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January 1st: Galatians 1 & Luke 2:8-21

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Paul's gospel and apostleship. The visit of the shepherds.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Galatians chapter 1. Paul, an apostle, not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead, and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him, who called you in the grace of Christ, and are turning to a different gospel. Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel

contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God, or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel, for I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it, and 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. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, or to the Gentiles, but I went away into Arabia and returned again to Damascus. Then, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him fifteen days.

But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you before God I do not lie. Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.

They were only hearing it said, he who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy, and they glorify God because of me. Paul introduces his epistle to the Galatians in a manner that immediately alerts the reader to one of its most prominent themes. He declares himself to be an apostle, but is concerned to distinguish the source of that apostleship.

Paul's apostleship is grounded not in some human commission, nor does it arise from some human authority, but it comes from Christ and God the Father who raised Christ from the dead. Paul at the very outset is defending his apostleship from misunderstanding, something that will be crucial for the argument of his letter. Paul writes with the brothers with him, presumably fellow missionaries who are alongside him.

He addresses the churches of Galatia. Galatians is unusual in being addressed to the churches of a region, not just a specific city. The question of what region is a live one.

There are conflicting theories over where the Galatians were situated. The Roman province of Galatia was large, it covered a significant region of Central Asia Minor, what we would now call Turkey. North and South Galatian hypotheses have both been advanced.

So the ethnic Galatian people lived largely in the north of the province, while the Roman province included areas to the south, including cities like Iconium, Lystra and Derby, which Paul and Barnabas visited on Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 14 1-23. The

hypotheses will weigh in, but without deciding, questions of dating the letter, as Paul visited the region of Galatia in Acts 16:6 and 18:23 and may have planted the churches then. However, if the southern Galatian churches are in mind, then it might give weight to those theses that would argue for a much earlier date for the book, perhaps even before the Jerusalem Council.

Having declared his identity and his credentials and identified his addressees, Paul blesses the Galatians as an emissary of the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace is a characteristic greeting of Pauline epistles, and here it comes from the source of the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. As in his opening declaration of his apostolic vocation, with its reference to the resurrection of Christ, there is again a core theological claim in Paul's reference to the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ here.

Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of the Father. As in the statement concerning the resurrection, the unity of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in the work of redemption is focused upon. The work of Jesus is the work of God.

God raised him from the dead, and Jesus gave himself for our sins according to the will of God. And the work of God is the work of Jesus, who was raised from the dead and gave himself for our sins. This decisive, gracious act of God occurs in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Also, as the action of the Father, this act will be, as we will later see, one that leads to adoption as sons. This act was for the purpose of delivering the Galatians, alongside whom Paul joins himself and his fellow missionaries in the pronoun us, from the present evil age. If we focus merely upon the statement that Christ gave himself for our sins, we might think of this merely in terms of an individual salvation system.

However, Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age. There is something more apocalyptic going on here. Christ giving himself for our sins delivers us from a doomed world order and age.

This all occurs in accordance with the will of the Father, who achieves his purpose in and through history. Paul uncharacteristically ends his opening salutation on a doxological note, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Having begun in this sort of manner, Paul immediately launches into rebuking the Galatians for their failure to hold firm to the Gospel. Unlike in other epistles, where Paul speaks of his pleasure in his knowledge of his recipients' growth in their faith and their witness and his confidence in their continued development, there is no such encouragement here. The Galatian churches are turning away from the one true Gospel, to a message that isn't a Gospel at all.

There is only one message of good news, and they are compromising it. The language of Gospel seems to be a way of summing up the message of Christ. In the Gospels, the word Gospel tends to be used in terms of the prophecy of Isaiah.

Isaiah chapter 40 verses 9-11. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion. Herald of good news, lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem.

Herald of good news, lift it up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and His arm rules for Him.

Behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. He will tend His flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in His arms.

He will carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. And Isaiah chapter 52 verses 7-10. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of Him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns.

