

It is December 28! Also known as the 4th Day of Christmas, also known as one of the days we all go blllllaaaaaargh (unless we're *still* running to Christmas parties and final family obligations, in which case, yours is coming on... New Year's Eve Eve, maybe?).

Yes, this is the beginning of the end of another Christmas season (or maybe the middle of the end). We've opened most of the presents and probably even returned a lot of the returns. Now we're figuring out New Years' plans and deciding what to resolve and silently counting down the days until school starts back up (parents in joy, kids in dread).

It's easy in these days to let Christmas pass and just be glad it's over. Sort of like gorging yourself on a big holiday feast - it was delicious, but now it's time to collapse and pass out. With all Christmas' hustle and bustle, with the relentless press of the season, we are especially prone in these days to forget *why* Christmas is a holiday in the first place.

That reason is, of course, Jesus coming into the world. A divine movement we call the Incarnation - a fancy Latin word that literally means "enfleshment". This is when God the Spirit became meat and matter. The creator stepped into the creation. The infinite became finite.

This is a singular event in human history. And this is why the Church has traditionally set aside 12 days to celebrate. In the Church, the Incarnation, God becoming human, is such an important moment, we dedicate 12 days to feasting, celebrating, reveling, partying.

We believe Jesus' birth is good news for the whole world. It means peace, not just in Heaven, where God is in control, but down here on Earth too. Jesus' birth means good news for *everyone*.

Now that might sound like a big claim. Yes, that's what the angels said to the Shepherds, but we want to object: How can you say Jesus' birth is good news for *everyone*? Don't you really mean Jesus' birth is good news for *Christians*? [HOPEscreen5.1] That's how we look at the world - we're all in our little religion corrals, and so Jesus comes and sort of establishes the Christian fences, says Hey everyone! If you're in here, I've got something good for you!

But everyone else, out there, in their religious corrals, Christmas doesn't mean much for them. Or it means *bad news*, because *they're* out and *we're* in and too bad for everyone else.

So how can the Incarnation be good news for the whole world? Obviously it can't, unless we've misunderstood what happened on that first Christmas.

Christmas isn't good news if it's only good news for Christians. Which must mean that Christmas didn't just add another religion to the world. It didn't just build a new corral for a few of us sheeple to gather here instead of there.

[HOPEscreen5.2] No, when God became human, the rules changed completely. Jesus removed the fences altogether and began drawing all peoples, everywhere to him. On that first Christmas, God changed what religion looks like forever and always.

[Scripture Slide] If you have a bible (or are using an app), turn with me to Galatians 4. If you grabbed one of our bibles off the table in the back, you can find Galatians 4 on page XXX. And if you don't own a Bible, please keep that one. Happy 4th Day of Christmas :)

Now, as you're turning, a bit of background on this letter. It was written by a man named Paul, who was Jewish. Paul, in fact, was one of the best-educated, most intelligent Jews of his day. He grew up in Tarsus, a Greek city in modern-day Turkey. So Paul was a Jew who grew up among Greeks. He had the best of both worlds.

Growing up in Tarsus also meant Paul was exposed to Greek religion. Ancient religions - including both Greek paganism and Paul's Judaism - were localized. [HOPEscreen5.3] Each city or nation had a particular patron god or goddess, and that god was worshiped in a temple. For that people, the temple was the center of the universe. Like the hub of a wheel, the temple connected Heaven and Earth. Your god was the god of your land. But he was also the god of your people. Your ethnic group.

So when you traveled to a foreign land, you would usually worship the gods there *and* bring a sort of portable shrine to your god.

And the shrine was good enough, but if you really wanted to meet with your god, you had to go to the Temple. It wasn't safe to encounter your gods out in the wild - gods are unpredictable and dangerous. So the Temple regulated divine encounters with rituals and rules. They made it safe for you to interact with the gods. (You didn't want to make your gods mad - that's why you had to take a shrine with you when you traveled.)

