

# *The Way Forward*

## *Galatians 4:1-7*

### *First Sunday after Christmas*

Timothy Slemmons  
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

*Mr. Slemmons is the first seminary student to receive the David H.C. Read Preaching/Scholar Award given by the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York.*

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child  
A long, long way from home.

There is something in that old song, something of a spirit of longing, the same spirit of longing which I hear in the words of Paul from this text: "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of God's Son into your hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (4:6).

What about that longing? Where does it come from? For me, I feel that longing in the midst of all the Christmas clutter, once or twice a year. It usually comes from the television, when a little boy who normally has a thumb shoved in his mouth, and a security blanket over his shoulder, walks onto center stage of the Peanuts' Christmas special, and the lights dim, and the spotlight focusses on this cartoon kid, who then recites the sacred narrative, and he concludes, "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

And I feel it in the Christmas Eve candlelight service when the whole congregation as one raises their candles for the singing of the third verse of "Silent Night." I have never been able to sing that verse. It is, every year, washed away by a wave of deep longing, choked back by a lump, the size of the world, in my throat.

What is that longing? I know you must have those moments as well. Where does it come from? What does it mean? I don't know. But I believe it has something to do with being a child of God. But what does it mean to be a child of God?

Jürgen Moltmann would say that to understand that you are accepted as a child of God is to stand in between the forgiveness of your sins on the one hand, and your new life in the righteousness of God, on the other. He writes: "The forgiveness of sins is a backward-looking act. The forward-looking act of justification is the new creation of life, the awakening of love, and the rebirth to a living hope."<sup>1</sup>

Every Christmas we look back, through nearly 2000 years of tradition, to that fateful night, when God's child was born to save the world from sin. We think about what that child means to us and to the world when we look back to those times when we have connected with God's grace, when we have been touched by God's forgiveness and mercy. That birth narrative is so powerful. That nativity scene is so holy. It's magical, it's mystical! Even the coldest, Scroogiest, Grinchiest hearts are warmed in the act of peering back into the mist and imagining the sacred birth.

And yet, I would suggest that the gaze of the church at Christmas is too often fixed back over our shoulder. We have focussed on the forgiveness of our sins with appropriate joy and thanksgiving, but we have forgotten that there is much more to the Christmas message than that. Like Lot's wife, looking back over her shoulder at the destruction of sinful Sodom, our institution has become a pillar of salt, eroded by years of tears of regret.

Paul's letter to the Galatians indicates those churches were in a situation much like the one in which we find ourselves today. His readers rightly valued the rich, Jewish, torah tradition, but they had become fixated on the way things used to be, they were stuck there, stuck in legalism, bound under the law, enslaved to the rudiments of the world. Paul is saying, "You have been freed from the law! Why do you want to go back under its authority like slaves, when you could be living like children who stand to inherit? Why go under the supervision of a guardian when you have been given your life to live freely? Why go back to practicing your alphabet on a Big Chief notebook with a big old #2 pencil, when you have the capability to write poetry, and drama, and verse, and song, and pathos with a fluid, creative, and artistic hand? Why go back?" Paul is here pointing in the forward-looking direction, and the church today needs to hear and live by this news: "There is a family inheritance to claim!" Being entrusted with this dependent and fragile babe, it's like someone we scarcely knew wrote us into her will and placed upon us the responsibility not of law, but of family.

"Here! Look after my son. Love him as I love him. Listen to him. Learn from him. I give him to you to enrich your lives. I give him to you because you too are my trusted and beloved children. I want you to share in his rich inheritance. Do you understand? I have not sent this Christ child, this son of mine, to forgive sins only. No! He is given to you now to point you in a new direction, into the future, into new life. Follow him!"

It's a very strange predicament in which we find ourselves, being children of God. You can't quite realize it until you recognize that strewn about the path behind you lie all your forgiven sins, and where you now stand is on the threshold of a new old relationship. William Muehl says, "the character of real forgiveness (is) ... that a whole relationship (is) reestablished .... The function of redemptive love, both God's and (humanity's), is not to make (us) feel better about the past. It is to give (us) back (our) future."<sup>2</sup>

The Spirit of Christ in our hearts, that yearning for our good and adoptive parent, that's what points the way forward. It's a sort of built-in homing device, or a compass, planted in our hearts, calling us home. Like that strange instinct that leads lost dogs and cats to find their way home through miles and miles of unknown terrain. They just know. They just follow.

Sometimes we are all like those lost animals. Sometimes we feel like motherless children, and we are a long, long way from home. But we know the way. We know the way.

So often we stand in the silent wreckage of the Christmas blitz and think "What a relief! Christmas is over." Well, the fact is that the journey of Christmas is not over. It is only just beginning. Listen. Listen to a short poem by Peter Meinke.

You stand in isolation like the first bloom  
of some enchanted plant. Around you lies a field

of sullen energy where strange creatures  
only seen by you move in slow motion  
with majestic beauty, their sharp hooves  
spraying broken glass like water, the field  
covered with the stained glass of old  
cathedrals. And you are trapped in this magic  
terrible land you more than half desire. I think  
I hear you crying, I think you think  
no one can reach you. Don't cry, look;  
I'm taking off my shoes.  
I'm coming in.<sup>3</sup>

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth God's Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order that those who were under the law might be set free, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of God's Son into your hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God (4:4-7).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 149

<sup>2</sup> William Muchl, *All The Damned Angels* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1972), 36

<sup>3</sup> Peter Meinke, *Liquid Paper* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 47