

INDEPENDENCE IN CHRIST**Colossians 2:16-23**

Intro: At my previous church in PA we had A JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM. We reenacted the Christmas story from the first 20 verses of Luke 2. Probably 50 to 60 of us gathered at the church building, designated as Nazareth, the hometown of Joseph and Mary to hear the reading of the decree telling all citizens of the Roman Empire they were required to go to their hometown to be registered in the census. From there we all travelled, with Joseph (whose real name was David) leading a spirited pony which was as stand-in for a donkey, on which Mary (David's wife Paula, who was not sure at all about riding anything let alone a prancing pony), up the hill behind the church building to the farm which lay about a ¼ mile up a long lane. As we travelled we witnessed shepherds in the fields watching their sheep, and even an occasional angel. We read the story as we walked. It was a brisk day with 5 or 6 inches of snow adding to the spirit of the experience even though there almost certainly was no snow during that first journey to Bethlehem. As we arrived at the farm (designated as Bethlehem) we stopped at a table to write our names down for the census and then we went to the farmhouse which was designated as the inn. Upon knocking on the door the innkeeper and his wife (Warren and Beverly Heisey – who were perfectly plump to play the parts designated) opened the door and when Joseph asked if there were lodgings to be had, Warren broke out in his beautiful and strong baritone the Christmas song by Evie Tornquist Karlson

No room, only a manger of hay,

No room, he is a stranger today,

No room, here in His world turned away,

No room, no room.

Which was really cool because we hadn't asked Warren to do it. He sang the entire song and then he sent us to the barn where there was room for Mary and Joseph and their soon to arrive Baby Jesus. There they stayed with the four sheep we had borrowed from the neighbor out the road.

It was wonderful! We celebrated the coming of Jesus who eventually died to set us free. He took our guilt and through him we can gain independence in Christ.

But those sheep there in Heisey's barn, aka the Bethlehem Stable, had their own plans for independence and they made a break for it out across the snowy fields to the east of the farm. We quickly corralled three but one eluded all attempts at capture. (briefly tell the story)

The sheep's attempt at freedom was eventually squelched in the same way any attempt at being a godly person on our own power and by our own design. Without Jesus, we too, are lost sheep.

As we continue our study of Colossians today we witness Paul admonishing the Christ Followers in Colossae to never give up the freedom they have in Jesus for the slavery of human constructs of what constitutes faith and faithfulness. Listen as I read the text:

(Read Colossians 2:16-23)

Notice how Paul strongly encourages the Colossians to experience . . .

Freedom from Human expectations and requirements

- Paul was dealing with heretics who were pushing a developing philosophy known as Gnosticism. One of the things that characterized the Gnostics was, instead of looking to God, they decided what was taboo and then tried to impose it on the young Christ Followers of the Colossian church who were hopefully gullible enough to swallow it.
- The Gnostics made religion a thing of regulations about eating and drinking and other things. Truth be told, there are still those who are more concerned with rules about food than about the truly Good News that makes up the Gospel. Its good news that *greater is he that is within us than he who is in the world.*
- The false teachers Paul speaking against had sold out to the enemy and they only wanted to stay on the right side of him. They worried about stuff like eating and drinking and festivals – both Jewish and pagan. You see, the tendency, especially because of Jewish influence, was to major in the minors of festivals and new moons and Sabbaths and holy times. But while they were so concerned about it, Paul says it's just superficial nonsense. In verse 17 he calls them wispy shadows because the reality is the real substance is Jesus Christ and he's there for the taking. And he further points out that asceticism, which includes fasting

and other kinds of radical self-denial to show how faithful you are, doesn't save you. Jesus is the one who saves you.

- The Gnostics were also wrapped up in the worship of angels. Instead of worshipping the Creator, they were worshipping created things – in fact they were kind of worshipping themselves and inviting that worship from others. They were saying “Look how humble I am! You have to be super humble to be worthy.” F. F. Bruce points out, “*some people love to make a parade of exceptional piety. They pretend to have found a way to a higher plane of spiritual experience, as though they have been initiated into the sacred mysteries which give them an infinite advantage over the uninitiated. Others are overly prone to be taken in by such people, for this kind of claim impresses those who always fall for the idea of an inner ring. The apostle says don't be misled by such people.*”
- Here's the point, don't fall for the allure of the in-crowd. Don't let anyone disqualify you. This is a really weird concept, but I think both you and I have seen it happen. It's the problem of superior humility. Yes, it's an oxymoron, but it has happened a lot, especially in the church where we can be especially proud of how humble we are. So, make sure that we don't get caught up in the worship of the wrong things. Worship is reserved for God and God alone, nothing else is worthy of worship. And through this worship comes freedom from human concoctions and the . . .

Freedom to grow into the Body of Christ

- The danger of this false teaching, in Paul's mind, and it's infinitely true, is that it brings in the danger of ripping the Body of Christ apart at its joints. Christ is the head of the Church, but the Gnostics never got past their idea that created matter is evil. They also thought they were so smart and so deep that they were smarter than God. Paul describes this as *puffed up without reason*. (v. 18). Barclay writes, “*No one will deny the visions of the mystics, but there is always danger when a man begins to think that he has attained a height of holiness which enables him to see what common men - as he calls them - cannot see; and the danger is that men will so often see not what God sends them, but what they want to see.*” This reminds me of Joseph Smith to be rating his disciples at not seeing the golden plates that bore The Book of Mormon. (Describe)
- Be alert for what God is saying, and there is no better place than the Word where we can see how that Body of Christ is freedom itself. In verse 19 Paul gives vivid picture of the body with Christ as the head, *from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God*. This is freedom. This is creation. This is victory over what Paul calls the elemental spirits of the world which are distractions at the very least and sure destruction at worst, if the Christ Follower falls into its trap.
- Don't fall for it. As Christ Followers we have the . . .

Conclusion: Freedom to BE

- We need to guard our freedom. Don't relinquish it! The danger is that in our effort to keep our human freedom we enslave ourselves to a human designed system and forget about the freedom we have in Christ.
- Think about all the ways we get wrapped up in the things of this world. We can strive for the almighty dollar, or for status, or recognition. Something we Americans can get so wrapped up in is how our freedoms are threatened, so much so that we become slaves to preserving our liberty. In verse 23 Paul describes the slavery the Colossians were in danger of with, *These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh*. Colossians 2:23. They are seemingly attractive but they are an indulgence of the flesh. They are worldly and thereby empty. Why give your freedom for that? Instead, the only true freedom is in Jesus Christ.
- If we want to be free, we need to know that the only true independence is in Christ. Amen.