In this respect, the Judaism of Paul's day wasn't wholly different from these other religions. Judaism was centered in Judea - Jerusalem to be specific. And in Jerusalem stood the Temple. It was actually the second temple - the first had been destroyed by Solomon 600 years before Paul wrote to the Galatians. Thanks to the Exile, Judaism was less dependent on the Temple than many other religions. They lived all over the known world (not just in Judea), and unlike the non-Jews, they *didn't* worship local gods. But even those Jews like Paul, who lived outside Palestine, longed to make a pilgrimage to the Temple, to encounter God there for themselves.

But then something happened to Paul: he encountered Jesus. And not just while he was teaching, but after his resurrection, when he had ascended to the throne of Heaven. Meeting Jesus like that blew up Paul's understanding of not just his own religion, but of all religions everywhere.

[HOPEscreen5.4] For Paul, there are no longer a bunch of little religions with their own gods, jockeying for position. No longer were people traveling to their gods, keeping up rituals and rules to keep their gods happy.

No, Paul now understood that God had come to humans. Not in a Temple, but in the flesh. In Jesus, there's no gap, no bridge, no space between Heaven and Earth. And better, Jesus came to announce that God's not angry. We don't have to worry - God is actually setting the world right, and inviting humanity *into* that restoration effort. Thanks to what God has done in Jesus, we now have hope for *life* instead of death.

And it's not just for the Jews. That's the craziest part. Jesus is for *everyone*. His life is for *everyone*. In every culture, in every language, in every religion. Paul saw that in Jesus, God changed the rules.

We know that because of what Paul did: he *didn't* go to Jerusalem. Rather, he went all over the Roman Empire, telling everyone he could about this new thing God was doing. How, no matter who they were,

where they were born, what color their skin or what gods they had grown up serving, the one true God, the creator of the universe, the father of all humanity, had stepped into human history, revealing the endgame, which was salvation for all peoples.

And this salvation comes not by rules and rituals. Not by earning and trying and one-upping. But by receiving. According to Paul, to worship this Jewish god, you didn't have to become Jewish. You didn't have to get circumcised and keep the dietary code and all the other rituals that marked the Jewish people as God's people. Because according to Paul, there are no more "God's people" and "not God's people". We don't have to do anything to be accepted by this God. This God had done all the work, and all that's left to us is to respond. To say Yes to what God is doing and join in.

Amazing! Good news! Right?

That's what the churches in the Roman province of Galatia thought. When Paul came to them, they embraced this new thing whole-heartedly. New churches sprouted up all over the province, all connected by this fantastic, too-good-to-be-true message brought by this crazy little Jewish guy.

But then Paul left. And some other Christians came behind him. These guys were also Jewish. But they didn't like how casually Paul was casting the Jewish Way aside. After all, we can imagine them saying, Do you know who came *up* with circumcision and the dietary code and all those other rituals that marked the Jewish people as God's people? I'll give you a hint: it wasn't the Jews. It was God!

This same God who came in Jesus. So how can Paul say to get rid of it all? Jesus was circumcised! He ate kosher! So where does Paul get off pitching it all?!

So this group of missionaries apparently followed Paul around, "fixing" his religion. Where Paul kicked fences down, these groups came back in to prop them back up. They'd say, Look: you pagans can get in on this Jesus thing, but you have to become Jewish. You have to keep the rules and rituals that mark Jews as Jews.

And the Galatians bought it. After Paul left and these Jewish-Christian missionaries came in, they began keeping Jewish law. They were getting circumcised, keeping dietary code and more.

And when Paul finds out, he's *mad*. Like *super* mad. Galatians is a scathing, brutal letter from Paul, berating and shaming the Galatians for turning their backs on the good news Paul brought them. And so of course an important part of the letter is what role the Jewish Way, what they called the *Torah*, and what Christians often call the Law, plays in the Christian life, and how God becoming human plays into that.

We're in chapter 4, and at this point, Paul is explaining the relationship between what God did before that first Christmas, and how everything has changed since then. Let's take a look, beginning in verse 4:

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir. -- Galatians 4:4-7

[Leave Scripture up] This is clearly the Christmas story - God sent his son, born of a woman. Born under the Law (which is the Torah, God's Way). And here's where Paul gets crazy: he claims that Jesus made us sons (and daughters). That sonship language is old-school Jewish - Jewish people referred to themselves as "sons of Abraham". Abraham was the first to be circumcised, the first Jew. The father of the Jewish people.

