growing Up Into Christ

Read Galatians 3:23-26

In yesterday's reading, Paul used the analogy of slavery to represent our relationship with the Law. The Law was our master, we were its slave, and Christ came to free us and put us under His rule and authority. Today, Paul uses what I think is a richer and more resonant analogy: "So then, the law was our guardian (*paedagogus*) until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." In the Graeco-Roman world, a *paedagogus* was a slave responsible for protecting and caring for a child from age 6 to late adolescence. You might recognize the English word "pedagogue" in there, and the Greek word is variously translated as "guardian", "trainer", "schoolmaster", "tutor", and "guide". A *paedagogus* was responsible for both the moral instruction and physical safety of the child. In the same way, the Law, rather than being a master, was itself a slave of God, given the job of teaching us the difference between right and wrong. The Law also guarded the people of God (the Jews) and separated them from their lawless and degenerate neighbors.

However, when Jesus came we no longer needed this protection and so He has "broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" between Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14). Everyone, even those not under the Law, are welcomed by our Lord. This does not negate the Law or render it useless. The Old Testament is still in our Bible because it still points us to Christ. Remember that Jesus came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Mat. 5:17). Just as you might still learn from an old teacher even if you are no longer under their authority, so too can we learn from the Law even if we are no longer required to keep all of its stipulations. Jesus, our new master, gives us the new commandment to love one another (Jn. 13:34), and the new rule of justification by faith.

But, as was said before, changing masters is not the same thing as freedom. And that's where the incredible promise of God comes in. We are no longer slaves, but children: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15-16). If we believe in Jesus and receive His life in exchange for our own, we become children of God (Jn. 1:12). This is why Paul is so insistent that we not become enslaved again to the Law. That would be a choice to be ruled by a slave rather than receiving the inheritance of a son. Living by faith is the work of a mature adult. We need to graduate from mother's milk to solid food "for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:13-14). Do you feel stymied in your walk with God because He won't just tell you what to do? Is it possible that He wants you to step out in faith, using what you have learned to grow into "the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13)? This Lent is an opportunity for us to grow up and get that practice in distinguishing good from evil. Slaves follow orders; children run the family business. It is time for us to be about our Father's business.

Thursday of 3 Lent – One in Christ

Read Galatians 3:27-29

Early Church father Cyril of Jerusalem (c.313-386) wrote the following about the ancient rite of baptism: “As soon, then, as you entered, you put off your tunic; and this was an image of putting off the old man with his deeds. Having stripped yourselves, you were naked; in this also imitating Christ, who was stripped naked on the Cross, and by His nakedness put off from Himself the principalities and powers, and openly triumphed over them on the tree. For since the adverse powers made their lair in your members, you may no longer wear that old garment; I do not at all mean this visible one, but the old man, which waxes corrupt in the lusts of deceit.” (*Catechetical Lecture 20*). Baptism is the great equalizer. We are stripped naked (metaphorically, if not literally) before God, rejecting our old sins and drowning our sinful nature. We then put on our new identity, like the white robes given to those in the early Church (cf. Rev. 7:13-14), and are sealed with holy oil and marked as Christ’s own forever. Where we came from and who we were before no longer matters: “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). All people are equal at the foot of the Cross.

Today’s reading is the ultimate destination of Paul’s argument in these first three chapters. Once we have been baptized into Christ, we belong to Him. Our race (Jew or Greek), our social class (slave or free), and even our sex (male or female) do not matter anymore. This does not mean that Christ obliterates human differences. Elsewhere in the New Testament, we see that men and women have different roles (e.g. Eph. 5:22-33), that slaves have obligations to their masters (and vice versa, see Eph.6:5-9), and even that the Jews still have a special call from God (e.g. Rom. 9:4-5). While differences inevitably remain between people for all sorts of reasons, and those differences are good and build up the body (1 Cor. 12), we all have equal value in the eyes of God. Every baptized person is an equal heir to the covenant with Abraham, that is, to the Kingdom. And God loves each one of us absolutely, totally, and forever. Christ died for you and you alone (and that’s true for all people). Your worth to God is literally infinite because you are part of Jesus, who is God the Son. Thus, in the holiest of mysteries, we mere humans are allowed to enter into the eternal love relationship of the Holy Trinity. The differences between us melt away in light of God’s glory, grace, and love.

While that would be an uplifting place to end, this is Lent, so we ought to ask ourselves some difficult questions. Do I discriminate against others based on human criteria? Do I treat other people, even other Christians, as “lesser” because of their race, their social class, their gender, or anything similar? Do I see myself as better than some other Christians because their sins are “worse” than mine? Have I allowed the toxic political and social climate of our times to blind me to the need to love others as Christ loves them? God is calling us to repent of the ways in which our hypocrisy and bigotry have divided the Church and endangered souls for whom Christ died. Let us instead love one another just as we are loved (Jn. 15:12). Let us fulfill Our Lord’s prayer “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn. 17:21).

Friday of 3 Lent – Slavery to the World

Read Galatians 4:1-3

In the short story “The Crooked Man”, the famous detective Sherlock Holmes solves a case by making a brilliant deduction which causes Dr. Watson to exclaim, “Excellent!” “Elementary,” Holmes replied (Sherlock never said “Elementary, my dear Watson” in Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories, but that is neither here nor there). The answer was “elementary” because, at least to Holmes, it was so obvious as to be without question. There is simply no other way things could be. Something that is elementary serves as the foundation. For example, elementary school provides the foundation for education, and the elements of the periodic table are the building blocks of all matter in the universe. An elementary principle is like water to a fish – the fish would never think to question its existence because it has always been swimming. Only by removing that elementary substance can the nature of its reality become clear.

Paul gives us a salutary warning in today’s reading about our enslavement to the “elementary principles” or “elemental spirits” of this world. I think both translations teach us something. The elementary principle of this world is that there is nothing outside of what we can perceive with our senses. This is called “naturalism” and it is the abiding philosophy of our day. Only what can be scientifically proven is true, and God, if he even exists, doesn’t matter to my day-to-day life. Pursuing money and sex and power or just pursuing whatever makes me happy is the only meaning of life. I can even have a “spirituality” as long as it doesn’t interfere with my pursuit of personal fulfillment. This is where the “elemental spirits” come in. The primary weapon of the devil is distraction. He wants us to be so caught up in the stream of everyday experience that we don’t perceive what is most important. As the demon Screwtape tells Wormwood about the man he is tempting in *The Screwtape Letters*: “your business is to fix his attention on the stream. Teach him to call it ‘real life’ and don’t let him ask what he means by ‘real’”. The last thing the devil wants is for us to realize that we are heirs to the Kingdom of God. We are no longer under the guardianship of the Law and we are certainly not to remain enslaved to the world. By faith, we can be freed from slavery to our sins and the rat race of a purely “natural” existence and live as children of God. We can do that *today*.

What “elementary principle” or “elemental spirit” is enslaving you? Do you believe in God and yet live as if He isn’t there? Is your faith in politics, in money, in your family or (God forbid) in yourself? Have you been tempted to be “spiritual, but not religious” or to be so worldly “wise” that you avoid Christ and His gospel? Does your desire to fit in cause the chains of worldliness to wrap around you? Wake up and realize that the water you are swimming in is poisonous. None of these paths will save you or give your life meaning or bring you true joy. Only faith in Jesus Christ can do all that. Let us throw off all these unquestioned “elementary principles” and cling to the truth of the gospel: our salvation is by faith and we are children of God and heirs of His kingdom. The “date set by our Father” is today: “Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). Accept nothing less. It’s elementary, my dear Christian.

