

**Celebrating the Arrival
Galatians 4:4-7**

December 26, 2010

Rev. John Burns

University Baptist Church ~ College Park, MD 20740

Website: www.weareubc.org

I've started planning what I want people to say once I'm gone. I think I'd like to have the service here and I'd like a few people from my past to share a few memories of me. I'd like Russell Grubs from Tecumseh, Oklahoma to share an expression of appreciation to me for helping him become the lightweight boxing champion of the world. He hasn't become that yet, but possibly he will before I pass. Years ago, Russell popped me in the nose while I was holding him in my lap on a church van. Without thinking, obviously, I popped him back and his nose started bleeding. He should thank me for giving him his first pugilistic lesson.

And I'd like the Upchurch twins from Chicago, Illinois to say a few kind words about how I turned their lives around back in 1981. That was when the boys were disrupting a children's club to such an extent I grabbed one in my left hand the other in my right, kicked the front doors of the church open and headed down the stairs to take them home. Unfortunately, I slipped on some ice at the top of the stairs, stumbled and launched the boys into the air. They sailed out over the stairs and landed in a snow bank. Never again did they cause any trouble in church. I imagine they are monks in a monastery today and have me to thank.

I'd also like Ralph Friedgen to show up, before he is run out of town, and tell how I prayed his team to their first football victory over Florida State. If he wants to give me credit for their first win over the University of Miami, I'd take that too.

Some of you ought to speak. Joan and Ed should relate that I helped them out of a ditch they both walked into after taking me to a Willie Nelson concert about ten years ago. Karen followed them into the ditch as well, but I want her to thank me for something else.

Pat Collins should offer gratitude to me for never once mentioning the Pink sports coat he wore at a recent wedding. Kenny ought to prepare a tribute on how I taught him to appreciate country music. Pastor Mark should give gratitude that I gave him so many opportunities to improve his crisis management skills by leaving him with impossible situations every time I went on a vacation or sabbatical.

My family ought to have time to praise me as well. Josh should say it was me that gave him the support he needed to build the first elevator on the moon. Micah should express gratitude for my encouragement that eventually led him to win an Oscar for best director. Aaron ought to tip his hat to me for providing the resources that allowed him to win the Nobel Peace Prize in journalism. Jacob should reflect lovingly on the contributions I made to his life that enabled him to do the first successful brain transplant in history. Joanna should talk of her appreciation to me for guiding her to win the Pulitzer prize for literature and Cyrus could give me kudos for helping him use his amazing math skills to build the first flying car. I want Karen simply to come to the podium and say that I was the best kisser in the history of the planet.

Hearing all this you might ask, "John are you sick?" Well, when you get Lyme disease and the swine flu in the same year, you begin to wonder if your time might be up. At this point, however, I think I'm going to make it. Why then, you might wonder, am I planning my own funeral right now? Good question. It's not the right time for that, is it?

Some of those things might not come to pass. In the next several years, I might yet achieve even more noteworthy goals and want them highlighted. And actually, it's not my job to write my own eulogies. None of this is appropriate right now. The time is not ripe for me to put together my own memorial service.

The author of Ecclesiastes says there is a season for everything and a time for every matter under heaven. One of the challenges we face in this new year is to discern what time it is in our lives. If we try to force certain developments before their time has come, we will spend the whole year in frustration. Should this year provide the perfect time for other events to take place, however, and we miss the golden opportunity, we will be deeply disappointed.

Our relationship with God should help us in navigating these tricky waters. For God always knows what time it is. The apostle Paul wrote that Jesus was sent into our world when the fullness of time had come. It was, in other words, the right time for Jesus to arrive.

What made the reigns of Caesar Augustus and Herod the Great precisely the right time for Christ to come to earth? Only God knows. Some have theorized that the Roman Empire provided both the access of transportation and communication necessary for the Gospel to spread to the utter most part of the earth. Before then, the story of Jesus might never have filtered out of the small, isolated nation of Judea.

Paul seems to suspect that the timing had more to do with the readiness of humanity, however. He writes that prior to the time of Moses, human beings thought they were governed by the elemental spirits of the universe. Not knowing how to please what they thought were the spirits of the moon, sun and stars, people offered sacrifices and performed elaborate rituals in the hope that they would be able to avoid the scorn of the capricious spirits and find an inroad into the cosmic power's blessing. Rather than operate out of an ethically mature value base, they simply did whatever they thought would cause the elemental spirits to grant them rewards and avoided what they thought might make the unknown phantoms punish them. Paul implies that this superstitious world view had to run its course long enough for humanity to realize that it was bogus and in turn look to God for a new revelation.

That, Paul says, came through the law that was given to Moses. For the first time, people had a clear statement from the living God that taught right and wrong behavior. Still motivated by a carrot and stick morality, the people tried to keep the law in order to gain God's blessing and avoid the Lord's punishment.

