

In Nomine Iesu

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O merciful and eternal God, heavenly Father, You caused Your Son to endure circumcision and to be made subject to the law that we might be redeemed from the curse of the law: We beseech You, grant us grace to become partakers of this redemption and thus obtain eternal salvation; through the same, Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (*ELH*, p. 149)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the second chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke, the twenty-first verse. We hear again these words in Jesus' name:

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. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who was obedient to the point of death, so you would be freed for life, dear fellow redeemed:

Today is the eighth day of Christmas. Like the song says, there are twelve days of Christmas, and these end on the Eve of Epiphany, Jan. 5th. We are still in the Christmas season, but it does not feel like it did a week ago. Our gift buying and wrapping, our baking, our get-togethers – most of these are done with. The glow of Christmas is pretty much gone. Life moves on.

I suppose the same could be said for Mary and Joseph after Jesus' birth. They had waited nine months for this. They wondered what this special Baby would look like. A pregnancy like this had never happened before and never would again. Finally the focus of their anticipation was here. Jesus was born – the first Christmas. The night was made even more memorable by a visit from some shepherds proclaiming the message of angels.

But then the days passed one after the other. Life moved on. Mary nursed Jesus, changed His diapers, and sang to Him. Joseph probably searched for better accommodations for his family. When the eighth day after His birth arrived, they had their little Baby circumcised and officially gave Him His name. There was nothing out of the ordinary about this. Circumcision had been commanded of the Israelites for about 2000 years, since the time of Abraham.

I

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, and he and Sarah still had no child together, the LORD said to him, "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (*Gen. 17:6-7*). The covenant that God made with Abraham was marked with the sign of circumcision, which was to be repeated by all of Abraham's male descendants. It should be done at eight days old or whenever any foreigner joined the people of Israel. The LORD

declared, *"So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 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"* (vv. 13-14).

Because of this command, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be circumcised on the eighth day. In this way, Jesus was incorporated into the Jewish church. His circumcision joined Him to the covenant of Abraham and obligated Him to keep the Law of God. This was the official start of His active obedience. The perfect God placed Himself under His perfect Law. He had to keep it in full in order to be the world's Savior. It also marked the beginning of His passive obedience. On this day, God felt physical pain. He felt the cut of the knife and first shed drops of His holy blood. We can comprehend the human side of this procedure, but not the divine. All we can say is that when God came in the flesh, He was all in. He did not exempt Himself from any human obligation or suffering.

His purpose in coming was underscored by His name. The name Jesus was common enough. It is the Greek version of the name Joshua, who is one of the heroes of the Old Testament. There must have been many Jewish boys with this name. But Mary did not select this name for her Son, God did. When the angel Gabriel visited Mary, telling her about the Son she would conceive, he said, *"you shall call his name Jesus"* (Lk. 1:31). The matter of the name was also made clear to Joseph. An angel said to him in a dream that *"[Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins"* (Mt. 1:21). Here the angel not only gave the name but also defined it. Jesus means, *"the LORD saves"* – *"for he will save his people from their sins."*

II

The eighth day from Jesus' birth was full of significance, not just for Him, but for you too. The fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham had now come. All the Old Testament prophecies were realized. A new era was ushered in. Circumcision was no more required of the people of God. It is not forbidden, but it is no longer commanded. The Apostle Paul writes, *"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love"* (Gal. 5:6). We are no longer set apart from the world by the sign of God's covenant with Abraham. What sets us apart today is our baptism into Christ.

But there are many Christians around us who disagree with this. They view baptism as an outward symbol with no real spiritual significance. They may think of it as a nice family tradition, or even as a good work done for God. But this entirely misses the mark. Baptism is not for God any more than circumcision was. Baptism is a gift from God for you. You needed it. Jesus told Nicodemus, *"You must be born again"* (Jn. 3:1-8). Your first birth was not enough. You may have looked alive and healthy when you were born, but as St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, *"you... were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh"* (2:13). You were dead in your sins. You needed to be reborn, regenerated. You could not save yourself.

This is why Jesus subjected Himself to the Law of God and to a life of suffering. He came to keep the Law perfectly for you and to die in payment for each of your sins. He won eternal life for you by dying your death and rising again in victory. These gifts are all yours through baptism. We read in the letter to Titus that *"[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life"* (3:5-7).

This is no small thing! To the Colossians, Paul wrote, *“In [Christ] 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”* (vv. 11-12). Baptism marks you as one of God’s own. It was through baptism that God sealed you with His promises of forgiveness and life, preparing you for the day of redemption when Jesus returns (Eph. 4:30). Baptism sets you apart in the New Testament era just as circumcision set apart the Israelites in the era of the Old Testament.

III

But do you live as one set apart? Do you *“walk in newness of life”* (Rom. 6:4) made possible by baptism? There is nothing about our appearance that distinguishes us from the unbelieving world. And we are often okay with that. We like to fit in with the world when it suits us. We can act like good Christians at church on Sunday morning, but then lead totally different lives outside of it. Spouses can put on a happy face around friends and family but treat each other like enemies at home. Employees can work while the boss is watching, but otherwise take advantage of their employer. Now on the internet, people (including Christians) can assume an entirely different identity to use for bad purposes.

However this disconnect happens in each of our lives, it happens to all of us. We are unworthy to be counted as God’s baptized children. We do not live up to the gift of baptism into Christ. But it is a gift that keeps on giving. No matter how sinful you have been, baptism still marks you as one of God’s own. It reminds you that even though your commitment to God wavers, His commitment to you does not. God loves you, which is why He sent His Son to save you, and why He moved your parents or guardians to bring you to baptism.

But the benefits of baptism can be lost. The fact that you are baptized will not save you, any more than the physical act of circumcision guaranteed salvation to the Old Testament Jews. The Sacraments of God are only beneficial when coupled with faith. Jesus said, *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned”* (Mk. 16:16). If you do not have faith in Jesus when you die, it will make no difference whether you were baptized or not. This is why it is so important to feed the faith that baptism brings, and to return to the cleansing waters of baptism every time you confess your sins and receive absolution.

The eighth day of Jesus’ life shows how committed God was to save you. He wanted to free you from the curse of the law and rescue you from the fires of eternal damnation. He wanted to bring you into His family by faith - to give you His name, the only name that can save. The salvation God desired for you was accomplished by His Son Jesus. You are a Christian, a believer in Him, baptized in His name, joined to His body. Your life is hardly ordinary. You live in Christ, in Him who shed His blood for you, who died and rose again for you, and who will come again to take you to Himself (Jn. 14:3). There could be no better name for Him than the one brought by the angel. Jesus is your Savior.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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