Saturday of 3 Lent – Our Inheritance in Christ

Reach Galatians 4:4-7

When my Gran died last fall, I inherited a family crest. You see, my middle name, Munroe, was my grandmother's maiden name. So, as the one in the family to carry on the name, I also received this crest as a symbol of our family bond. It's pretty awesome to be honest: it has a perching eagle with wings aloft and is emblazoned with the words "Dread God". Of course, the real connection between us was not the crest or even the name, but our common blood and (most importantly) the relationship we shared with each other. Inheriting the crest was a symbol of all that I already have as a member of the family.

Paul continues his familial analogy in today's reading. By being born of a woman and under the Law, Jesus became a part of the human family just as He was already the eternal Son of God. By uniting God and humanity in this way, we became adopted children of God. We are, if you will, "blood relatives" of God because Jesus shed His blood to redeem us. If Christ lives in us, then we are God's children and we have His Spirit just as much as Jesus did. Thus we are right to call God our Father, just as our Lord commanded us to (Mat. 6:9). And if we are children, then we are also heirs – "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:17). In other words, if we are willing to die to ourselves and allow Christ to live in us, we will inherit the kingdom of God. This inheritance is already ours, as Jesus said in the parable of the sheep and the goats: "the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'" (Mat. 25:34). We already bear the name of Christ by virtue of our baptism, and we have the Spirit as "a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance" (Eph. 1:14). Even now, Jesus is preparing a place for us in paradise (Jn. 14:2). It's a done deal.

All that said, I think we can get a little too preoccupied with our heavenly inheritance that we forget what we have today. The Spirit in our hearts is the Spirit of the Son crying out, "Abba! Father!" We aren't just heirs of a heavenly home after death, as wonderful as that will be. We have inherited the Son's relationship with the Father. We can have an intimate, familial bond with the Lord of all creation, closer than any human relationship. We are no longer slaves, dutifully performing our responsibilities in hopes of appeasing a holy God. No, we are beloved children of the King, chosen, justified, and glorified by him, and nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:30-39). This is not "pie in the sky when we die". We can experience the fruit of a transformed life *today* if we cry out to our Father and claim the inheritance that Christ won for us. Someday we will receive the "crown of life" (Jas. 1:12; Rev. 2:10), but understand that you are already a member of the family of God. Our inheritance is not gold or silver; it is not even salvation or forgiveness. Our inheritance is union with the God of all creation, a relationship that nothing and no one can take from us. We need not "dread God" because He loves to show us mercy and will give us all the good gifts we need, just as a father does for his children (Mat. 7:11). Cry out to "Abba, Father!" today and receive all that you are heir to.

Monday of 4 Lent – Don't Turn Back!

Read Galatians 4:8-11

Of the 25 highest-grossing films of 2021 in the United States, 20 of them were either a sequel, reboot, remake, or part of a series. Most of our popular tv shows are remakes of older material or, in the case of something like *Stranger Things*, heavily dependent on a setting from the past. “Retro” fashion has been all the rage for quite a while now (of course, “retro” often means the 1990s which makes me feel about 147 years old). Our entire culture seems stuck in an imagined past, endlessly replaying the hits. Twenty-first century life is so fraught and complicated that we find ourselves wistfully reaching back to simpler times, a feeling only exacerbated by a post-pandemic desire to return to “normal”. The word for this, “nostalgia”, comes from two Greek words meaning “pain” (*algos*) and “homecoming” (*nostos*). We feel the painful desire to return home, and “so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (*The Great Gatsby*). It is a comfortable illusion of safety because the past is gone. Trying to live there will not allow us the growth we need and will leave us frozen in our sins. In the pointed words of Jesus: “Remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:32; cf. Gen. 19:26).

Paul reminds the Galatians how far they have come. They once were enslaved to pagan idols, which were really demons in disguise (1 Cor. 10:20; Deut. 32:17). Many of them were Gentile converts to Judaism who had been “enslaved” to the Law. Either way, they had to observe “days and months and seasons and years”. Experiencing both uncertainty and persecution as Christians, the Galatians have become entrapped by nostalgia for their old way of life. They were seeking not thrills, but comfort. Sin often entices us not through spectacular temptation, but the slow erosion of virtue. “Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one--the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts” (*The Screwtape Letters*). We see again Paul’s concern that his work could be “in vain”, that all the progress the Galatians have made could be lost, making them worse off than before. In Peter’s bracing words: “if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2 Pet. 2:20-21).

Jesus said, “no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Lk. 9:62). There is no place for complacency or nostalgia in the spiritual life. If we return to our sins now, after all that we have experienced, the consequences would be catastrophic. If we compromise with the elemental spirits of the world, the flesh, and the devil, they will enslave us entirely. Instead, let us take to heart Paul’s example: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13-14). Don’t turn back now! Even though the road ahead may appear rocky, steep, and full of brambles, it leads us toward the only goal worth having: union with God. Nothing we have left behind will lead to Him. Remember Lot’s wife and press on!

Tuesday of 4 Lent – Power in Weakness

Read Galatians 4:12-15

Our culture idolizes good looks, wealth, fame, and power. We listen to famous and attractive people because we believe they have something worth saying. Even as Christians, we tend to value “winsomeness” in sharing the gospel (by which we often mean making the gospel palatable to current norms) and elevate celebrity preachers who look good on television and preach a prosperity gospel of “your best life now”. Yet the world was turned upside down (Acts 17:6) by a bunch of uneducated Galilean fisherman and a choleric former Pharisee with a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7). This should not be surprising from the followers of a Lord who said that the last would be first. In Paul’s words, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27-28). The kingdom of God advances not through power or influence-peddling or force of arms, but through humble obedience and “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). If you feel weak or sick or poor or just generally like a nobody, you may think you have nothing to offer God or His Church. But it is quite the opposite: the weakest among us are God’s most powerful warriors.

Paul preached the gospel to the Galatians “because of a bodily ailment”. This seems to indicate that he came down with something (malaria?) or had a flare up of a chronic condition (epilepsy?) that forced him to stay in Galatia for an extended period. Never one to waste an opportunity, he used his own misfortune to preach the gospel (just as we should). His condition made the message of the gospel even more compelling and filled the Galatians with the spirit of generosity. The saying that they “would have gouged out [their] eyes” for Paul indicates how much they loved him and would have sacrificed for him. While I have made much of Paul’s anger in Galatians, today’s reading shows his tenderness toward these Christians. Anger is always a secondary emotion and this passage shows Paul’s pain at the thought of losing these brothers and sisters. He’s not mad; he’s heartbroken. Anyone who has seen someone they love stray from the Truth knows the feeling. You wish you could just shake them until they come to their senses. But that’s not how love works because God does not cajole us. He woos us. And we must have the same attitude in sharing Him with the lost.

Paul says that he wants us to “become as I am”. Paul was persecuted, weak, hungry, sick, in constant danger, anxious, and often despised (2 Cor. 11:16-29). If you are using Christianity as a self-improvement plan, you are missing the point. God doesn’t want us to suffer unnecessarily, but neither does he promise us a life of ease, wealth, or comfort. He is not in the business of making us happy; He wants to make us holy. In a beautiful paradox, our weaknesses may be the very thing that God uses to redeem us and to advance His kingdom. His power is made perfect in weakness. “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10).

