

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹

The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.⁴

“Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you. Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. Your eyes have seen what the LORD did because of Baal-peor [**bale-PEA-awr**]: for all the men that followed Baal-peor [**bale-PEA-awr**], the LORD thy God hath destroyed them from among you. But ye that did cleave unto the LORD your God are alive every one of you this day. Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day? Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons’ sons; Specially the day that thou stoodest before the LORD thy God in Horeb, when the LORD said unto me, Gather me the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children. And ye came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire unto the midst of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness. And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice. And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone.

“And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go over to possess it.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Galatians.⁵

“... But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[F]ar be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Introduction:

Today’s Second Lesson was presumably chosen to be read on Independence Day because of its line that “*Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.*”⁷ Freedom is a most appropriate topic for this particular day. However, other than as a noble aspiration, this entire passage we have just read makes little sense without the five verses that immediately precede today’s *pericope*:

“Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One is

from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.”⁸

Theme:

In a moment, I trust you will see why these omitted verses are essential to understanding the point St. Paul was making when, in the two sentences I gave as my text today, he sets out the fundamental Christian principle that we call ***baptismal regeneration***. These two sentences allude, in very elliptical form, to three facts regarding the new relationship between God and humanity that Our Lord’s coming made possible. First, this new relationship has its basis in the Cross and in the atoning sacrifice Christ made there on our behalves. This is what Paul means when he says, “[F]ar be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ....”

Second, this new relationship involves, in some important ways, our removal from the state of existence into which we were born and in which we would remain but for this new opportunity Christ has afforded us. This is the point Paul is making when he writes, “[T]he world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Third, this new relationship is not to be lived out through our obedience to ritual or cultic laws, or even to particular rules of morality or behavior; it is instead a new state of being, so radically different from our natural state, the one we assumed at our births, that it amounts to an entirely new re-ordering of creation. Thus Paul describes it by saying “[N]either circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”

Homily:

A. First, this new relationship has its basis in the Cross and in the atoning sacrifice Christ made there on our behalves.

“[F]ar be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ....” Christianity arises from a long and progressive history of God’s salvific dealings with humankind. However, if we had to reduce the foundations of the Christian faith to a half-dozen essential points, these would have to be (1) Christ’s Incarnation; (2) His atoning death on the Cross; (3) His Resurrection from the dead; (4) His

Ascension into heaven; (5) His reigning in heaven at the side of God the Father; and (6) His ultimate return to judge the living and the dead.

In today's Second Lesson, in order to lead his readers to his conclusion, Paul begins with one of these six essentials, namely with Our Lord's atoning death on the Cross. All salvation, and therefore all re-institution of the relationship between God and mankind that was disrupted by the human propensity to sin, must begin at the foot of the Cross. It was only God's sacrifice on our behalf that made our restoration possible.

B. Second, this new relationship involves, in some important ways, our removal from the state of existence into which we were born and in which we would remain but for this new opportunity Christ has afforded us.

In the state of nature—that is, as the beings who, ever since the Fall, we have been born to be—we are radically separated from God. Adam and Eve dwelt in Eden in perfect fellowship and amity with God but once they disobeyed Him, and as a direct result of that sin, became conscious of their disobedience, their consciences led them to turn away from Him.

For this is what the story of the Fall actually tells us: it was Adam and Eve's sense of guilt that made them turn away from God and once they had thus severed their fellowship with Him, He merely recognized that *fait accompli*. He did so by removing them from Eden, where they could no longer dwell because a precondition for living there was being in a spiritual and mental state that permitted full and open fellowship with God. And, instead, He gave them the whole world in which to live while they waited for Him to work out the manner of their restoration.

So when one of us is baptized, and so joins himself or herself to Christ and is reborn in fellowship with Him, that new Christian is, in the most important ways, removed from this fallen world and transferred to the Kingdom of Heaven, which is the new Eden.

C. Third, this new relationship is not to be lived out through our obedience to ritual or cultic laws, or even to particular rules of morality or behavior; it is instead a new state of being, so radically different from our natural state, the one we assumed at our births, that it amounts to an entirely new re-ordering of creation.

The reason the ancient Jews could not attain this new state of creation is that their covenant with God, although a real and valid one, was based on outward behavior and observances. It was entirely a matter of doing the correct things and abstaining from the incorrect ones, of saying the right words, prayers, and rites, and performing the proper acts and rituals.

This outward conformity was sufficient to teach those Jews to accept God's law, and therefore to become conscious of the reality of sin, but that was only a portion of the whole curriculum. It was as though the ancient covenant was the Jews' primary school, but when they went no farther than that, it was as though, like Amish farmers, they had dropped out of school in the eighth grade. It remained for the new covenant to make it possible for us to complete our educations.

Just as elementary school pupils learn by rote the operations of simple arithmetic, but wait for the higher grades to apply those operations to actual problems, so the concepts of God's commandments, obedience, and sin were the basics of humanity's moral syllabus. But the higher lessons require us to apply those concepts of commandments, obedience, and sin not just to our outward actions but also to our inward thoughts, feelings, emotions, and motives.

And this redirection of our moral focus from an outward one to an inward one is accompanied by a re-orientation of our relationship to all of God's creation. No longer do we merely live in this world as a means of physical subsistence, using God's bounty to sustain our bodies between the cradle and the grave, but now we experience this world as the moral laboratory in which the non-bodied portions of our beings, our minds and spirits that together make up our souls, may likewise grow to maturity. And the object of that maturation is to become capable of receiving and accepting God's grace that will enable us to enter into eternal fellowship with Him.

As St. Paul tells the Galatians, now that Christ has come to bring reconciliation between God and humankind, it is not the marks of their cultural and religious Jewishness that will permit them to enjoy the fellowship that springs from that reconciliation.

Thus what ultimately counts is not the fold of skin cut—or not cut--away from the males, and the peculiar garments worn by both males and females, and the dis-

inctive foods eaten by them, and the holidays, festivals, and temple observances that they have celebrated and underwritten. All that matters in the end is the new creation which is symbolized by rebirth, and that rebirth is baptism.

Let me repeat that. That rebirth *is* baptism. It is not symbolized by baptism, it is not recalled by baptism, it is not memorialized by baptism. It is made, done, and effectuated by baptism.

Conclusion:

Some of you will be familiar with a certain *genre* of science fiction, which posits a number of parallel universes, each of which has developed similarly to, but not identically with, the alternative ones adjacent to it. In a manner similar to time-travel stories, in the plots of these “parallel universe” stories one of these worlds of alternative probability briefly touches another, causing the protagonists to transfer from the world of their births to a new one where they will live, using the skills and experiences of their old existence to survive in the new one.

The Christian life is similar to that. Baptism is one of those incarnational events by which God causes the next world to break through into this one, capture us and transfer us to the new venue in which, thereafter, we will have and live out our existences.

So as St. Paul told the Galatians, “[N]either circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” This “new creation” is the freedom to which Paul referred when he said, “Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.” What Christ brought us are the most essential freedoms of all: freedom from the bonds of this physical existence, freedom from the chains of sin, and freedom from the fear of death.

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September 16, 2012

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for Special Occasions*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xliii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ Deuteronomy 4:1-14 (KJV).

⁵ Galatians 4:26—5:1 (KJV).

⁶ Galatians 6:14-15 (RSV).

⁷ Galatians 4:16 (KJV).

⁸ Galatians 4:21-25 (RSV).

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