The voice of your watchmen, they lift up their voice. Together they sing for joy, for eye to eye they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem.

The Lord has bared His holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. The gospel here is a message about an event in history, about the Lord returning to Zion to deliver it and to be present in the midst of His people for blessing once more. It's a statement of the establishment of the reign of God.

Gospel then is not a timeless message of salvation, it's a message of the work of God in the fullness of time in Jesus Christ. The gospel can be summed up in statements about the reign of God, which is why the gospel can be termed the gospel of the kingdom. Its more particular realisation in the ministry of Christ can be expressed in the statement, Jesus is Lord.

That's the shape that the kingdom of God, the reign of God takes. However the gospel can also be fleshed out considerably. In the gospels, not only does the term gospel refer to the message of God's coming reign, or to the particular form that this takes in Christ's lordship, but it can also refer to the larger story of the coming of the kingdom in the ministry of Christ.

This can be witnessed in Matthew 26 verse 13, where Jesus says of the woman who anoints Him with the costly ointment, Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her. There, gospel seems to refer to the broader story that is told of Christ and his work in bringing the kingdom of God. I don't see any reason to suppose that Paul uses the

terminology of gospel in a fundamentally different manner, although there are clearly different emphases.

He is not talking about general and timeless truths about God, but about a historical event of epochal importance, in terms of which all social reality must be renegotiated. However, whereas Matthew 26 uses the term gospel to refer to the expanded narrative of the coming of the reign of Christ, Paul can use the term gospel to refer to the reality of the reign of God in Christ as it is expounded in its character and form and implications. This is founded on the narrative of course, but the accent lies at a somewhat different point.

His concern is to show that the message of the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ – we should always remember that Christ means Messiah – necessarily entails realities denied by the false teachers whose influence he is seeking to counteract. They have exchanged the glorious message of the reign established by Christ for a petty message of Jewish exclusivism. Paul, as a master of rhetorical argument, steps back for a moment from the argument to make the point that his intent is not to gain human approval, but God's.

His concern is God's approval over man-pleasing. This not only has the effect of giving greater weight to his words, it also transitions to his next point. His concern for the approval of God over all men is appropriate to the character of the gospel that he is presenting, which isn't a human gospel.

He didn't receive it from another man, nor was he taught it in some institution of learning. Rather, his message of the reign of Christ came from Christ himself in an act of revelation, presumably a reference to his conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul gets into his biography at this point.

He had been set apart by God from birth for the purpose of preaching to the Gentiles. Here the reader should recall Jeremiah 1.4-5. Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Paul also is a prophet to the nations, a messenger to the Gentiles.

Further echoes could be found in Isaiah 49.1-6. Paul's own life exemplifies the radical grace of Christ. He was a violent persecutor of the church, he was a man of zeal, a man who might remind us of the tradition of zeal represented by characters such as the Levites, Phinehas or Elijah. However, God had already set him apart for a determined purpose, for which he called him in due time by his grace.

Paul is called by God's grace, much as the Gentile Christians were, in verse 6. Paul himself, prior to his call, would seem to have been utterly disqualified by his persecution of the church. Yet the grace of Christ is manifested in his choice of Paul. All of the things that formerly represented Paul's standing among his people have been eclipsed by a

radical and remarkable act of grace, upon which the entire rest of his life must be founded.

We might think of characters like Peter and Paul mostly as witnesses to the story, rather than prominent actors in the story. However, I believe we are justified in thinking of Paul's call and mission as something that has redemptive historical significance in itself. Paul is set apart by God by birth for a decisive mission at the turn of the ages.

Like John the Baptist had a unique mission in preparing the way for Christ, Peter and Paul especially have unique missions in laying the foundations of the age of the church. They are uniquely set apart for these purposes. Indeed, Paul's mission is not just to declare a message of good news to the Gentiles, but to realise the meaning of the message he is bringing in calling Gentiles into submission to the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here Paul is concerned to make clear that the gospel he preaches came directly from God, not from a human source. And to make this clear, he gives a brief sketch of his life after God's revelation of his son to him on the road to Damascus. He makes the point that the message of the gospel did not come from Jerusalem and its authorities, rather it was a direct prophetic revelation from God in Christ himself.