Wednesday of 4 Lent – Birthing Christ in Us

Read Galatians 4:16-20

Galatia, a teenager, has fallen in with the wrong crowd and stayed out after curfew. She pulls up the driveway with the headlights off and sneaks in the back door. She takes her shoes off and avoids that one creaky floorboard and is headed to her bedroom until she hears a *click*. It's the lamp in the living room. St. Paul, her dad (or mom? [v.19]), is sitting in the armchair with a half-finished crossword in his lap and a mostly-empty tumbler of Scotch. "I'm not mad," he says, quietly, "just disappointed". Galatia wished he would just yell at her. This icy dissatisfaction is almost too much to bear. Paul had warned her what would happen if she strayed. And yet, here we are.

You can feel the pain in Paul's words in today's reading. The abandonment of the gospel by the Galatians seemed like a personal betrayal. They were treating him as an enemy because he told the truth. They instead surrounded themselves with those who told flattering falsehoods, influence peddlers out for their own gain rather than the care for the Galatians' souls. "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25). We must always beware of leaders who are more interested in their own power and influence than in the Truth. Such people will try to divide Christians against each other and encourage rebellion against legitimate godly authority. This is all especially galling because Paul feels (rightly) that he was their father in the Spirit and that he had helped "birth" Christ in them through bringing them to salvation. It's like he's having to start over from scratch, giving birth to them a second time (every mother's nightmare!). It's made all the worse that he's having to write from a distance and can't sort things out face to face. This is a heartbroken parent with a wayward child, begging and pleading for them to just come home.

Have you rejected God's word in your life or the advice of a godly authority figure because the truth hurt too much? Do you live in an echo chamber, either in real life or on social media (or both), where you only listen to those who say things you already agree with and who flatter your vanity and sense of entitlement? Be honest: we all do this from time to time. Lent is a time to stop living in denial and face up to the ways in which we have strayed from the truth and who we have hurt when we have done so. Perhaps now would be a good time to log off your social media feed and call your priest or your accountability partner or a good Christian friend. Maybe you could schedule a formal confession with a priest or simply come to God in prayer with an open heart and mind to what He has to say. God is not mad at you. He is a lovesick father who just wants to hold His child in His arms and tell them that He loves them. Stop listening to comfortable lies and embrace the love of God found in the Truth, that is, in Jesus. "Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (Jas. 1:21). Let us pray to Jesus in the words of the classic Christmas carol: "descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today."

Thursday of 4 Lent – Child of Flesh vs. Child of Faith

Read Galatians 4:21-23

A young child who is tending a garden can grow impatient. Waiting for the flowers to grow takes *forever!* So he or she might try to help by pulling on the flower – after all, we want it to grow tall, right? Of course, all this does is pull the roots of the flower out of the ground thereby killing the plant and achieving the opposite of what the child wanted. How many of us are that little child, impatiently tugging at the flowers in our lives in the vain hope that it will help them to grow?

For the next three days of readings, Paul will be making an extended analogy based on the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar found in Genesis 15-21. Let's review: Abraham was promised descendants as numerous as the stars even though he and his wife Sarah had proven barren. Thus, Sarah suggests he impregnate their Egyptian slave Hagar so that he could have an heir from his own body. Abraham agrees and Hagar becomes pregnant almost immediately, igniting furious jealousy in Sarah and causing her to abuse Hagar to such an extent that the slave woman flees. God tells her to return to Abraham's household, and, once back, she gives birth to a son named Ishmael. Afterward, the Lord promises that Sarah, long past the age of childbearing, will have a son. Both she and Abraham laugh at the thought. God joins in the fun and tells them to name the child Isaac (*Yitzhak*, "laughter"). And, indeed, Sarah miraculously conceives and gives birth to the son that was promised. However, after some time passed, there was conflict between Ishmael and Isaac which caused Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael permanently. Ishmael would grow up in the wilderness, while Isaac would become the father of Jacob/Israel and an ancestor of Jesus. Both Isaac and Ishmael would be patriarchs of great nations, but only one fulfilled the promise of God. Ishmael was the fruit of disobedience, while Isaac was the fruit of faith.

Abraham and Sarah could not see how God's promises could possibly come to pass, so they decided to "help" God out. Of course, the form that "help" took was disobedience to God's monogamous design for marriage (which existed since Adam and Eve, see Gen. 2:24). The result of this attempt to achieve in the flesh what can only be obtained through faith was constant domestic strife and a sibling rivalry that blossomed into the Arab-Jewish conflict that exists to this day. We must learn to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7) and trust that the Lord is good to his word. We may be tempted to laugh at the extravagance of God's promises and that's o.k. The child of faith is literally named "laughter" and the laughter of faith fills us with unspeakable joy, just as the bitter laughter of disbelief empties us of that joy. We must choose today whether we will laugh *with* God or *at* Him, whether we are children of faith or children of the flesh. There is no third choice. Will you trust God and wait on His promises or will you run ahead in your own power? Remember Peter's admonition that "the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you" (2 Pet. 3:9). Scripture is filled with reminders to wait upon the Lord, to "be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10), and that "it is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (Lam. 3:26). Let the word of the Lord to His people at the Red Sea live in our hearts today: "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today.... The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent" (Ex. 14:13-14). Let us be children of faith.

Friday of 4 Lent – Our Mother is Free

Read Galatians 4:24-27

“The Church’s fruitfulness spreads branches over the whole world. It sends forth her rivers, freely flowing, yet the source is one, and she is one mother, plentiful in fruitfulness. We are born from her womb, nourished by her milk, given life by her spirit.... No one who forsakes the Church of Christ can receive the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother.” (St. Cyprian of Carthage [210-258]; *On the Unity of the Church*). In our hyper-individualized and heavily-divided society, the Church stands out. Many Christians, especially American Christians raised with the values of individualism and self-determination, neglect the communal aspects of the faith. However, if we are going to minister in our world today, we need to address one of the most pervasive problems in our culture: loneliness. People have no roots, no family, no sense of belonging. Many young people, themselves children of divorce, no longer even want to get married and many report having no friends. They do not participate in any sort of communal activity outside of work and spend their free time alone with only the flickering light of a phone to keep them company. This is an orphan generation in need of parental guidance. And how can they know that God is their father if the Church will not be their mother?

Paul continues his analogy of Hagar and Sarah. He interprets the story as an allegory (although he is not denying that these women actually existed). Hagar the Egyptian slave represents the covenant given to Moses on Mt. Sinai in Arabia. This corresponds to the Law which was still practiced in the Temple in Jerusalem (Galatians was written before the temple was destroyed in AD 70). Like Hagar, the Law is a slave and her children (those who keep the Law) remain in slavery. Meanwhile, Sarah represents “Mount Zion and...the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22). This is the New Jerusalem inaugurated by the coming of Jesus Christ, and which will be revealed at the second coming as our eternal home (see Rev. 21). Paul, quoting Isaiah 54:1, points out that the barren woman is paradoxically a fruitful mother because of God’s miraculous grace (Ps. 113:9). This barren mother, this New Jerusalem, is free and she opens her home to all. We can live in the home of God our Father when we embrace our mother.

