

Circumcision and Name of Jesus: January 1, 2017
“Cutting Names”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text this morning are these words from Luke 2, “And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”¹

Today is the eighth day of Christmas. As we are still in the mode for celebrating, or maybe after last night, we are celebrated out; the Christmas Season still lingers on until Thursday. Some of our routines may have kind of gotten back to normal, but they will not really hit the stage of normalcy it seems until this next week. Then the children are back in school and work continues on like normal. The Christmas Season becomes nothing but a fainting memory. During the past several weeks, in the hustle and bustle of celebrating, I bet there were things that you did not notice. Whether it was things at home, things at work, things with family, there are so many things that seem to fly at us all at one time, that we do not take the time to notice everything; and after all, who can notice everything.

This morning in our Gospel lesson, we have a text that does not get noticed all that much. Today it is the only words of our Gospel lesson, but usually during the reading of the Christmas Story, it is nothing but an addendum to the story before it. It is kind of a parting shot between Jesus’ birth and a segue into His presentation at the temple. Our text for this morning gives us a scene that we do not often notice, but it is still a part of the infancy narrative of our Savior, but without all of the photo ops of angels and shepherds, sheep and donkeys. This is a smaller gathering, attended by perhaps no one other than the little holy family and an officiant or two. Not much more noteworthy, it seems, than when a nurse comes by a new mother’s hospital room and asks her to verify the information about to go on the birth certificate. Baby’s lying there nearby in a bassinet, dad smiles proudly, but no one else even notices.

This event in Jesus’ life on earth is nevertheless very significant indeed, and in this one verse we have two very important things happening in the life of the Christ-child. We have His circumcision and His name being given. God had commanded

¹ Luke 2:21

in the Old Testament that every male child was to be circumcised on the eighth day. By circumcision, the child was incorporated into God's covenant with Israel, as was recorded for us all they way back in Genesis 17. It was there that God made the promise to Abraham of His everlasting covenant with His people. Circumcision is a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham and his seed. In this covenant God declared to Abraham, "I will be your God." God would glorify the name of Abraham in the world, make him the father of many nations, multiply his seed like the stars in heaven, give him the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, and in his seed all of the nations of the earth shall be blessed.

To be Abraham's God, the Lord pronounced to Abraham, "I will help and assist you in all your cares and infirmities, comfort you in all your tribulation, adversity, persecution, anguish, sorrow, and deliver you from misery and wretchedness. If anyone hurts you with words or works, harms you in body or belongings, wife or child, honor or reputation, I will avenge and repay it. If your sins oppress you, if death and hell terrify you, I will forgive you your sins, rescue you from death, the devil, and hell, and grace you with all earthly and heavenly good, and at last bring you to eternal life."

Make no mistake, the promise from God is sufficient enough, but people being people, God in His grace and mercy gave this sign for Abraham and his children to believe in the promise more firmly. To know that this promise is for them. This seemingly small and insignificant earthly act, carried with it more than the eye could see.

Baptism is the sign of the new covenant. It is a seemingly insignificant act to the world. A few words, a bit of water, and then, so what? Hear the words of Colossians, "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the

record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”²

The event of circumcision was not like the scene that we had just several days ago. It is not like the temple scene where Jesus was forty days old and was visited in the temple by Simeon and Anna. In fact this scene did not take place in the temple at all, as circumcision was usually done locally, wherever the family lived. So while circumcision and baptism, seem so blah and bland, why would the God of heaven and earth, prescribe such a foolish thing? Why would He not want to make a big show, move heavens and earth for such a great promise?

Who says He doesn't? First, to use such simple acts, God makes a fool of reason, who always seeks to undermine God's word and works. We walk by faith and not by sight. The world sees simple, and dull, but faith sees heaven and earth move. Second, these acts remind us of our sinful birth passed down through Adam's fall. The sinful flesh needed to be cut off and removed, the Old Adam needed to be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires. Third, these simple signs are for us human beings. A Jew could daily be reminded of the covenant, we daily (make the sign of the cross) are reminded of our baptism. Circumcision and baptism are not simply outward tokens, they are memorials of God's will towards us, to remind us of God promises, and to strengthen our faith.