After his conversion, Paul went away into Arabia for a time. This is a mysterious detail of his biography and it is not entirely clear where the Arabia in question is. As Paul declares that Mount Sinai is in Arabia in chapter 4 verse 25, N.T. Wright has suggested that Paul might be retreading the path of Elijah from 1 Kings chapter 9, where Elijah went to Mount Sinai to meet with God before being sent back to Damascus.

Later, after three years, Paul has a brief trip to Jerusalem, during which time he meets with Peter, whom he calls Cephas, as he does most times when he refers to the apostle Peter. This, it seems to me, refers to Acts chapter 9 verses 26-28. And when he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. It seems that Paul visited Peter at this time, presumably that's the reference to Barnabas bringing him to meet the apostles. He didn't meet any of the other apostles though, except for James, the brother of Jesus, presuming we are using the word apostle in a more expansive sense.

He then went to the region of Syria and Cilicia, described in the verses that immediately follow in Acts chapter 9 verses 29-30, and he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists, but they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Paul came from Tarsus and was based in

the church at Antioch for a number of years early on.

At this point the churches in Judea still only knew him by reputation, but they were heartened by an approving of the reports that they heard, glorifying God on his account. Paul was described as preaching the faith, which suggests that the term faith can carry a more objective sense as the message to which faith properly responds. A question to consider, what are some of the most important implications of the fact that Paul's gospel is not from man, but directly from God? Why does Paul so stress this point? Luke chapter 2 verses 8-21 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

And this will be a sign for you, you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning the child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

While fishermen are prominent in the New Testament, in which the gospel goes out beyond the land to reach the Gentile peoples, shepherds dominate in the Old. The patriarchs were shepherds, and distinguished from the Egyptians by that fact. Moses was a shepherd, as was David.

In a familiar Old Testament image, both God and the leaders of Israel were regarded as shepherds of the people, with the nation as their flock. In Psalm 23, the psalmist famously declares that the Lord is his shepherd. Moses was a shepherd, and he delivered Israel from Pharaoh as a shepherd, using a shepherd's rod to strike the enemy of his people, and leading Israel through the wilderness like a flock.

We see this in Isaiah chapter 63, verses 11 to 13. Moses' first encounter with the Lord

was while keeping watch over his father-in-law's flock. He saw an angelic appearance with glory phenomena, something that probably occurred at night, considering the appearance of the fire, in chapter 3, verse 2 of Exodus.

He was given the further sign that he would later worship the Lord on Mount Horeb with the people after bringing them out of Egypt. The shepherds in Luke chapter 2 are watching their flocks when they see a glorious angelic appearance, accompanied with the glory of the Lord, and are also given a further sign. Here we should note the parallel between Exodus chapter 3, verse 12 and Luke chapter 2, verse 12.

Exodus chapter 3, verse 12, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you, when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain. Luke chapter 2, verse 12, and this will be a sign for you, you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. The contrast within the parallel is striking, however.

The sign received by Luke's shepherds is that of a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. The sign given to Moses, the pyrotechnics of Israel's encounter with and worship of the Lord at Sinai, is eclipsed by the sign of an infant in a feeding trough. In both cases, shepherds are led to an encounter with the Lord.

In the first, the Lord is shrouded in the dread darkness of the thundering and fiery glory cloud. In the second, he has come as a swaddled child in a manger. The significance of the sign of the swaddled child in a Bethlehem manger being given to shepherds probably arises chiefly from Old Testament prophecy.

The Old Testament foretold the coming of a Messianic shepherd from the line and town of David, David of course being the great king who was called from the flock to shepherd God's people Israel. In Ezekiel chapter 34, verse 23, And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them, he shall feed them and be their shepherd. In Micah chapter 5, verses 2-5, But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrath, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has given birth. Then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel, and he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be their peace.