The New Jerusalem is not just somewhere we go when we die. If we are justified by faith and made free by Christ’s sacrifice, then we are already citizens of heaven now (Phil. 3:20) and members of God’s family. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). Are you feeling lonely and alienated? Do you see people around you who seem cut off from the world? God is calling all of us home. If God as Father seems like a distant or intimidating image, perhaps it would help to think of His Church as your mother. Let the Church nurture you in Word and Sacrament and in good fellowship. Resist the urge to isolate and do not cut yourself off from the means of grace. Our mother is free and freedom can be found in her. May the family of God ever be found in the household of God, welcoming all into the loving embrace of Mother Church.

Saturday of 4 Lent – Cast Out the Slave Woman

Read Galatians 4:28-31

I have a bookshelf problem. You see, I do not have enough bookshelves in my house to hold all of the books I own (even though one entire wall of my living room is literally just a bookshelf). So books end up everywhere, stuffed in sideways or piled on the floor or stacked in front of other books, and just generally higgledy-piggledy. Now you might be saying to yourself that my problem is not too few bookshelves but too many books. To that I say: how dare you! I may never even so much as look at most of them, but it physically hurts to get rid of any of them. However, I know that if I ever want to get new books that I will actually read and enjoy, I will have to make room for them by parting with those that I no longer need. Or maybe I could fit one more bookshelf in the bedroom....

Today we conclude the extended analogy from Genesis. We Christians are like Isaac, a child of promise, born (again) through faith. However, those who cling to their old ways, be it legalism or some other sin, are jealous of our freedom and will scorn us for it just as Ishmael scorned Isaac (Gen. 21:9). They would say that we can have it both ways, holding on to our old ways and our old self, while still benefiting from the grace of God. But Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael from his household, and so too must we jettison anything which crowds out the Holy Spirit. “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles” (Heb. 12:1). We must choose whether we live in the household of the slave woman or the free. Our souls are not big enough to fit both our old nature and the new creation we are in Christ: “put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires... [and] put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22, 24). There is always a temptation to live a double life, to be Christian when it is convenient and worldly the rest of the time. It would certainly save us a lot of trouble with those who feel convicted by Christian morality but would rather not submit to God. To that Paul has a simple message: “cast out the slave woman”. This may mean cutting off or minimizing contact with those in our lives who are attempting to lead us away from God or it may just mean renewing our minds by casting out sinful thoughts and behaviors. Either way, be careful who you listen to, because eventually the one you listen to becomes the one you serve.

Our Lord addressed these same issues when confronted by Jewish leaders who said that they were not slaves because they were children of Abraham: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever....I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father” (Jn. 8:34-38). If we want to remain in the household of God, we must reject slavery and embrace our identity as children of God. We cannot try to stuff Jesus into our lives sideways like the books on my shelves. He either occupies the throne or He will not be there at all. We either serve the father of lies (Jn. 8:44) or the Father of our spirit (Heb. 12:9). This Lent, let us cast out sin and make room in our hearts for Christ to enter that He may bring His rule of freedom into every aspect of our lives.

Monday of 5 Lent – Freedom in Christ

Read Galatians 5:1-3

Freedom is one of our most treasured values as Americans. Our founding document is the Declaration of *Independence* and our anthem ends by calling this the “land of the free”. Yet no two people in our country (or anywhere else for that matter) can quite seem to agree on what “freedom” means. This stems from the fact that freedom can never be absolute. Our freedom from prison is predicated on following the laws of the state. Freedom to follow our own conscience often means denying our baser instincts. Freedom to indulge our basest instincts means forfeiting part of our humanity. And so forth. Life always involves trade-offs. If nothing else, our freedom is limited by our physical limitations as creatures and, ultimately, by our mortal nature. Yet we chafe at any limits to our ambition and most of our sins are an attempt to deny our status as creatures dependent upon the Creator. Our first sin was to eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil in order to be “like God” (Gen. 3:5-6). Ever since, we have lived under a curse and, like a bear in a trap, every attempt to free ourselves has only ensnared us further. We demand freedom on our terms, freedom to be little gods who determine our own destiny and shape the world in our vision. In doing so, we have created hell on earth. If this is what “freedom” looks like, count me out.

Chapter five begins with a discussion of circumcision. Paul is not so much concerned with the physical act of removing foreskin as he is the motivation behind the act. The Galatians are still trying to have some control over their spiritual life by practicing circumcision, which also has the added benefit of setting them apart from their Gentile neighbors. The desire to be in an exclusive (and exclusionary) club runs deep in humanity. Paul insists that we can only benefit from Christ’s sacrifice on the cross if we stop attempting to save ourselves. Through circumcision, the Galatians were declaring their loyalty, indeed their slavery, to the gods of this world. Jesus will not share the throne of our hearts – we must pledge loyalty to Him and Him alone.

So why did Christ set us free from the curse of original sin? “For freedom,” says Paul. That isn’t as banal as it sounds. Everything we have called “freedom” to this point has enslaved us, be it greed, sexual immorality, false religion, worldly ambition, or living for the approval of others. Jesus gives us the only true freedom, the freedom to be what we were created to be, which is a freedom found in Him alone: “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2). Christ has transferred us out of the kingdom of sin and death, ruled by the written Law, into a new kingdom of freedom ruled by the law of the Spirit. Freedom in Christ is freedom to *live*, not just survive. It is the freedom of forgiveness of sin and new life in the Holy Spirit. God is love and “to obey Love itself, which above all else wishes us well, leaves us the freedom to be the best and gladdest that we have it in us to become” (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*). Resist the siren song of false freedom offered by money, sex, and ambition and let Christ set you free. “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (Jn. 8:36).

Tuesday of 5 Lent – Faith Works

Read Galatians 5:4-6

When I was a teenager learning to mow the lawn, I once filled the lawnmower with chainsaw gas (which, if you don't know, is gasoline mixed with motor oil). Thankfully, my dad quickly stopped me before I started the mower and destroyed its engine. Now, I could have complained that he was being narrow-minded about what to put in the mower to make it run, but that wouldn't have changed anything. My best efforts and good intentions would change exactly nothing about the situation. Lawnmowers need regular gasoline to run, just as chainsaws need chainsaw gas to run, and trying to run these machines on anything else is courting disaster.

The Galatians were trying to run the Christian life on the fuel of the Law. In trying to make circumcision the gateway to salvation, they had actually severed themselves from the grace of Christ. This is not because God was petulantly removing blessings from them for “breaking the rules”, but simply because that's not how grace works. Righteousness is not something we earn but something we are given. We “wait for the hope” to be revealed in us. Do you sometimes feel hopeless? It's certainly easy given the state of the world today. Paul is encouraging us today to wait in faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit, for that hope to become a reality in our lives. Just like faith, hope is a gift and not something we can conjure up ourselves. Neither should we confuse hope with happy feelings, because hope is often given to us when we are (paradoxically) on the verge of despair. Finally, remember what your hope is for. The hope the Lord promises is not hope for financial security, domestic bliss, vocational fulfillment, or even world peace. It is the “hope of righteousness”, that is, a right relationship with God. We can work for all of those other things. But union with God can only be found in Christ and we wait in eager anticipation for His life to be revealed in us.

