Luke 2:21

Other Lessons: Numbers 6:22–27; Psalm 8; Galatians 3:23–29

Happy New Year to you all. The text and theme for the 1st of January is always the circumcision and naming of Jesus, because it is the 8th days after his birth (inclusive). But this is not something we associate with a new year, this circumcision business and the shedding of blood. After all isn’t circumcision a private matter? And for modern people, it is usually associated with hygiene and perhaps with some cultural and/or religious significance, but nothing more. Paradoxically, we today can think like that only because Jesus was circumcised. We do not need to circumcise our babies on the 8th day only because the baby Jesus has shed his blood. Up to the New Testament times in the early church period, circumcision was still a very very important practice that reflected the faith. If you were male and was not circumcised, you would be considered outside the grace and mercy and kingdom of God, something that is totally unthink of in a Jewish community in the Old Testament and even for the first century (Jewish) Christians.

Circumcision had such high regard because it was first given to Abraham as a promise and as a sign of the covenant with Abraham and all his offspring. The promise was 3-fold: 1) that through him all other nations would be blessed (because only through the Israelites can people have the true worship and sacrifice, which of course points forward to the true temple, Jesus himself); 2) Abraham and his offspring would inherit Cana; 3) all who are circumcised would become the people of God, being part of his kingdom. Circumcision was a sign, a physical mark, like a tattoo or branding, to show that one now belongs to God, under his protection and blessing.

Paradoxically Jesus was circumcised himself even though he is the one who gave this command. But this was for him to fulfill all righteousness. By being circumcised himself, he proves to be not only the one who gave the command and promise but also the one who completes them and ends them once and for all. Jesus is the descendant of Abraham through whom all nations are blessed. It is Jesus, the incarnation of the 2nd person of the Trinity, who can reverse the curse on mankind. By taking on the human flesh, he also takes on the curse for mankind so that all the rest are blessed. And in him also, the promise land is given. A promised land that is far great and better than the one in Cana. Joshua, having crossed the Jordan, led the Israelites to the land to conquer, but they had to fight and struggle, and even so they did not completely inherit the land as they were not able to drive out the Canaanites thoroughly. But this “Joshua” (where we get the name “Jesus”) is greater because he fights and gives the land, being God himself, a land where no evil exists, a land where sorrow and pain and death are no more. A land that is eternal rest for his people. And becoming his people, the people of God, is the third fulfillment as Jesus was circumcised because the promised “seed”, the messiah, has arrived, and through him all peoples are brought to the kingdom of God. Thus circumcision has come to an end because Jesus is the promise of circumcision.

And there’s the naming at the same time as well. We have already heard from Mathew's account concerning the meaning of his name, which means “Yahweh saves” because he will save his people from their sins. But for Jesus, this is no ordinary name. again, it’s another paradox because the name “Jesus” was a very common name, yet Paul would say that it is the name above every name, before which all knees should bow. It is a great name because that is the name of God. Biblical names are not merely identifying tags to distinguish one person from another, but they often describe the nature and work of the person. And the name of God is more than a description but it is a blessing in itself. And as we heard in our Old Testament reading for today, the name of God can be put on a person, again like a branding or marking, so that where the name of God is, that’s where God himself will be to be with them and bless them.

All of these things are wonderful promises and blessings to the people, but only if they have faith, and only if they live a righteous life that is by faith. Many people are circumcised but how many remains in that covenant and promise? Many carry the name of God, but how many use that name to curse others? And how often have we been a blessing to others in word and deed? How often have we shared both material and spiritual blessing to others?

That’s why we have the circumcision of Jesus, which is more than fulfilling the law as Paul connects Jesus’ circumcision with baptism. Listen to what Paul says in Colossians 2: “**11**In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, **12**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. **13**And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, **14**by cancelling

the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”

Here we have Jesus’ circumcision, his baptism, and his cross, all described as one single event that happened at our baptisms. That means our baptism is a circumcision made without hands, it something done to us by God, for what purpose? It is to put away the flesh, to die with Christ so that new life may rise with him. The faith that we lack, the wavering faith that seems to fail, and this cursed life of sin may seem to overwhelm us, but we are reminded today that Jesus was circumcised, and it was done for us because when he steps into that Jordan river to be baptized (which is the Gospel reading for next week), Jesus tells us that it is to fulfill all righteousness. He didn’t need to be baptized, he didn’t need to be washed, he didn’t need to be forgiven, but he was baptized to complete his work of salvation for us.

And baptism of course is also where God has put his name on us. In a way, baptism is like the Old Testament covenant, but only much much superior and better in every way. With his name applied to us, we can know that he is always with us until the end of the age. And because he is always with us, we have the blessings, his protection, his light, his grace, and his peace forever and ever.

In our baptism, God removes our cursed and sinful flesh so that we may be renewed again and again. It is in baptism that you draw strength and power to overcome temptations and sins. By simply remembering that you are baptized into his name, that you are now a child of God, a holy person who will inherit the coming kingdom, you are being renewed to live a righteous life that is by faith.

This is how we are to start a new year and every day of our lives actually. It’s the same message but one that needs to be kept in our hearts and minds every day. As we now enter a new year, there are many things we want to do and accomplish, but let us not forget first of all who we are. We are people baptized, a circumcision without hands, to be made anew in Jesus. We are children of Abraham by virtue of these promises and blessings. Let this baptismal blessing be a blessing to those around us.