But now Paul is leapfrogging Abraham and claiming that in Jesus, God has made *all people* his children, not just Abraham's descendants.

A few verses earlier, Paul used the example of inheritance. Look back at verses 1-3:

What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law. -- Galatians 4:1-4

Paul claims that the Law, the Torah, the rules and regulations of religion, they were like guardians. They helped us to connect to God, to find God, to reach for God. Until that first Christmas. Until the "time had fully come". Because *now* we are not waiting for God, reaching for God, striving for God.

Now, God has come to *us*. God has embraced *us*. God. Is. With. Us.

And now we don't live like slaves, subject to rules and regulations. Now we have a mature faith. We are living in spiritual adulthood. To return to rules and regulations is to live like a child with a nanny, rather than a free, mature adult.

And we get that, don't we? A religion that's not founded on rules and regulations and rituals to earn our way to God, not having to work for God's favor, a religion that's not about being good enough, that is so enticing!

[HOPEscreen5.5] But we're so much like those Galatian Christians. We turn religion into rules (especially in our denomination). What does a person of God look like? Fear not, we've got a whole big list of behaviors, of dos and don'ts and definitely nots. We make it *hard* for people to find a relationship with God. You want in? Make sure you say this prayer and read this many chapters and go to church this many times per month and here's the dress code and we'll need to prune your music collection and you can eat bacon now, but the booze has to go on and on and on.

We're no better than those Jewish Christians. We have different rules, but they're still rules. Why do we do that? Why do we like the rules so much?

I have a couple of suspicions. Some of us *like* the rules. Because rules put us in charge. It's the scoreboard mentality Tommy talked about at the beginning of Advent. We like to measure and compare because that way we can *win*. We get to be the gatekeepers, determining who's in and who's not (because when I decide who gets in, I am *always* in).

This new thing God did in Jesus is threatening, because it's not up to me. It's up to God. God's in charge. God decides who gets in and God doesn't ask for our help in making those decisions. I don't get to do. I only get to respond.

Some of us don't like that. We want to be able to earn our sonship.

But not all of us like rules. In fact, quite a few of us are like those Galatians. The first time we heard about this God who offers us a radical welcome, a God who doesn't demand, who only invites, a God who did all the work we couldn't do *for us*, we were excited. Thrilled.

We said, Yes. Sign me up!

But then... somewhere along the way, some religious people told us we had to follow some rules. That if we *really* expected God to love us, then we had to look a certain way. Act a certain way. Avoid certain types of people.

And here's the surprising part: we didn't resist. We didn't question. We shrugged our shoulders and said, I knew it was too good to be true. I knew there couldn't really be a God who just plain loved us. No matter what. I knew there couldn't really be a God who saw past my past, who saw through all the lies I tell everyone (and myself) and loved me anyway. I knew there couldn't really be a God who welcomes me exactly as I am and gives me the power of the universe, who makes the dead live.

I knew grace was too good to be true.

So we fell back into law. Into the rules and rituals and the striving and the earning and the *hoping* at the end of the day we did enough, we reached far enough to get to God.

[HOPEscreen5.5 again] At the end of the day, fences just make more sense to us. We're cattle that need to be controlled. Kept in the right places.

To the Galatians and to *us*, Paul says, No! That's not the God I told you about! That's not the God I met, Jesus, who abandoned Heaven to come to Earth to *become* Earth, the Master of the Universe become mere matter. No! The time was right, and God stepped into human history, born to a woman, born under the rules and rituals of religion to *blow it all up*. Paul says, Now that Jesus has come, we don't need the path anymore! Now that the lover is with us, we don't need the love letters anymore!

