

# **“Born to Redeem and Adopt”**

## First Sunday after Christmas

### Galatians 4:4-7

“God sent forth his son . . . to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons” Galatians 4:4-5

Misdirection. It is when your attention is led in a certain direction while the action takes place in a completely different direction. When one looks at the front cover of the classic novel, *Les Miserables*, by Victor Hugo, they would experience misdirection. They might feel misled.

If one were to look at the front cover of the novel, the picture on the poster for the musical adaptation, or the poster of the 2012 movie adaptation, they would see the picture of a young girl. Those familiar with the story know that the young girl is the character named Cosette. Since it is young Cosette who is featured on the cover of the marketing of *Les Miserables* one would expect that she is the main character or protagonist of the plot. And one would be misdirected and feel misled.

Young Cosette does play a role in the story yet she is not the main character or protagonist. She is not introduced to the reader until well into the story line. Yet, it is her character that becomes associated with *Les Miserables*. It is her face that the uninitiated first see.

As a person becomes familiar with the story, that person soon learns why Cosette is the face of *Les Miserables*. It is because the story is ultimately a story about redemption and adoption. She is not the main character. She is not the protagonist. She is not the one who carries out the actions of redemption and adoption. But she is the grateful recipient of another character’s work to redeem and adopt her.

At the end of the story the protagonist who worked to redeem and adopt her has died. Many of the other main characters have died. Young Cosette, now as a young adult, remains. And as the story concludes the reader or viewer is left thinking about the future. We are left imagining what her life will now be like. We are left in hope as we imagine how the life of this redeemed and adopted girl will unfold.

So this morning I would like to use this story of young Cosette to proclaim the story that Paul presents in just four short verses in his letter to the Galatians. I would like to do this in such a way so that at the end of our time together on this first Sunday of Christmas, we are left in hope as we reflect on the possibilities of a life of redemption and adoption.

In *Les Miserables* the character Cosette is the daughter of a poor, peasant woman named Fantine. Because Fantine does not have the means to care for her daughter, she leaves Cosette in the care of an

innkeeper and his wife. The reader soon learns that the innkeeper and his wife are not pleasant people. They abuse Cosette and use her as forced labor for their inn. She is held captive.

At one point in the novel, Jean Valjean, the main character of the story and protagonist, encounters young Cosette fetching water in the woods alone. He walks with her to the inn and there observes how the innkeeper and his wife abuse her and treat her as a slave.

In a later trip to the inn Valjean informs the innkeeper and his wife that he wants to take Cosette with him. Valjean pays the couple a substantial amount of money and he and Cosette leave the inn. The two of them flee to Paris where he cares for her as a father and guardian. Valjean pays the price to buy her freedom and then effectively adopts her and provides her with his love and inheritance, transforming her miserable life into one of hope. A story of redemption and adoption that leaves us in hope.

As one first engages the story of *Les Miserables* that person may feel confused, misled, or misdirected. That person may fail to see how the cover photo character, the face of the story, relates to the plot. Yet, as the story unfolds, one discovers how appropriate it is that young Cosette's face is featured. She is the recipient of grace and mercy. She is the redeemed and the adopted. Her story gives hope for the future.

On this first Sunday of Christmas, just three days after the celebration of the birth of our Lord, as you heard the four verses from Paul's letter to the Galatians, perhaps you feel like there is some misdirection going on. Perhaps you feel a little confused or misled.

On Christmas Eve here at Atonement we celebrated the birth of the Christ child through a service of lessons and carols. We received the body and blood of this Christ child in the Lord's Supper. We remembered the birth of the one who is the light of the world by lighting candles, dimming the lights of the sanctuary, and singing *Silent Night*. The point is that Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and the twelve days of Christmas leading up to the Day of Epiphany on January 6, are supposed to be all about Jesus. They are supposed to be about his birth. His first Advent or coming into the world—his incarnation. Yet, as we read the Epistle lesson from Paul's letter to the Galatians that is appointed for this first Sunday after Christmas, we wouldn't necessarily get that impression.

