

Christmas 1 / The Name of Jesus / January 1, 2023

Luke 2:21

“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.”

The circumcision of Jesus was the first step in the mission He was born to accomplish; the reconciliation of creation to the Creator. Circumcision was the mark of the covenant God made with Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai. By being circumcised, Israel showed their agreement to the covenant and submission to its laws and terms. The first generation was largely an adult group. But thereafter, the law commanded that all males be circumcised on the eighth day of birth. By circumcising their children, Israel affirmed their commitment to the covenant for themselves and their children. Circumcision was the means by which God brought His grace into the life of the new born child. In this spirit David declared in Psalm 22, *“You brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother’s breast.”* In circumcision, God touched the child with His Spirit, gave His promise and created faith in the infant heart. Faith begins with God, who by His Holy Spirit opens our hearts to trust Him, even at our mother’s breast.

God makes the same promises in baptism that He preciously made in circumcision: forgiveness, faithfulness, and eternal life. God made a new covenant through Christ and His blood shed on the cross. We are received into the New Covenant through baptism into Jesus’ name. Baptism is our initiation into the New Covenant. In the New Covenant, baptism has replaced circumcision as the first means of grace. In the letter to the Colossians St. Paul writes, *“You were also circumcised, in putting off the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men, but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead.”* We baptize infants for the same reason that the Israelites circumcised their children. It is the promise of God’s grace, the mark of the new covenant and the means by which God gives us faith to believe.

Christ was circumcised and given the name ‘Jesus,’ the name given to Mary, before He was conceived in her womb and to Joseph, before He was born. ‘Jesus’ means, “the Lord saves.” Jesus would save His people from their sins. The day of circumcision was the day the child was named. The day of baptism is also the day in which Christians traditionally name their new born children. The day of our baptism is our name day, the day we were named before God. The public naming declared the child a member of the covenant community. By speaking the child’s name, Israel asked God to remember His promises to His people, extend them to the child and receive the child as a member of His covenant people. They asked God to remember the child’s spiritual and physical needs, to hear and help in time of need. By speaking the child’s name, the people testified to the personal relationship between God and each member of the covenant community. Circumcision and naming declared that the child had the right to call God by name, at all times, especially in times of trouble.

It was from this relationship that David in His troubles and Jesus on the cross, cried out to God, saying, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* This was not an expression of doubt or cry of despair. It was a prayer for God to remember the promise He made at circumcision to hear and help. It was a cry of faith in remembrance of God’s faithfulness. God said, *“When He calls, I will answer him.”* We are established in the same relationship with God through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus. For the sake of Jesus, God promises to hear when we cry, forgive when we sin, bless us with the Holy Spirit and work for our spiritual good in time and for eternity. In circumcision, Jesus was named and included in the covenant God made with Israel through Moses. In baptism we are named and included in the covenant God made with all people through the blood Jesus shed on the cross.

The question has been asked why only males were circumcised into the covenant community. Semitic peoples in the ancient near east practised female circumcision. The practise continues in Islam today. Why not Israel? Perhaps the Lord thought women had enough pain in giving birth, that he spared them this pain. In Genesis, as a consequence of sin, God said to the woman, *“In pain you shall bring forth children.”* Regardless, they too were daughters of Abraham as Jesus’ affirmed, children of Israel and members of the covenant community. God made a distinction between male and female in circumcision, He has removed this distinction in the Christian Church. In the New Israel both male and female are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote: *“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.”*

The division between male and female is also a consequence of the sin of the first people. Sin separated the man and woman from God and from each other. The battle of the sexes is a bitter fruit of the weed of sin. Jesus fulfilled the demands of the Old Covenant, so that sin would be uprooted from our hearts, including the battle of the sexes. In Genesis the Lord said to the woman, “*Your desire shall be for your husband, and He shall rule over you.*” That was a curse of sin. Because of sin, the law of circumcision made a distinction between male and female. In Christ the curse is lifted. In the New Covenant there is neither male nor female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile. Christ has taken away the condemnation of the law and the removed the curse of sin. All who are circumcised in the spirit through baptism into His death and resurrection, have equal standing before God and full access to the grace of forgiveness. All share equally in the inheritance of resurrection to everlasting life.

Christ was circumcised and given the name ‘Jesus’, because He would fulfil the righteous demands of the law in our place. He fulfilled the demands of the law, so He would offer Himself on the cross to pay the debt of human sin. Writing to the Corinthians, St. Paul said, “*God made Him who had no sin to be a sin offering that in Him we would become the righteousness of God.*” Jesus submitted Himself to God’s law through circumcision. He would fulfil the demands the law made on every child of the covenant and every soul born into the world in bondage to sin and under the condemnation of death. He would live without sin as the perfect son of the covenant. In Him and through faith in His name, we are all sons of the covenant, children of the heavenly Father and heirs of eternal life. Jesus took our place under the law, bearing the injury of circumcision, so that He would also take our place in bearing the ultimate injury inflicted by the law, which is death. He did this so that through baptism into His death, we would receive rebirth as children of God.

In the letter to the Galatians, St. Paul said, “*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of woman, born under law, to redeem those who were under law, that we might receive adoption as sons.*” Jesus was born into the world, enslaved to sin and under the condemnation of death. In this world we cannot help but sin. Since the sin of the first people separated humanity from the heart of the Creation, it is our nature to sin. Sin brings death and so the world is under the condemnation of death. There is no person in the world who has or ever will escape the condemnation of sin, which is death. Jesus was born into this world to share in our humanity that He would restore us to a good relationship with the Father through the forgiveness of sins; earned through His sinless life and sacrificial death. We receive forgiveness, a good relationship with God and pardon from the condemnation of eternal death through faith in Jesus’ name and baptism into His death and resurrection.

The work of the cross began with Christ’s circumcision and naming. He was marked a member of the covenant community. He was named our Saviour. He fulfilled the Law, so that though His sinless obedience, He would offer Himself in place of every human soul. He was given the name ‘Jesus’, because through His sacrificial death He would pay the debt of sin for the whole world. In His name, grace is offered for all to receive. Grace is given to all who believe in His name and are baptized into His death and resurrection. Today we begin a new year. May the Holy Spirit remind us of the promise of our baptism, circumcise our hearts in repentance, bless us with faith to believe that we may continue to receive the grace of mercy, the kindness of forgiveness, and the promise of sharing in Christ’s resurrection when time passes away. In Jesus’ Name. Amen