

Adopted as God's family (Christmas 1B) (Galatians 4:4-7)

Six markers of what this means in the wake of the incarnation.

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#)

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The Christmas season does not usually strike me as the perfect time to read Paul's letter to the Galatians. But if you're feeling like the usual Christmas stories aren't doing it for you this year, or if you're feeling ready to shake off the Christmas sugar and twinkle lights, Paul offers a different pathway into the incarnation.

His letter to the church in Galatia is anything but twinkly, more pepper than sugar—and with such passion about the very incarnational controversy of circumcision that he even gets a little crass (see 5:12). But this Sunday's reading doesn't go to any of those spicy places, giving us instead four joyful verses about adoption into God's family, very much a part of incarnational theology. The God of time and the cosmos has been born on earth and of a human woman and invites us to live in the here and now, on earth and in our bodies, as members of the body of Christ and God's family.

In Paul's words, I hear six particular markers of what it means in the wake of the incarnation to be adopted as God's family on Earth and in this particular time in history.

God sent God's Son. Throughout history, God has sought out God's people, but it was in a particular moment in history—in “the fullness of time”—that God was born as Immanuel, “God-with-us,” here on earth. God wants to be in relationship with

us—not in an abstract way, but in such a way that we can feel connected, body and soul, in Christ, to God. Not just as members of an institution, but as members—parts and ligaments—of Christ’s body.

That we might receive adoption. Adoption is something to be received; it is not forced on us. It is a gift. We belong to God and to one another, in love and freedom—not ownership or coercion. God came to dwell with us, not to force us into conformity but to offer us loving relationship.

Adoption as children. No one is a “birth” child of God except Jesus. As baptized Christians, no one belongs or looks more like God than anyone else; we have all been brought into the family, not born to it.

Crying, “Abba! Father!” We are invited into intimacy with God. God is inviting us to call to God with words like, “Abba! Father!” (or “Amma! Mother!”), and so inviting us to a closeness and familiarity. There is a physical closeness we have to our parents or first caregivers that is hard to describe; this is the closeness we are invited to feel to God.

Not a slave, but a child. In our baptism, we are not joining a business, an elite spiritual society, or a prison. We are not marked with a believers’ ID number; we are adopted into the big, loving (and certainly chaotic) family that is the church universal. We are called to be who God made us to be, with differing gifts and paths.

And an heir. In baptism, we receive the spiritual inheritance of God’s promises and the rich, complex, and living story of salvation—both in scripture and in the lives of our ancestors, mentors, and friends in the faith. And then we, too, will pass on this inheritance to those who come after us.

In this holiday season, when many of us are unable to spend time physically with our families, some might need especially to be reminded that being a member of God’s family—or of any chosen family at church, among friends, or at work—is a real and holy gift, especially if our family of origin is a painful or uncomfortable place for us. In baptism, we are marked as Christ’s own, no matter what distance we are from church or our siblings in the faith. As heirs of the day of Pentecost, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit is always active and among us, in our very bodies and souls. Church, even on Zoom or Facebook Live, is still where we can meet God, our Abba and Amma, and meet one another, as fellow heirs and children of the promise.