

The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus, 2020

Luke 2:21

Part I

For most January 1st is a day on the calendar that ushers in the new year. It is a day off - a time for making New Years' resolutions - a time for watching college football games - a time to turn the page to a new year with renewed hopes. But for the Church, New Year's Day is more than that.

It does not happen to often, but today - New Year's Day - actually falls on the day of the circumcision and naming of Jesus. If you count, beginning with Christmas Day, this is the eighth day. On the eighth day of a newborn baby's life, in the Old Testament times, he was circumcised. It is what God had commanded.

God gave that command to Abraham. He said:

This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you; Every male among you, who is eight days old, shall be circumcised. It shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

So, Mary and Joseph did according to what God commanded.

At the time of Abraham, and in the early years of the rite, the father did the circumcision. Over time a person trained in the surgical procedure represented the father. He was called a mohel. The parents would then bring the baby to the mohel for the rite. The room was lit with candles. A rabbi might be present; godparents and family as well.

It all spoke to the special event of the day - the day when the eight day old child became a part of God's covenant people.

Part II

In Jesus' case, we are not given all of the details - who did the circumcision or who was present. We are simply told that he was circumcised. That is the important thing.

It is because when Jesus was circumcised he was formally placed under the law. That meant that Jesus had keep the law - the Ten Commandments. He had to do it for us. It also meant that Jesus suffered pain as the knife cut and as the first drops of his blood were shed. Thirty three years later he would suffer the pain of hell as he paid for our sins of breaking the law.

So ... what does all of this mean for you and me going into the new year? Well ... think about it in terms of looking back and looking forward.

When we take a look back - what do we see? We see that we have failed to do what the law requires. We have not always been the parent - the son or daughter - the spouse we could and should be - not always been the citizen who shows respect to civil authorities - not always been the worker who gladly does his assigned work - not always been content with who we are and what we have - not always trusted God will provide. When we measure ourselves against the law the law shows us that we have not measured up to its requirements.

When we take a look back we also see we have also done just the opposite of what the law requires - we have done what the law forbids. We have lost our patience as parents - talked back to parents - spoken unkind words as spouses - disrespected civil authorities - grudgingly done work orders - complained about who we are and what we have - worried that God will provide. When we look at the law it shows us that we have done what God forbids.

In both cases - doing what the law forbids and failing to do what the law requires means that the law accuses us. It

points its finger at us and says: You are guilty! Guilty, the law condemns you and me. It says justice must be served.

That is why Jesus suffered pain as the knife cut and his first drops of blood were shed the eighth day of his life. Those first drops of blood said that one day Jesus would suffer the penalty of your and my sin - the pain of hell. He would as his blood was shed for your and my sin on the cross. By his death, justice was served. Jesus took away your sin. The law no longer condemns you.

Then, there is the other part to that. Jesus was formally placed under the law the day of his circumcision. He did for us what we fail to do. Jesus measured up to the law. He kept it in every point. He did it for you and for me. Because he did, God credits Jesus life to you and me. He sees you as perfect in Jesus.

So, when you and I look back, we see that God has been gracious to us. It all goes to say that you go into the new year - forgiven of sin and righteous in God's sight by faith in Jesus.

As we take a look forward, then, you can go into the new year with confidence. You can, because the fact that Jesus died and your place and lived a perfect life for you

means that you now belong to him. Because you belong to him, you are safe in his care.

That means you do not have to worry about the future. Neither you nor I know what the year 2020 holds in store for any one of us. We do not know what it might mean for work - for family - for health - for life. We do not know what it means for change. That may give us anxiety.

Yes, it may. Though it may, and though there may be changes you cannot control - you are safe in God's hands. He has "inscribed you on the palms of his hands." He has written your name on the palm of his hand in his shed blood.

It is as though every time he looks at his hands, he sees your name. Your name is always before him. Because your name is written on his hand in his blood, he will worry about the future for you. He will keep you safe in those hands.

Part III

Lets probe this circumcision thing a little bit more. Why were male children circumcised on the 8th day? The eighth day was the beginning of a new week. The old had past; the new had begun.

It is no coincidence, then, that Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday - the 8th day - the beginning of a new week. That is what this 8th day has to do with. It all looks to the resurrection of Jesus. In his resurrection the old has been left behind at the cross and the new life you and I have in him has begun at his empty tomb.

...and here is one more thing about the number 8. Baptismal fonts typically have 8 sides. They do, because the 8 sides mean to say that baptism raised you to new life in Jesus.

The apostle ties these 8th day occurrences together this way:

In [Christ] you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ having been buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him through faith.

It was in your baptism, then, that God linked you to the perfect life Jesus lived for you and the painful death he died in your place. By linking you to Christ in baptism, he raised you to new life.

As you and I walk in that new life we struggle. The vestiges of the old life want to creep up. There will be those times in the new year when we won't do what the law requires. There will be those times when we do what the law forbids.

That will happen because we have the three enemies of the devil, the world and our flesh. The devil and the world constantly hound us ... and our flesh - it wants to go along with them - it will cling to us until the day we die.

So as we go into the new year, we need to daily return to our baptisms - that God may continue to drown our sinful nature and daily raise in Christ Jesus - that God may work in us to walk not according to the ways of the devil, the world and our flesh, but in his ways - that God may turn our thoughts to the new day of eternity when we will no longer struggle.

Part IV

There is one more thing that happened the day of circumcision. On that day the baby boys were also named. In the case of Mary's baby, Joseph gave him the name the angel told him to give. He named the baby, Jesus. That

same angel told Joseph the meaning of the name Jesus: “For he shall save his people from their sins.”

Someone observed that in some cultures, babies are given the name Jesus. They are probably given that name in honor of Jesus .. but none of them save from sin. They are sinners just like you and me.

Then he added that there is place in Africa which uses a name that is somewhat like the name Jesus, but not the same. In that culture the name Jesus is considered too sacred to be applied to humans. Instead, they are given a name to remind them of Jesus. It is the name, “Holali.” It means “There is a Savior.”

When all seems lost and a person is in despair, then, he/she can call out “Holili!” - “There is a Savior.” Trusting in the Savior, Jesus, he/she can go forward in confidence.

In such a way you can go forward in the new year - you can with confidence. You can because God has given you his name in your baptism. When you feel overwhelmed with challenges, when you fear for the future, you can say “I am baptized.” It is a reminder that no matter what tomorrow might bring, you are God’s baptized child. As his

baptized child nothing in life or in death can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

Part V

On this New Year's Day, then - a day to turn the page to 2020 - a day of New Year's resolutions - a day of watching parades or football games - a day to hope for a better tomorrow - you have begun in the name of Jesus. There can be no better way to begin the new year.

Come now to his table where he gives you his body and blood broken and shed to pay for your sins - by which he also credits you his perfect life lived for you - and by which he keeps you in the new life given you in your baptism.
Amen!