O.k., you might say, if justification is by faith, how exactly does that work? In other words, what is the fuel that faith runs by? Verse 6 gives us the answer, best rendered in the KJV: “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love”. Love is the fuel of faith. Many people get caught up in the debate of “faith vs. works”, but the book of James cuts through all that: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (2:14-18). Our race, our class, our sex, and even our adherence to religious traditions availeth nothing. We have only one commandment from our Lord: to love God and love our neighbor (Matt. 22:36-39). That's what faith is. The rest is just noise (1 Cor. 13:1). Effective faith, faith that works, is faith that exhibits the love of Christ in every situation to every person, from sharing the gospel to sharing a cup of cold water. Let our faith always work by love. “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

Wednesday of 5 Lent – Removing Leaven and Producing Fruit

Read Galatians 5:7-12

Okay, let's talk about that last verse. Paul wishes that those who are so proud of their circumcision would just finish the job and lop off the whole kit and caboodle. How petulant! But there is a deeper point here. We are called as Christians to produce fruit (Mat. 3:8; Eph. 5:9), and fruits are the reproductive part of a plant. In other words, we are to spread the Spirit into all the world, reproducing the life inside us into others, and that can only happen if we are first justified by faith. Thus, relying on circumcision causes us to be unfruitful spiritually just as much as castration would cause a man to be unfruitful physically. Such small compromises hinder us from obeying the truth (and the Truth, Jesus [Jn. 14:6]). When we try to sand off the rough edges of the faith, we end up removing the cross and replacing it with a sort of therapeutic deism, a far-away yet loving God who exists to make me feel better about myself and support my desires and who just wants me to "be nice". Instead, we are offered "Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). The cross of Christ stands in condemnation of both salvation by works and the feel-good spirituality so endemic to our age. How could we ever think that compromising the gospel would be acceptable as we contemplate the cross? The choice isn't between a "nice" and "mean" Christianity; it's between fruitfulness and barrenness.

The other analogy in today's reading mirrors this theme: "a little leaven leavens the whole lump". This refers, of course, to the practice of kneading yeast into a lump of dough in order to make it rise. But we must be careful what leaven we use, as Jesus said: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Lk. 12:1). Just as a woman who becomes pregnant by an unworthy man is in for a lifetime of regret, so too are we to avoid those who would fill our souls with lies. Paul expands on this in 1 Corinthians: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (5:6-8). Only unleavened bread was to be eaten at Passover and it is unleavened bread that becomes the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. Our old self was leavened with sin and therefore must be cast aside for the unleavened Body of Jesus. To try to add bits of our old life into our new life in Christ is to defile what we have become. Even a small amount of sin corrupts our entire self. What little compromises with the world are you holding onto today? Just as a mustard seed of faith can bloom into a mighty tree (Matt. 17:20), so too can a tiny seed of compromise blossom into a poisonous vine that can choke the very life out of us. We must uproot these weeds in the garden of our life before they grow unmanageable and kill the good fruit we are trying to produce. Only then can we follow the first command God ever gave to us: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). Let us fill the world with the fruit of repentance, multiplying His blessings to us, so that "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Is. 11:9).

Thursday of 5 Lent – Freedom to Forgive and Love

Read Galatians 5:13-15

“Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you” (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*). Sin consumes. It cannot create anything of value – it can only destroy. It is like a parasite that grows stronger as its host becomes weaker. And it's not just anger: greed, pride, lust, sloth, the whole miserable lot of them are leeches that sap us of our God-given strength, leaving us feeling exhausted, anxious, hopeless, and depressed. Once we find ourselves in that state, it becomes easy to play the blame game, to lash out at others as if our own bad decisions were their fault. We would do anything to avoid responsibility, anything to keep our sins attached to us even as they kill us. *After all, we're free, right? That means I can do whatever I want! God wants me to be happy, doesn't he? I can't be happy without...well, you know...and anyone who tries to hold me accountable or confront me about my sin or just stands in my way is my enemy. I don't need them anyway....* And that, my friends, is how churches are torn apart: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

Using freedom as an opportunity for the flesh pretty well encapsulates the world we live in. We use freedom not to build one another up, but to pursue our own selfish ambition and our basest desires. How much of our interpersonal conflict arises from a schoolyard-level dispute that amounts to “I want that! Give it to me!”? As St. James puts it: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (4:1-3). What can stand against such powerful desires? Why, love, of course. Paul says that the whole Law is summed up in that one word. Love desires the good of the other above all else. “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” (1 Cor. 13:4-6). Rather than giving in to a desire to devour our neighbor for our own benefit, love prompts us to serve our neighbor for *their* benefit, indeed to give up our life for them if need be. Proudful “‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1). Brothers and sisters, we are called to humility, to consider others above ourselves (Phil. 2:3). “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Rom. 14:19). What do you need to do for peace and building up Christ's body today? Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone you need to apologize to? Or is there an old grudge or an old hurt that you just need to let go of? Let us end the cycles of conflict through the radical power of Christ's love and forgiveness. May the “skeleton at the feast” be resurrected just like Ezekiel's dry bones (Ez. 37). Let us love our neighbors as ourselves.

Friday of 5 Lent – Gravity and Grace

Read Galatians 5:16-18

“All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.” These words of French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil pretty well sum up our spiritual life. On the one side we have the inevitability of gravity, pulling everything toward ourselves, a constant consuming need for more and a desire for others to revolve around us just as the planets do the Sun. That’s the flesh, a soulless natural force that attempts to fill us with everything that surrounds us in the vain hope that we might become like God. There is a reason that the first sin was eating something. The Spirit of grace, on the other hand, is wholly different. It can only work where there is light and air inside us. Weil again: “Not to exercise all power at one’s disposal is to endure the void. This is contrary to all the laws of nature. Grace alone can do it. Grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.”

Perhaps an analogy would help. A hot air balloon on the ground is just an empty bag tied to a basket with ropes. But when hot air is pumped into it, the bag expands and lifts up off the ground. As long as the hot air is pumped into it, the balloon is no longer bound by gravity and soars majestically and peacefully through the sky. In the same way, we are just empty vessels. We can try to fill our balloon with any number of things, but it is only when we allow God to empty us and fill us with the fire of His Holy Spirit that we can overcome the weight of our flesh with its sinful desires. Sometimes, hot air balloons are tethered to the ground to keep them from being carried off by the wind. This might be analogous to the Law (see v. 18), which protects us but also keeps us under the force of gravity. If we are to soar into the freedom that Christ would have for us, we must cut the tethers that bind us to this world, even the ones that make us feel safe. So, you see, choosing to walk by the Spirit rather than walking by the flesh is not like flipping a switch inside yourself or choosing a different spiritual “diet”. It’s more a matter of answering the question “Which force will you surrender yourself to: gravity or grace?”

Maybe the most important part of the hot air balloon analogy is this: it can only stay aloft as long as hot air is continually pumped into it. In the same way, we can only stay aloft spiritually by the daily visitation of the Holy Spirit. Invite the Holy Spirit in right now, as you read this, and give Him full control of your day. Allow Him to show you how to serve, how to forgive, how to listen, how to heal, how to hope, how to love. Let go of the endless list of “I want-s” and embrace the freedom to soar in the Spirit. It’s quite a stormy world out there and your little balloon is going to get buffeted about, make no mistake about that. But as long as you leave open the void inside to be filled by the fire of the Spirit, He is faithful to hold you aloft through all the tempest and toil of this life. Jesus said: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Do not surrender to the flesh, to doubt and dejection and despair. Surrender to the Spirit and He will lift you up (Jas. 4:10). Sin may be as inevitable as gravity, but God’s grace is more than sufficient to elevate us above our problems, our mistakes, and our limitations. May the Spirit lift you up today.

