

The First Sunday after Christmas • December 31, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Galatians 4:(1-3,)4-7

“Reset”

What gifts did you receive this Christmas? Did people give you a bunch of stuff that you'd rather just return for gift cards, or did you wind up with thoughtful gifts that you'd enjoy and use? You might have been blessed with gift-givers who know you pretty well, or who at least pay attention when you show them your wish list. Some folks prefer to receive gift cards; while those are practical, they do take some of the fun out of gift-giving. It's great being able to see the excitement on someone's face when you've given them just the right gift, maybe one they'd been wanting for a long time. So what do the gifts that you received this Christmas say about you?

Our home was graced with an abundance of gift that were both fun and useful. One of them came from my brother. He sent us one of the hardest-to-find items to hit stores in the past few months: a Super Nintendo Entertainment System Classic Edition. The Super NES Classic is a video game microconsole, a miniaturized reincarnation of the 16-bit Super NES that dominated the worldwide gaming market for much of the 1990's. But instead of using game cartridges as its ancestor did, the Super NES Classic comes with 21 games built in. One of the things I like best about this new version of the device, though, is its Reset button.

Back in the 90's, you'd hit the Reset button and the game would (generally) reboot, switching off and back on again, setting the game back to its initial state. You could have a clean start if you wanted it. The Reset button on the Super NES Classic, however, is even better. Punching Reset on the new console takes a snapshot of your current game in the console's memory and sends you out to a system-wide menu from which you can adjust settings, save your current game, or jump to another game entirely. It even lets you rewind your current game, allowing you to jump back 30 seconds or so to fix any mistake you might have made. For instance: if you made the poor choice of jumping *into* the fireball that someone was throwing at you instead of *away from it*, you wouldn't have to replay the entire level again. (Not saying that happened to me, but I have discovered that my platforming skills are somewhat rusty.) Who wouldn't want a Reset button like that?

As we're heading out from Christmas into the new year, how'd you like a reset button for life? Let's say that 2017 didn't go so well for you. What if you could hit the reset button and have a clean start? In effect, that's how a lot of people look at a new year: it's an opportunity to get right what you didn't last time around. Problem is, that's not how time works. The past has happened; it's not easily forgotten. The bad or unhealthy habits that you've built up don't simply go away. So even if you have a clean start in the new year, what's to say that this new beginning will be any different than what's come before? We need a Reset button that does more than just rebooting the system, leaving us back where we were before.

Merry Christmas! I've got good news for you: you have a new – and different – beginning in Christ.

In his letter to Christians in the Roman province of Galatia, Paul explores the concept of freedom that comes through Christ. In the verses immediately preceding our reading today, Paul writes: *“I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, ²but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. ³In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.”* (Gal. 4:1-3) He used a concept that his hearers understood. A minor lived under the instruction and supervision of a custodian appointed for them. Even though a boy was still the heir of the master of the house, he was unable to enjoy the rights of sonship or the inheritance that was his until he came of age. The child had to follow direction of those set over him and do as he was told, much the same as a household slave.

That, Paul writes, is what life is like for people apart from Jesus. Apart from Christ, humanity has no way to connect with God, to fix our relationship with Him. People still try, though. They live under obligation to what we call the law, the design that God has written into the hearts of all people. But even though we might know what the good is, we human beings still fall short time and again. We know the obligation of the law, what we should be doing, but we don't do it. And under the supervision of the law, we stand condemned for our failures and shortcomings. We're enslaved by the burden of something that, because of our sin, we can't ever get right. No wonder that people around the world embrace the coming of the new year as a time for new beginnings: we need a Reset button!

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” (Gal. 4:4-7)

In this season of Christmas, we celebrate the amazing truth that God stepped down into our world, not simply to reset our relationship with Him, but to redeem us and give a new relationship that is even better than what had come before. The Father sent the Son in the working of the Spirit to come and fulfill the law for us. Even as an infant, he took our place in doing all righteousness. Circumcised on the eighth day in accordance with God’s covenant with His people, Jesus went to the temple for his mother’s purification offering. (Luke 2:22-40) He would grow and become strong, filled with wisdom. He would take our place in John’s baptism of repentance. He would suffer and die for us, the innocent sacrifice who carried the sin of all under God’s judgment. Jesus did everything that needed to be done to fix our relationship with God.

What do the gifts you received this Christmas say about you?

Jesus doesn’t merely reset you back to having a clean start with God. He gives you a new standing: his own. God’s people in Christ have received his Spirit and the rights of sonship, together. **Because of Jesus, you have redeemed life with God as His child, not as a slave, but as an heir of the Kingdom.** You get to pray the Lord’s Prayer, saying “Our Father in heaven,” as a statement of your new reality! You have been set free from the obligation and supervision and condemnation of the law. The new life that you have through Christ is free from the burden of trying – and failing – to make right with God. It’s so much better than what’s come before!

You are no longer a slave, but an heir. You get to enter in to the new year – and every day therein! – with a clean start: not just *reset*, but *redeemed*. **Redeemed by Jesus, you have been given your freedom and the power to use it responsibly.** Hearing God’s Word, you can now go and listen, conversing with people each day, people who may very well be longing for a Reset button. As an heir of the King, pray for – and with! – the people around you, confidently bringing your petitions before your Father in heaven. Do good, sharing the restored relationship with God that comes through Christ, working to repair the damage that sin has done in the lives of your neighbors and in your world.

What gifts did you receive this Christmas? Thanks be to God that He knows each of us well enough to send us what we most need: a new and different beginning in His Son.

A blessed new year to you in Christ!

Amen.