This religious methodology went along for hundreds of years until the people were exasperated with their own failures. Although they agreed the code taught by God was the best way to live, they simply couldn't match up to the full standards of the Lord. Paul says the law given to Moses acted like a pedagogos for humanity. A pedagogos was a male slave who was given charge over the young children of the household. In wealthy homes, the parents did not nag the children to keep hygienic habits or do their homework or use good manners. A slave was assigned those duties. When the children misbehaved, the pedagogos would instruct them on the errors of their ways and apply discipline.

For hundreds of years, the law of Moses was like our pedagogos. It told us what we were doing wrong and reminded us of how we were suppose to live. Punishments for misbehavior and rewards for good behavior were also spelled out. Unfortunately Paul writes, the law was not entirely effective in placing us on the straight and narrow pathway. Like young children often resent the discipline of their pedagogos, humanity resented and resisted the restraint of the law of Moses. They rebelled against the rules and ended up feeling constantly ashamed and hopelessly guilty.

Romans 5:13-14 teaches us that before the law of Moses, humanity knew sin. We had fallen short of all God intended for us to be. Eve deceived Adam, Adam blamed Eve and both hid from God. Cain killed Able and one

culture's hubris built a tower of Babel against the wishes of God. Paul says that because those behaviors preceded the law, however they were not technically transgressions. Transgression, said the gifted apostle, is open defiance to the stated law of God. That could only take place after the law was explained to humanity. Once we knew the law, though, our despair grew deeper because we couldn't keep from transgressing it.

That made our species ripe for the coming of Jesus. At just the right time, God sent Jesus who called us to repentance and faith in God. Jesus promised us that if we took Him as our Lord and Savior, he would forgive us for all the times we broke the law and give us a new heart that would obey God out of love, rather than fear or obligation.

God has kept his promise, the Creator has sent Jesus at the perfect time to save us from our sins, free us from our guilt and empower us to live the abundant life. The only problem with this part of the plan, however, is that we have to open our hearts to the Spirit of Christ for this help to take affect. If we don't, Paul said, we live like people who have inherited the most wondrous gift in the world but do not choose to appropriate it. Without accepting the new life of Christ, Paul observed, we are like children who could inherit the full wealth of their parent today and live in joy, love and freedom but instead choose to continue under the custodianship of the law. Rather than celebrate Jesus' arrival, we live like he never came.

Sometime back, one of the sisters of Notre Dame in Baltimore passed away. When she died, her brother changed his will. He specified that a boyhood possession he had traded for in 1939 was to be left to the nuns.

Now a little boy's treasure might not seem like much and it often isn't unless it is, as in the case of the nun's brother, a 1909 Honus Wagner baseball card. You see Mr. Wagner was a baseball star in the early days of the sport. He was among the first batch of players to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame along with the likes of Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb. Wagner's picture was put on a baseball card that advertized cigarettes made by the American Tobacco Company and sold to young baseball enthusiasts. When Mr. Wagner saw his face on a product that he rightly felt was bad for kids (Honus was ahead of his time) he demanded that the tobacco company cease and desist from using his image on any more of their cards. Consequently only a first run of the card was printed. Today there are only 60 of those cards known to exist. Change, that, as of a few weeks ago, there are 61.

For years, as the nun's brother lived out the remainder of his life, the prize card sat in a box of collectibles. No one received any benefit from the card for no one knew it was there. Then the old man died and as they settled his estate, they found the card. The brother had specified that the card was to be sold at auction and the proceeds given to the nuns of Notre Dame. The card brought \$220,000 at auction. It would have brought ten times that had it not been in such dilapidated condition. A footnote to the story is that the highest bidder on the card, Doug Walker of Knoxville, Tennessee never paid up. For a few painful days the nuns concluded the value of the treasure would never be theirs. And then just a few days ago, the auction house contacted a collector named Nicholas DePaul, a cardiologist from Philadelphia and he bought the card for the full amount. Yes that's right, the nuns were saved this Christmas by St. Nicholas.

Paul said that even though God has kept his promise and sent Jesus right on time, the astonishing act of love can be like that baseball card. If we don't open our hearts and make room for the full spirit of the Christ, the coming of Christ does not change our lives to any great degree. We are like people due a marvelous inheritance who won't even accept the gift.

The author of Galatians offers us a better way to respond to the birth of Jesus. He says that if we will celebrate Christ's coming and open our hearts to the filling of the Spirit, we will receive adoption into God's family and take on a new motivation for obedience. For Christ will inhabit the open heart and change us into little children who run to God crying Abba or Daddy, we love you. Overwhelmed by love, we will find new incentive to keep the high teachings of Christ. Not out of fear of punishment or a desire for reward but out of a joyful, loving longing to please the One who has so loved us.