Saturday of 5 Lent – The Works of the Flesh

Read Galatians 5:19-21

As we head into Holy Week, we ought to examine ourselves and reject the works of the flesh that we may enter into the freedom of Christ's kingdom. While Paul's list here is not intended to be comprehensive (you can see where the Galatians had problems), it's a good place to start a self-examination.

I. Sins of Impurity

- **Sexual immorality**: Are you engaging in adultery (sex outside of marriage) or fornication (sex before marriage)? Are you pursuing any relationship primarily for sex rather than for committed, chaste friendship or lifelong marriage?
- **Impurity and Sensuality**: Do you watch, read, or listen to pornography? Do you seek out media (like Instagram) for the purpose of exciting lust? Do you dress or act immodestly in order to draw attention to your body? Have you objectified others rather than seeing them as images of God? Have you, by treating sex as wrong or sinful, created undue curiosity about sexual matters by being a prude?

II. Sins of Idolatry

- **Idolatry**: Have you allowed anything in this world (money, your job, your family, your education, etc.) to take priority over your relationship with God? Do you neglect worship, prayer, Scripture, and works of service because you have "more important" things to do? Are you unfaithful with money, either hoarding wealth or spending profligately? Do you care more about your reputation than your relationship with Christ?
- **Sorcery**: Have you attempted to manipulate God or "spirits" through occult or other means, such as fortune telling, astrology, Tarot cards, etc.? Do you expect *quid pro quo* from God for prayer, Church attendance, and tithing, using the liturgy like a talisman rather than as a vessel for God's grace? Are you trying to earn your salvation by works?

III. Sins of Hostility

- **Enmity**: Are you holding a grudge against someone else (justified or not) and failing to forgive as you have been forgiven? Do you fantasize about harm coming to a person or people you dislike? Are you standing in judgment over someone else's sin?
- **Strife**: Are you quarrelsome, looking to pick a fight? Are you given to bickering, nagging, or rudeness? Are you shunning anyone because of slights against you, real or perceived? Do you participate in gossip?
- **Jealousy**: Do you resent others when they are wealthier, more successful, more attractive, or just luckier than you? Are you given to rivalry rather than collaboration?
- **Fits of Anger**: Are you given to verbal outbursts when things don't go your way? Is profanity a regular part of your speech? Do you say things in the heat of the moment that you later regret? Are you physically violent, against people, pets, or property?
- **Rivalries, Dissensions, and Divisions**: Do you have an "us-vs.-them" mentality about groups you belong to, whether that be based on politics, religion, race, class, or gender? Have you practiced or approved of unjust prejudice? Have you caused

division between spouses, family members, friends, or the Church for your own benefit? Has your pride made you isolated from the Body of Christ? Do you stand in judgment over other members of the Body?

- Envy: Do you take pleasure in the misfortune of those you dislike or see as rivals? Have you tried to damage someone else's reputation? Do you spend your life comparing yourself with others rather than following Christ? Do you tend to wallow in self-pity rather than taking actions to improve your situation?

IV. Sins of Intemperance

- Drunkness: Are you intemperate in your consumption of food or drink? Do you fail to take proper care of your body by getting adequate sleep, exercising, and eating healthy food? Do you "self-medicate" mental or spiritual maladies with alcohol, drugs, or tobacco?
- Orgies: Are the people you surround yourself with encouraging sinful behavior, be it sexual immorality, gluttony, sloth, or the like? Do you neglect your duties to your family, church, or vocation in order to indulge in amusement? Do you waste time in order to avoid unpleasant realities?

These questions are not meant to be a comprehensive self-examination, but simply a place to start. If you find yourself convicted by any of these questions, good. But don't stay in a place of condemnation. There is no condemnation in our Lord (Rom. 8:1), and He desires not the death of sinners, but that they may turn from their sin and live (Ez. 18:23). I recommend, if you haven't already, scheduling a confession with a priest. Alternatively, you can confess your sin to a trusted accountability partner. At the least, you can lift all these things up in prayer and accept the Lord's pardon and forgiveness. Make a plan today for how you (with the help of Christ and the Church) can improve in the areas where you have fallen short. Reject the works of the flesh, repent of your sins, and live a new life of freedom in the kingdom of God.

Monday of Holy Week – In Step with the Spirit

Read Galatians 5:22-25

When my son Gideon was learning to walk, we would hold hands and pace up and down the hallway in our house for what felt like hours. He would carefully watch my feet and try to imitate what I was doing, often taking steps far too big for his little body. He would lose his balance and I would have to pull him back up and try again. His determination to walk was adorable, and, frankly, inspiring. He didn't want to walk; he *needed* to walk. Sure enough, he was walking on his own in no time (and he hasn't stopped moving since). We learn by imitating and by making mistakes. Through perseverance and trusting in the One who is teaching us, we can learn to be everything we are meant to be.

Much has been written about the fruits of the Spirit and I don't feel a need to spend your time or mine explicating each one. The main point is that the fruits spring from walking in faith, learning from God and our fellow Christians how life in the Spirit is actually lived out practically. The fruits aren't something that just happens to us; they are the consequence of daily choices to follow God. For example, *love* means working for the good of the other, *joy* and *peace* result from putting our faith in God's providence, and *patience* develops as we learn to practice forgiveness and gratitude. That said, we can't conjure up these fruits by the force of willpower any more than we can grow an actual fruit tree by wishing for it really hard. We plant the seed in the ground, water it, fertilize it, tend it, and, eventually, the tree produces fruit. We don't make the fruit grow – we simply give the tree the environment it needs to produce what it is naturally meant to. As Jesus said, "every good tree bears good fruit" (Mt. 7:17). So it is with life in the Spirit. If we walk in step with the Spirit, persevering in obedience, the fruits will grow naturally in our lives. In the words of St. John Chrysostom: "evil works come from us alone, and hence [Paul] calls them works, while the good works require not only the resolution of our will but the kindness of God" (*Homily on Galatians*).

In order for these fruits to grow, however, we must prune away that which doesn't belong. In Paul's words, we must "crucify the flesh". This brings to mind the collect for today from the Book of Common Prayer: "Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace." Walking by the Spirit means to walk the way of the cross daily (Lk. 9:23). God is calling us to die with Him this week, crucifying the flesh, so that His Spirit may live in us. Jesus told us: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn. 12:24-25). We are called to follow in Jesus' steps all the way to Calvary. Make a commitment this week to walk in step with the Spirit even as He leads you to the cross, trusting that being crucified with Christ will result in bearing all of the fruits of the Spirit in your life. May the way of the cross be the path to life and peace for you this week and always.

Tuesday of Holy Week – Bear One Another’s Burdens

Read Galatians 5:26-6:3

As Jesus fled the temple to avoid people trying to stone him, he passed by a man who had been born blind. I’ll let John take the story from here: “His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world’” (Jn. 9:2-5). Then He spit in the dirt, made mud, spread it on the man’s eyes, and healed him. This story demonstrates the two ways to react to a person suffering. We can try to figure out what they did wrong and stand in judgment over them or we can see the opportunity to display the love of God and serve them. It is a difference, as Jesus said, of night and day. People sure of their righteousness had tried to stone the light of the world and would soon snuff out that light by condemning Him to death. Our time on this earth is similarly short – will we be servants of darkness and condemnation or of light and grace?

