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Circumcision and Name of Jesus  
January 1, 2012  
Text: Luke 2:21

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

There are a number of reasons why today stands out as being most remarkable. First of all, it's New Year's Day. And it's not too often we gather together for worship on New Year's Day. Each year, the New Year begins with a sense of renewed optimism. Happy New Year! is the greeting we give to one another. With such optimism running fresh and new, we plant the seeds of "New Year's resolutions." The trouble is that they tend to fall flat and go unfulfilled.

Dear people of God, we stand at the beginning of a New Year. I cannot predict what this year will be like. But this I can and will say, the Lord of heaven and earth will remain faithful to us in 2012. The writer to the Hebrews admonishes and encourages his readers with these fitting words,

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" (Heb. 13:5-6).

This New Year promises to be one of goodness and blessedness not because of an improved economy, better health, fulfilled New Year's resolutions, or these kinds of things. Rather, this hope and confidence comes from our Lord's promise to be with us this year, the next, and into eternity. So, with that word of promise ringing in our ears, I say to you all, "A happy and blessed New Year!"

The other reason why today is extraordinary is that this year we have the privilege of commemorating the festival that occurs on every New Year's Day but receives far too little attention, even in the Church: the circumcision and name of Jesus. My guess is that most of you didn't come to church today expecting to hear about circumcision; the name of Jesus is one thing, we're accustomed to hearing about Jesus, but circumcision? Not a common theme in Church in any time of year.

But today is a good day for that very reason. For we will see that the infant Jesus, at 8 days old, is already at work fulfilling God the Father's will and plan to save the human race. Luke 2:21, today's gospel reading, is probably one of the most overlooked Christmas passages of the Bible. It's but 8 days since Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. The Wise Men have not yet arrived. Mary and Joseph are still adjusting to being parents.

But the Law (Leviticus 12:3) requires that every 8-day old newborn baby boy be circumcised. Today's gospel reading reveals that Jesus does not take any shortcuts in saving the world. Every detail of God's holy Law must be fulfilled. Jesus, who is true God and true man, even at 8 days old subjects Himself to the OT Law, the very Law He inspired to be written. His holy, precious blood is already being shed for the sins of the world, not His sins, for He had none, but for you and me and all humanity. This is the work given to Him by His Heavenly Father.

Through circumcision, children born and conceived in sin received a sign of grace. The mark in their flesh was a promise that God adopted them into His covenant people, that He forgives their sins. Jesus, however, was conceived of the Holy Spirit. The angel Gabriel declared that the Child in Mary's womb was holy. With this Child, there is no sin to forgive. He is holy, the very Son of God, begotten of the Father from all eternity. The Infant Jesus is being circumcised not for Himself, but for us and our salvation.

What a strange topic for a New Years' Day service. Circumcision. It's not a subject typically discussed in public. The importance of this event is that our eternal salvation depends upon Jesus fulfilling it for us. Through circumcision, Jesus is made to be our substitute. He places Himself under the Law in order to fulfill it for us. So even at 8-days old, Jesus sheds His blood to cleanse us from our sins and iniquities.

The cutting of the flesh of an eight day old baby is not the substance that makes for hopeful optimism for a better year. What it does is to remind us of the darkness of our sinful condition and the unstoppable love God has for His people. The Child, whose birth we celebrated just last week with great rejoicing and fanfare, is the same Child subjected to pain and bloodshed for us and for our salvation. In this work of circumcision – which ultimately leads to Jesus shedding His blood on the cross of Calvary – God is displaying His love for us. We can and should rejoice. God is saving His people through the infant Jesus!!

With circumcision also comes the giving of our Lord's name. According to Jewish custom, infant boys formally received their name on the day of their circumcision. Luke 2:21 reveals that Joseph and Mary follow this custom faithfully. And Joseph, the Child's step-father fulfills the command given to him by the angel of the Lord. Matthew 1:24 records the angel's instructions to name the Child Jesus because He would save His people from their sins (1:21).

The importance of Jesus' name cannot be overestimated. This is the name that is above every name, the name at which heaven and earth will bow and worship in joyful adoration for all eternity. This name, that we have been given the privilege of calling upon as often as we will, is the greatest treasure given to humanity.

Through this name we have access to God the Father and to every gift of heaven. Jesus Himself says that His Father will send the Holy Spirit in “my name” meaning in Jesus’ name (John 14:26). In addition, Jesus promises that whatever we ask God the Father in my name – Jesus’ name – He would give it (John 15:16). It is this name the Church has proclaimed ever since our Lord’s resurrection to the salvation of all who receive it in faith.

We gather together every Sunday in Jesus’ name to sing His praises, to worship Him in faith and obedience, and to receive His gifts of grace. It’s not by accident that we begin every worship service in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. For where God’s name is invoked in truth, there God is present among His people. Jesus Himself says that whenever two or three are gathered in His name, there He is among them (Matthew 18:20). And so we have the sure and certain promise that on this first day of 2012, Jesus is among us.

Circumcision and name. Both topics merge together nicely in Holy Baptism for baptism is the NT sign of grace as well as the direct, personal application of God’s name to each and every Christian. Water applied in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit gives you the eternal life of God the Holy Trinity. And baptism in God’s name is also the NT equivalent of OT circumcision though baptism gives richer and more expansive promises. Hear St. Paul’s teaching about baptism and circumcision given to the NT church in Colossians 2:11–12:

In him (Jesus) also 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 in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

In baptism we not only receive God’s holy name we also receive a circumcision made without hands which connects us to Christ’s resurrection from the dead. So every time we remember our baptism in the triune name, we recall everything Jesus did for the salvation of the world from the moment of His conception in Mary’s virgin womb, to His circumcision and naming on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, to His miracles and teachings, to His bitter sufferings and death, to His resurrection from the dead, to His ascension to the Father’s right hand, and to His ultimate return in glory.

On this 8<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas, we give thanks to our Lord, for His circumcision and for His name. May this New Year be filled with the joy and happiness that can only be found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.