

"The Law and the Name"

Luke 2:21

January 1, 2023 -- The Circumcision of Our Lord

“And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.”

### I. The Strangest of Holy Days

Of all the festivals and holy days of the church year, this might sound the strangest: “The Circumcision of Our Lord.” This normally isn’t the subject of polite conversation, and to speak of circumcision and Jesus may seem a little bit degrading to our sensibilities. However, perhaps our sensibilities need a little repentance: we celebrate this eighth day of Christmas for an important reason: behold, your infant Savior is at work to save you.

It was God’s Law from Genesis 17 for the rest of the Old Testament: on the eighth day of a baby boy’s life, his parents were to have him circumcised. If he was circumcised, he was part of the nation of Israel. If he wasn’t circumcised, he was to be cut off from the people because the baby boy had broken the covenant. Gen. 17:14 reads: “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” -- an interesting verse for those who believe in the innocence of children and the so-called age of accountability. This was the sign that God gave for the men of Israel, and He provided no alternative: a full-grown man who desired to be counted among the Israelites also had to undergo circumcision before he was numbered among them (an interesting requirement for those who would water down adult confirmation classes on the pretext that one should place no obstacles before a catechumen).

If you and I were to choose a sign to mark God’s people, I daresay it wouldn’t be that. But the fact is that this is the sign that God chose: if a man was going to be part of the people of God, he had to obey God’s commands. Obedience started when he was eight days old: when he was circumcised, he was officially under the Law. If he wasn’t circumcised and continued that way, he obviously didn’t want to be part of God’s covenant or His people.

So, it was the Law: circumcision on the 8th day for boys, or else.

Eight days after Jesus was born, Jesus also was circumcised according to that law. Here is the key question: why? Why would Jesus be circumcised? Did He need to become part of God’s people? Hardly! He was already God’s Son. So why did Jesus submit to circumcision? Was it that He had no choice as an infant? Again, no: although a baby according to His human nature, He was the all-powerful creator according to His divine nature. So why was Jesus circumcised? This is the answer: to declare Himself under the Law. Thus Galatians 4:4-5: “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

On the 8th day of His life—still the tiniest of babies, Jesus declared that He had come to keep the Law. He had come to keep the Law for all those sinners who couldn’t keep the Law.

Remember how the Law works. To Old Testament Israel, God gave His holy Law. The Law says, “In order to be God’s people, keep all of these commandments perfectly. Be circumcised. Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. Keep these laws, and you’re holy. Break them, and you’re not.” That’s how the Law works. And as you are well aware, the Law is impossible for sinners to keep. If our only hope of salvation was to keep God’s Law perfectly, all our life from infancy to death, we’d have no hope of paradise. We’d have only the grim certainty of God’s judgment for our sin.

That’s why Jesus is born in flesh, just like you and me. He puts Himself under the Law in order to keep it for us. He’s born to live a perfectly holy life, keeping every one of God’s commandments, and so He starts by being circumcised; and He’s born to go to the cross and die, suffering God’s judgment for the sins of the world.

You and I are used to celebrating Jesus’ birth at Christmas, His death on Good Friday and His resurrection at Easter. Along the way, we also give thanks for His baptism, transfiguration and more. However, the Circumcision of our Lord is an important day to remember, because there you see Him from the earliest of ages, keeping the Law for you, to save you.

Keeping that in mind, remember two more things about His circumcision.

First, it is here that He is given the name Jesus. The name that means “Yahweh saves.” As Jesus submits to circumcision, He is the Son of God at work to save you.

Second, this work of His for your salvation—at the age of 8 days—already foreshadows the ultimate act of salvation on the cross. Already at day 8, the Infant sheds His blood for you.

## II. What it Means for You

What does this mean for you, this Circumcision of our Lord?

Each day provides you with all sorts of opportunities to keep God’s Law by loving God and your neighbor. You can deal kindly and politely with your spouse. You can patiently instruct and care for your children. You can be a model of patience and understanding to the driver who just cut you off in traffic. You can put the best construction on the odd behaviors of others and help squelch gossip when it arises.

You can, but you probably won’t—not always and not perfectly. You’ll get crabby and impatient. You’ll let the gossip go and maybe pass it along. You’ll snap at your kids and your spouse. At times, you’ll sin in far worse ways than these. If you **honestly** examine yourself according to God’s holy Law, you’ll be quick to confess that you sin each day—often and much.

Therefore, you can’t save yourself by keeping the Law.

And so you remember Jesus’ eighth day, and you remember that the Baby is at work to save you. He’s shedding His blood to keep the Law. And from there, He grows up and keeps all of God’s commands perfectly, for the express purpose of giving you the credit for His perfect obedience.

Furthermore, He goes to the cross and dies for your sin and disobedience, so that you might be

forgiven. Remember the circumcision of the Lord, and marvel that the Christ is working for your salvation even there.

Remember this, too: circumcision was an objective mark. There was no maybe, maybe not. A circumcised male was part of God's people, not maybe part of God's people. He could be faithless and forsake the Lord and be lost, but that didn't mean God had waffled. God no longer commands circumcision; instead, He gives Holy Baptism for male and female both. In Col. 2:11-12 St. Paul tells us:

"In him (Jesus) you also 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..."

There! Forgiveness is not a maybe/maybe not. In other words, dear baptized, you have no need to wonder, "Did Jesus really keep the Law for me? Did He give forgiveness to me, too?" Baptism is a marvelous, objective outpouring of grace: "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved" God's word tells us. How do you know that Jesus kept the Law for you on the 8th day? You know because of what happened in His 30th year, on the cross! Because there, on the cross He demonstrates His forgiveness for you. And now, He gives you that forgiveness in His humble means of grace -- His Word and Sacraments.

Throughout history, circumcision was an object of scorn by Israel's enemies. What kind of God would command that kind of sign, and how could it help? Such questions are always asked by those who do not believe. Not just about circumcision in the past, but about Sacraments today: how can water do such great things? How can that Supper be anything more than bread and wine? The answer is simple and clear: they give forgiveness, life and salvation because God says they do. He attaches His Word to water, bread and wine to give you the forgiveness of sins.

Your sinful flesh will whisper, "What proof do you have of God's love and grace and forgiveness for you?" You boldly declare back, "I am baptized. I have God's Word that I am forgiven."

One more thing that Jesus' circumcision teaches: it proclaims again the wonder that the Son of God has taken on human flesh. He's really human: He can lose blood. His body is susceptible to harm like our bodies are. It can get weak and tired. It can be scourged and nailed and pierced and killed. He's really taken on a body like yours: like yours, which grows weak and tired. Like yours, subject to its arrhythmia and rising PSA levels and all the other wages of sin. A body just like yours, so that He can sacrifice His in your place, and raise you up to everlasting life.

Remember the circumcision of our Lord, and rejoice. Jesus was born to live for you, keep the Law for you, die in your place and rise from the dead for you. He gives you all of this in His means of grace so that you can be sure: you are forgiven for all of your sins.

While from His mother's bosom fed,  
His precious blood He wills to shed;  
A foretaste of His death He feels,  
The promise of His love reveals.

Lord, circumcise our hearts, we pray,

And take what is not Yours away.  
Write Your own name upon our hearts,  
Your Law within our inward parts.

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