Paul sets up the same stark contrast in today’s reading. On the one hand are those who have been trying to deceive the Galatians, people concerned with worldly power and prestige, consumed by vanity, anger, envy, and self-deception (5:26 & 6:3). Standing against them are those who walk by the Spirit. They restore the fallen in gentleness and humility, understanding their own weakness in the face of temptation. Most of all, they help each other and serve one another. Nobody should ever be left alone or left behind in the Body of Christ. Indeed, Paul says this is the “law of Christ”. Wait a minute, I thought that Paul just spent this whole book rejecting the Law? What is the “law of Christ”? In our Lord’s own words: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (Jn. 13:34). Love is the fulfillment of the Law (Rom. 13:10).

We are free of the Law that brings death, free to love one another. We don’t have to constantly be worrying about our status in the kingdom, desperately trying to earn the love and favor of a distant God. We already have the love of God through the sacrifice of Christ and living in us by the power of the Spirit. Because of this, we are free to spread that same grace to all people. Vanity, backbiting, and status-seeking serve no purpose in the kingdom. Instead, we are called to gently restore the wayward brother or sister and support the weaker members of the body, all the while finding help when we experience trouble. We can bear the burdens of this life together, knowing that we are one in Christ, equally redeemed and equally beloved. How can you help a fellow believer bear their burden today? Is there someone you need to forgive? Or do you need the humility to reach out for help and forgiveness? Even Jesus needed help carrying his cross to Calvary (Lk. 23:26). As the lyrics of the Servant Song remind us: “We are pilgrims on a journey / we are travelers on the road / we are here to help each other / walk the mile and bear the load.” When we forgive and serve one another, we follow Jesus in being the light in this dark world (Mt. 5:14-16).

Wednesday of Holy Week – Bearing Your Load and Carrying Your Cross

Read Galatians 6:4-6

I work at a community college, and the issue of plagiarism is ever-present. Often students are just ignorant about how to cite sources or properly attribute quotations. But sometimes a student will try to pass off someone else's work as their own or lift entire passages from a book and plop it in the middle of an essay without citing the source. While doing research and collaborating with others are essential parts of the educational process, the grade you receive should reflect the quality of your work and yours alone. To pass a class or even graduate because you are a clever cheater is not only unfair to others, it means you have deprived yourself of the very education you were ostensibly trying to receive. Students who succeed at plagiarism fail at life because they enter the world unprepared to do real work and uneducated in the field that their education was supposed to prepare them for. What looks like a short cut actually leads to a dead end.

Paul seems to be contradicting himself. Yesterday we read that we were to “bear one another’s burdens”, but today he says that we each must “bear [our] own load”. What’s the difference between a “burden” and a “load”? It seems that, while we ought to help one another, we also have a responsibility for our own life. Christ’s call to take up our cross is an individual call, just as each cross was for a single individual. We are each going to have to give an account for ourselves to God (Rom. 14:12), and we will each be rewarded according to the labor we have done (1 Cor. 3:8). God saves us as individuals, not because we are members of a group. No matter how faithful your family or friends might be, you cannot coast into heaven on the merits of others. Furthermore, we cannot expect other people to do the work of the kingdom while we sit on the sidelines. It is common these days to hear people, especially Christians, complain about the state of the world. If that describes you, may I gently and lovingly ask you a question: what are *you* doing to make the world better? Are you fulfilling the calling of God for your life? Are you faithful in bearing the load that God has placed upon you, even if you feel it to be overwhelming or unfair? The world will only change when people change, and that must start with the people of God. Instead of waiting for others to get their acts together, perhaps we ought to take Paul’s advice and “test [our] own work”. Only then can we be prepared and equipped to face the trials that life throws at us.

Today’s reading connects to yesterday’s in one other way: sharing. Paul admonishes us to share with those who have taught us. The reason to bear our own load is that we might produce fruit that we can share with others. Indeed, the only way to help bear another’s burden is to be strong enough to bear our own. Even though we all will need help from time to time, we ought to strive to be the kind of person upon which others can rely. That strength can only be found by being built upon the Rock of Christ and becoming deeply rooted in the soil of the Holy Spirit. There are no shortcuts to salvation – it always and only runs through the Cross. So, this Holy Week, let us each bear our own cross to Calvary that we may be reborn to a new and fruitful life in the Holy Spirit that will benefit not only ourselves, but the whole world.

Maundy Thursday – You Are What You Eat

Read Galatians 6:7-10

Inside your body right now are literally trillions of microorganisms from thousands of species of bacteria, fungi, and viruses, mostly living in your intestines. This is known as your “microbiome”, and we each have a unique combination of these little creatures. Mostly, these microbes prove to be helpful, stimulating our immune system, breaking down toxins in our food, and helping us digest certain vitamins and amino acids. Other bacteria and viruses can be harmful causing everything from mild discomfort to serious disease. The best way to cultivate a healthy microbiome is to eat healthy food, which creates a welcoming environment for symbiotic microbes (the good guys) while discouraging pathogens (the bad guys). Our microbiome is so important that it has been called another organ of the body – what lives inside us is literally a part of us. In other words, that old cliché proves true: you are what you eat.

Paul uses a common analogy found in scripture of sowing and reaping (cf. Hos. 8:7) to demonstrate how the smallest actions have giant consequences. In an agricultural society, this metaphor would have been obvious and visceral. Since you likely aren’t a farmer, perhaps the analogy in the previous paragraph is more helpful. Whatever you feed is what you get more of. If you feed your sin and flesh, you will find those desires growing stronger, but if you feed the Spirit inside you, you will find desire for God to be easier and more natural. We must remember, however, that such changes don’t happen overnight. Just as with a new diet or exercise regimen, it takes time and perseverance to see the results that we want. Our spiritual “microbiome” is full of pathogens that we must purge out and replace with the presence of the Spirit and His gifts and fruits. Paul offers a very practical place to get started: “as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (v. 10). If we want to cultivate righteousness inside ourselves, we need to think of others first. In what way can you help or serve someone else, especially a fellow believer? What small act of kindness can you perform to make someone’s day a little better? Each action of love or peace or faithfulness sows a seed of righteousness not only in ourselves but in everyone we meet. We may not see immediate benefits from our good deeds, but we will receive a reward if we do not give up.

Tonight, we will remember the Last Supper. Adam and Eve ate the fruit that they were commanded not to and thus cultivated the pathogen of sin in all people. Jesus provides His Body and Blood as the antidote: “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.... For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn. 6:54-56). We are what we eat. In taking of the Holy Eucharist, we make Christ a part of ourselves. But it is not enough just to participate in the Sacrament. Our Lord gave two other commands that night: “wash one another’s feet” (Jn. 13:14), and “just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (Jn. 13:34). Judas broke bread with the Lord, but he was still sowing to the flesh by his actions. In order to be able to reap the good things the Lord has for us, we must serve and love one another. And, unlike the disciples who fell away and denied the Lord on this very night, we must persevere in doing good if we hope to see the Kingdom. Partake of the Body and Blood of our Lord and find every opportunity to do good. Let us feed the Spirit inside of us that He may remake us in the image of Christ.