In Paul's four short verses he begins with the birth of Jesus and then jumps right to us. There is not a lot of time spent creating sentimental moments reflecting on the birth of Christ while singing silent night and holding candles with the lights dimmed. No, Paul mentions the birth of Christ in a breath, spills a small amount of ink, and then he packs up the nativity set and moves onto another character. That character goes by the name of "you," "we," "me," and "us."

In those four verses from Paul we hear "you" and "we" language multiple times. Paul says, "That we might receive . . ." (vs. 5), "And because *you* are sons . . ." (vs. 6), "So *you* are no longer a slave . . ." (vs. 7). We might feel like Paul is misleading, misdirecting, or confusing us just three short days after Christmas day. We might feel like Paul is making Christmas more about us than Christ.

Making Christmas more about us than about Christ. Isn't that the struggle we all endure? We might point our fingers at others who seem to take Christ out of Christmas and speak more about "the spirit of giving" and the "feeling of generosity." We might point to department stores that refuse to say "Merry Christmas" and public schools that teach kids how to sing *Jingle Bell Rock* and *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town* for the Christmas plays and set aside classic Christmas carols like *O Little Town of Bethlehem* and *Away in a Manger*. But to point the finger only at others would be a case of misdirection. And that would be misleading.

The truth is that at this time of year even we can give the appearance that Christmas is more about us than about Christ. As we have talked about before, we do this when we make Christmas more about a day than a person. When we make it about preparing for a perfect day where relatives get along, the meal is cooked perfectly, and the decorations look beautiful. We might give the Christ child his time at Church on Christmas Eve but then we leave the child in the sanctuary. We forget that he was born so that he might come out of the manger.

The confusing and misleading thing about this kind of misdirection—making Christmas more about us than about Christ—is that it doesn't stop with Christmas. Our Christian life can often become a self-absorbed life that is more about me than about living in Christ and Christ working through me. Our lives then can misdirect others as they hear us say we are Christians but they see and hear no Christ. A life of misdirection that can be misleading and confusing.

But that is not the life to which God has called us. As a baptized, believing child of God he has joined his story to your story. That means that his story of redemption and adoption should be the central story that others see and hear in such a way that inspires hope.

On the surface it appears that in his four short verses Paul jumps from Christ to you and me in a way that leaves Christ out of the picture. Yet, in reality, Paul jumps from Christ to you and me because he knows *why* Christ was born in the first place. He was born to redeem. He was born to adopt.

Paul says "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4:4-5). Paul is not misdirecting, misleading, or trying to confuse. Rather, he is proclaiming the Gospel.

Like Victor Hugo proclaims a story of redemption and adoption through Jean Valjean paying the price to buy young Cosette's freedom from slavery and captivity and then promptly adopting her to be his very own, so also Paul proclaims the one who was born for two primary purposes. The purpose of redeeming your life from slavery to sin and death and all that eternally separates you from your God and one another. And the purpose of joining you to himself through the Spirit of Christ in the waters of Holy Baptism so that you can be effectively adopted into the household of God. Now you are joined to Christ. Now every day is not about you and it is not even about just Christ. It is about Christ in you and you being kept in Christ and living in Christ. It is about you living as a redeemed and adopted child by the

power of the Spirit of God. It is about trusting in and calling upon your Father daily. For you are a new child in Christ. You are redeemed. You are adopted. Christ was born for that purpose.

Your story as a redeemed and adopted child of God is also a story of hope. A story that can inspire hope in others. I told you that at the end of *Les Misérables* the reader or viewer is left thinking about the future. We are left imagining what young Cosette's life will now be like as a redeemed and adopted child who has received such grace and mercy. We are left in hope as we imagine how the life of this redeemed and adopted girl will unfold.

This is also where Paul leaves us at the end of the four short verses in Galatians. He says, "So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God" (Gal 4:4-7). As redeemed and adopted sons and daughters in Christ you and I are heirs. That is the language of inheritance. That is language that points us to the future. It points us to our future in the promise we have that Christ, our brother, the firstborn Son will return and usher in an eternal life in the household of God in the new heavens and the new earth. So we have hope as the redeemed and adopted children of God. And our story gives others in this weary world a reason to hope in Christ as well. Amen.