So why would Jesus have to be circumcised? As Christ was born fully human, He was under the Law. He had to subject Himself under the Law in order to save us fully from the wrath of that Law. As we read in Colossians, the foreskin that was cut-off represents sin and rebellion against God. Not only in Colossians, but throughout Scripture, the imagery of being cut off from God's grace, from being cut off from God is directly related to this imagery. So instead of being cut off from God, the image was that the sin and the rebellion were cut off from you.

As without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness, so Jesus shows His obedience to the Law by shedding His blood for the first time. Through His circumcision, Christ takes the place of humanity under the Law as the sin-bearer.

²Colossians 2:11–14

He becomes fully under the Law, so that humanity might be saved. He became one of us fully, so that we might be saved fully.

The benefit for the believers in the Old Testament was incorporation, as I have already said. Along with that incorporation into the covenant of God also comes forgiveness of sins and justification. Through circumcision, one was justified and declared righteous by the promised seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. One was forgiven of all their iniquities by the blood of the one who was to come. Being circumcised brought one in the family of God and made a full heir of His promises. As we also know from Colossians, Romans, Peter, John and host of other places, Baptism has replaced circumcision. Paul writes in Colossians that Baptism is a circumcision not done by human hands, but it is the circumcision of Christ.

So if circumcision cuts off the sin and rebellion, baptism does the same right? Does that mean that we are free from sinning then? Does that mean that just because I am baptized, I no longer do anything wrong? Of course not. Just as those who were circumcised in the Old Testament continually rebelled against God, we who are baptized also do the same things. We do not always love the Lord our God and serve Him only. We do not love God with our entire being, mind, body, soul and strength. We are not always just. We do not always explain everything in the kindest way.

We are baptized Christians and yet we do not always live up the expectations as Christians. We live with the name of being Christian, but we do not always live as a Christian is supposed to. Then on top of this, we live in a sinful world. We suffer all sorts of physical, mental, and emotional tribulations, grief, sorrow, thirst, heat, frost, anguish, pain, pestilence, sickness, war, bloodshed, famine, illness, plague, bondage and death.

But the circumcision was not the only event described. While it was important to incorporate the child in the covenant, it was also at this ceremony that the child was named. Just as God changed Abram's name to Abraham at his circumcision, like when the nurse comes by to fill out the birth certificate and baby X officially has a name, and this child on this day was given the name Jesus. It was precisely on this day that the little baby who was born in a stable was given The Name, Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.

This name, "Jesus," comes from the Hebrew word *yeshua* meaning salvation. Already on this, His eighth day of being alive, His destiny of atonement is given and proclaimed to the world in His name. The salvation from this baby who will grow up, keep the Law perfectly, suffer, die, and rise again so that we may have a newness of life. This one man will succumb to the full brunt of the Law, so that the Law may have no strangle-hold on us. He will break the oppressor's rod. From this little, eight-day old baby, the world will be rescued from the wages of sin: eternal death and damnation. This one man will save His people from the sin and rebellion, everlasting death and hell and give them eternal life and salvation!

He is the one who will save His people from their sins. Who are His people? His people are those who are incorporated into His family. His people are those who are not only circumcised or baptized, but they are the one's who have faith and believe in the promise. Does circumcision save you? Or to put it in a more modern-day context, does baptism save you? It not merely the act of being baptized, but it is what is created and given there. Here at this font, Christ joins Himself to you. The Holy Spirit is given to you. Here at this font, where water and word is joined together, you have been called by the Gospel.

Here you have been enlightened with His gifts. Here you have been sanctified and He will keep you in the one true faith. Through these blessed waters, through His life-giving words, He daily and richly forgives all of your sins. Here He has joined Himself to you, you are His own, and you have been incorporated in the promise given to Abraham. Here you have been given the name that is above all other names. Here you have been given the name that matters more than any other.

Through Christ's death and resurrection, you have been made right with God. Through Christ, you have been justified. Through your baptism, you have not only been incorporated into the greatest family of all, God's Family; but you have been given forgiveness, life and salvation. In His family we have been given all the rights and privileges as son's and daughters of the Most High God. As children, you have been invited to come and eat at the family table, eat the meal for your forgiveness and for strengthening of body and soul. Jesus has come to save His people. He has come to save you! Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.