Good Friday – Boasting in the Cross

Read Galatians 6:11-14

“Christianity is the only major religion to have as its central event the humiliation of its God” (Bruce Shelley). By any worldly standard, the cross of Christ is a scandal and a disgrace. There hangs the man we call God, tortured and humiliated, bleeding and suffocating. He was “one from whom men hide their faces; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Is. 53:3). You could be forgiven for reacting the same way atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche did: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. Yet his shadow still looms” (*The Gay Science*). We all stand uncomfortably in the shadow of the cross, staring up at our dying Lord. We would much rather believe in a God who demands *our* sacrifice, be it circumcision or religious rituals or good works. Or maybe we’d rather an imperious God who smites our enemies and gives us victory over every adversity and power to do anything we want. Or, conversely, we’d like a distant and impassive God who doesn’t really care what we do as long as we’re nice to each other and don’t hurt anyone’s feelings. Anything but this; anything but the man on the cross. For those who seek power, He demonstrates humility and weakness. For those who seek compromise at all costs, He demands the ultimate sacrifice. He felt the depth of our suffering and showed us the monstrosity of our sin by suffering and dying to save us from sin, death, and hell. We all would like to boast about something: our wealth, our wisdom, our beauty, our holiness, our tolerance, etc., etc. But at the foot of the Cross, there is no boasting. We are all equally wretched and all equally loved; we are all equally marred by sin and all equally beautiful creations in the image of God. The naked and bleeding man nailed to a Cross is our only hope, and He is our God. Come let us adore Him.

Paul takes up the pen himself to finish this epistle. The message is so important that he will not leave it to a scribe to write. The apostle knew the suffering that life could bring and he also knew the temptation to brag, not least of which in how much he had suffered! But there is only one thing he could find to boast in: the cross of Christ. Think about how strange that is. Why should we boast that the Son of God had to die such an excruciating and humiliating death? Shouldn’t we boast in His creation of the entire universe, or, even better, in His resurrection? Perhaps. But many “gods” have claimed to create the universe and many “gods” claim immortality or resurrection. It is only our God, our Jesus, who became one of us for the express purpose of dying to save us. Jesus came to earth not to demonstrate His power or to prove that Yahweh was the only true God. No, He came “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). In Peter’s words, “He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). He spent His earthly ministry serving us mere mortals, and when it came time to die, He willingly gave up His life in exchange for our own. Through the cross, Christ has given us His kingdom in exchange for the world, His freedom in exchange for our slavery. Jesus loves us. Jesus loves *you*. We are right to be bewildered at the Cross. Such love and sacrifice from the God of the universe is beyond anything we can begin to comprehend. It is a mystery before which we must fall on our face in worship.

The world will never accept Christ on the cross, because Christ calls the world to die. The world will tell you that you are running after a fairy tale, that you are foolish, just a victim of wishful thinking. The world will say that, because you do not adhere to its commitment to money and status and sex and all the rest, you are intolerant and narrow-minded and backward. The world views our humility as weakness, our chastity as prudery, our generosity as gullibility, our faith as ignorance, our hope as misguided, our love as hate. Maybe they're right, sometimes, about all of it. Sometimes we Christians can be backward, intolerant, gullible, prudish, ignorant, misguided, and foolish. But thanks be to God, the salvation of the world does not depend upon me. I may be a fool, but I pray that I am a fool for Christ's sake (1 Cor. 4:10). I may be moving backward against the world, but that is because the first word out of my Lord's mouth was "Repent" (Mk. 1:15). The only answer I have to all the accusations of the world, the flesh, and the devil (and to all the accusations of my own heart) is to point to the cross. I don't really know much about anything, but I know that my God loves me. Look at His hands, His feet, His side.

The two greatest objections to Christianity are that there is so much evil in the world (thus, there can't be a "good" God), and that a real God wouldn't be so hard to find, so invisible. Circumcision was an attempt to make God visible, but it just ended up creating an exclusive club that did more to demonstrate the evils of vanity and bigotry than God's *agape* love. The only answer we have to the problem of evil and the problem of God's hiddenness is to point to the cross. Where is God? He's right there, on the cross, killing sin and suffering and death once and for all. Christ crucified does not prove anything – as the Nietzsche quote above demonstrates, it could just as easily *disprove* God. But if we wrap our arms around Him, if we wrap our *lives* around Him, accepting the mystery of what He did for us, it just might save us. The whole book of Galatians was written to remind us that freedom is found not in what we do or what we think, but in whom we believe. As our Lord said to a woman he delivered from lifelong pain: "your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering" (Mk. 5:34). That is the word for you today. Stop trying to earn it or understand it. We have been crucified with Christ and He now lives in us. Believe it; live it; and go forth in peace and freedom.

Holy Saturday – New Creations Bearing the Marks of Christ

Read Galatians 6:15-18

Near the end of a forty-day fast during a mountain retreat in the summer of 1244, St. Francis of Assisi was praying and meditating on the cross of Christ. As he prayed, he received a vision of a six-winged seraph, a creature of unearthly beauty, nailed to a cross. This vision filled him with a strange combination of joy, wonder, and sorrow. St. Bonaventure, his biographer, recounts the story: “Pondering what this vision might mean, he finally understood that by God’s providence he would be made like to the crucified Christ not by a bodily martyrdom but by conformity in mind and heart. Then as the vision disappeared, it left not only a greater ardor of love in the inner man but no less marvelously marked him outwardly with the stigmata of the Crucified.” St. Francis would be careful to hide these visible marks of Christ for the rest of his life, preferring instead to let his actions demonstrate his love for our Lord. He was a new creation in Christ not because of the stigmata, but because his heart and mind were conformed to the image of Jesus.

It seems strange at first that Paul would end this epistle by declaring that he bore the “marks of Jesus”. This probably just means that he had scarring from experiencing persecution and not that he had the stigmata like St. Francis. It doesn’t really matter either way, because, when all is said and done, there is only one thing that counts: a new creation. That has been the destination of this epistle and our forty-day journey. We have been crucified with Christ, killing off the old man within and rejecting the works of the flesh, and we have been resurrected to a new life in Him. Christ now lives in us through the power and mediation of the Holy Spirit. Peace, mercy, and grace will be ours as we walk in this new rule of faith. But this is more than just an individual walk. Notice how Paul prays a blessing on the “Israel of God”. That is the Church, the New Jerusalem, our Mother who is free. Jesus hasn’t just saved us individually from sin and death. He has plucked us out of the kingdom of darkness and inaugurated a new Kingdom of light and hope and peace. We have been chosen, not by virtue of ethnicity or circumcision, but because we have faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is no accident that Paul begins (1:3) and ends (6:18) this epistle with the message of grace. For it is by grace that we are saved and by grace that we live. It’s about so much more than heaven. It’s about salvation from misery and death, from failure and despair, from the mundane and ordinary, even from ourselves. Grace resurrected us from the fall and freed us not just to survive, but to *live*. All that matters is a new creation.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He proved his identity by showing His scars. What a poignant and beautiful gesture. Even the God of all the universe couldn’t escape life unscathed. We all bear scars, from what others have done to us and from what we have done to ourselves. But, brothers and sisters, we also bear the marks of Jesus. He has sealed us through baptism and marked us as His own forever. We do not belong to this world anymore; sin and doubt and despair and death no longer have mastery. We serve a new King in a new Kingdom. By His resurrection, Christ has set us free. He is making us new, just as he makes all things new (Rev. 21:5). Let us go forth into the world as new creations bearing the marks of Christ and proclaiming the good news of freedom and grace to all whom we meet. Let us say together with joyful hearts: Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!