An infant in a sheep's manger in Bethlehem, the town of David's own birth, is a sign that she who is in labour has brought forth. We might hear in the background here the story of Rachel, of Micah's prophecy. Bethlehem has finally been reached and the Messiah is going to be born.

Rachel died on the path towards Bethlehem, giving birth to Benjamin in the context of a prophecy that kings would arise from Jacob. Benjamin, the one who was born when Rachel had not quite reached Bethlehem, would be the ancestor of the first king, Saul. But ultimately it is David, the king from Bethlehem, who ends up having the enduring dynasty.

The shepherds, who we might see as symbolising the leaders of Israel, encounter the promised great shepherd. However there is a surprise. The one who was to feed the people as his flock is himself in the feeding trough.

The Messiah will feed his flock, but not in the way that people might have expected. He himself will be their food. Moses had a significant and foreshadowing encounter with shepherds at Well-Emidian, prior to his encounter with the Lord at the burning bush, in chapter 2 of Exodus.

He delivered the seven daughters of Jethro from the abusive shepherds and watered their flocks. The one drawn from the water became the one who gave water in the wilderness. Moses' later ministry also involved resisting false shepherds and leading and watering the people as the Lord's flock in the wilderness.

There is a striking foreshadowing element to Luke's account of the shepherds too. Later in Luke's gospel he describes Joseph of Arimathea requesting the body of Pilate, in Luke 23, verse 53, The comparison with the description of the birth of Jesus is noteworthy. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn, in Luke 2, verse 7. The child wrapped in linen cloths and laid in the manger is later wrapped in linen garments and laid in the tomb.

The comparisons don't end there. Shortly after the wrapping of the body of Jesus and laying it in the manger or the tomb there is the dazzling appearance of angels, in Luke 2, verses 9-14 and in chapter 24, verse 4. Once again a sign is given. But the sign is no longer the wrapped body of Jesus in a stone container but the unwrapped linen garments and the empty tomb, in chapter 24, verse 12.

The women within Luke's resurrection account both receive the angelic message and serve as the angels or the messengers to the apostolic shepherds. In both cases the result is marvelling, in verse 18 of this chapter and in chapter 24, verse 12. The conclusion of Luke's gospel also recalls the story of the shepherds.

There the apostolic shepherds are charged as witnesses of the resurrection, who will make more widely known the fulfilled sign concerning the Son. The gospel ends with words that echo the end of the account of the shepherds visit. In Luke chapter 24, verses 52-53, And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God.

Here, in verse 20, And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Luke's account of the shepherds is the story of a wondrous and remarkable sign, reminiscent of the sign of the burning bush, anticipatory of the sign of the empty tomb, and revelatory of the promised arrival of the Davidic shepherd. The shepherd Moses' burning bush anticipated the greater sign of the burning mountain of Sinai, as the Lord's presence later descended upon it, appearing to the people that Moses shepherded out of Egypt.

The wrapped child in the manger seen by the Bethlehem shepherds anticipated the greater sign of the unwrapped linen garments in the empty tomb to the apostolic shepherds. The account of the shepherds as witnesses, their bursting forth in praise, the theme of rejoicing and people pondering things in their hearts, also connects this account with that which precedes it in the account of John the Baptist's birth and Zacharias' song of praise. Once again, the purpose of such an account is to help the reader to interpret the meaning of the events.

The angels are bringing good news of the birth of the Davidic Messiah to shepherds. Some have observed that the language of Lord, good news and saviour are all terms that were prominently used by the Emperor, with whose action this chapter was opened. If Matthew frames Jesus as a challenger to Herod as the king of the Jews, perhaps Luke might be framing Jesus in part as one whose kingdom will eclipse that of Rome.

A question to consider. Luke draws a number of parallels between Jesus' birth and his death and resurrection. How many of them can you identify?