[HOPEscreen5.6] Let me put it in terms of an old Texan legend: God's Way is like a rancher who had no fences on his land. Year after year, he continually let his cattle into his pastures and they wandered his lands freely. In 50 years, the rancher didn't lose a single cow. Near the end of his life, he was asked the secret - how he could graze his cattle freely, with no fences, when every other rancher had to spend hours every week building and maintaining fences. He told them there was no secret, only that the water on his land was the sweetest, clearest water in the region. He didn't need fences because no animal who ever drank from it ever wanted to drink from any other water. They would return again and again to that spring.

**If God is with you, you don't need fences.**

[Hold up Water Bottles] I wonder if the real problem is that we're missing the God who is right in front of us. We've become consumed with a stagnant pool of dead water when right behind us is a fountain, flowing with living water. We're trying to sell this disgusting, worthless water. From a distance, it looks pretty good. But you get up close and it's not any better than the water you can get anywhere else.

[HOPEscreen5.5] If our religion is just one more set of rules for people to follow, it's not going to be much different from what people can get somewhere else. So maybe they come to our little area for a while. They're interested in what we're offering. But they get close, and they realize it's just... okay. Not much better than anything else. So they wander off again.

We build fences - rules, rituals, regulations, to try to keep them in. And before long, our fences are keeping as many people *out* as they are keeping people *in*. And before too long, Christians become glorified TSA agents, putting on a big show, making it *look* like we're doing something, but it's all smoke and mirrors. Our rules and rituals don't actually bring life. They just add more things to our to-do lists.

And that's not God. Jesus describes himself as living water, thirst-quenching, eternal and beautiful. Once you get a taste of what he's offering, you'll never want anything else.

Once people get a glimpse of Jesus, they never want to go anywhere else.

Once people experience the power that shaped the universe, the power that raised Jesus from the dead, the Spirit that brings life from death, you don't need rules and rituals to keep them in line. They're headed toward Jesus.

People dying of thirst don't need fences. They need a drink.

And in the Christmas story, God brings the fountain to us. God brings the water of life to everyone who is thirsty. If God is with you, you don't need fences.

You might wonder, What's so bad about fences? I mean sure, they're not the *best*, but are they really that bad? Yes, they are. When we take our eyes off the source, when we quit drinking from the well of life, we get distracted. We get caught up in the rules and rituals for their own sake. They become barriers, keeping other people from meeting God. We take pride in the fences we've built, and when people don't fall in line, we get angry, hurt and judgmental.

What then, for we who have been captivated by rule-making, fence-building? What for those of us who offer this dirty, uninspiring water hoping no one will notice?

The answer is for us to become good news. And to do that, we must reconnect with our first love, with that first, soul-quenching drink of the water of life. For all of us who are thirsty, whether we've never drunk of this water, or whether it's been a long, long time, the answer is to come to the well and accept what is freely offered.

In practical terms, let me make a suggestion: If Jesus doesn't seem like very good news to you, read the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The four stories of Jesus' life on earth the Church has preserved across the ages. Start in Matthew (it begins with a nice Christmas story). Read it. Then move to Mark, to Luke and to John. Then, when you're done, read them again. And again. And again.

Read a book a day. A chapter a day. A paragraph a day. It doesn't matter. Just read the Gospels over and over and over. And be open to how God is speaking to you. Be open to the person of Jesus, the God become flesh, the fountain of life who quenches eternal thirst.

Let the time you spend with Jesus reshape and reframe and renew your news until it's not dirty, average, uninspiring water you have to build a fence around to keep people drinking from it. Let Jesus filter your words, your life, your very self until you too are a fountain of living water, until the news your life announces is refreshing and life-giving.

### **Water Bottle Examine**

You each received a bottle of water when you came in. It was on purpose. We're going to spend a few minutes in prayerful reflection, and this bottle of water is a way to focus your prayer. Here's the first question I want you to consider:

**How clean is the water you're drinking?** Is the life you're living good news?

**When in the last week have you been focused on Jesus, rather than rules and rituals?**

**When in the last week have you been focused on fences?** (Building them, staying inside them, afraid to go in)?

**When in the next week will you be tempted to reduce a life with God to rules to follow?**

**How can you drink from the well of life this week?**