

The Circumcision and Name of Jesus
January 1, 2017
Luke 2:21

“A Name Etched in Blood”

Happy New Year! Everybody knows that today, January 1, is New Year’s Day and we usher in the new year of our Lord that is 2017. Folks may be a bit bleary-eyed today after last night’s New Year’s Eve festivities. How many of you stayed up to midnight to ring in the New Year? And how many of you were blissfully asleep when this happened? Regardless, we gather in the house of the Lord today to seek his face and ask his blessing for the year ahead. On the church’s calendar, today is more than just the start of a new calendar year. Within the Body of Christ, we follow the life of Christ that governs the days and seasons of the year. And today, January 1, is exactly eight days after Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. This day we observe the Circumcision and Name of Jesus, and we do so under the theme, “A Name Etched in Blood.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

According to the Levitical law of Judaism (Leviticus 12:2-8), on the eighth day after a male child was born he was to be circumcised and so become part of God’s covenant people. This practice began with God’s promise to Abraham (Genesis 17:1-14), and continued with each generation. It was customary for the child to be formally named at the time of circumcision, which is exactly what that closing verse in today’s Gospel lesson tells us. Joseph and Mary, being devout members of God’s covenant people through Abraham, fulfilled what the Law required of them on the eighth day after Jesus’s birth. Obedient to what the angel of the Lord told him to do (Matthew 1:21), Joseph, together with Mary, named their baby boy, Jesus.

Talking about circumcision in a sermon may seem like T.M.I. – too much information. I think of this every time my family watches the movie, “The Nativity.” Anyone familiar with this film? Although it does have some historical inaccuracies, it’s a really well done movie that portrays the people and events surrounding the birth of Jesus. One scene deals with the birth and circumcision of John the Baptist, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:57-66), who is Jesus’ cousin. To this day, family and friends gather for the circumcision, called a *bris* ceremony by Jewish people. The *mohel* is the person who is trained to administer the ritual of circumcision. In the movie, adolescent boys have gathered around to witness this, and seeing firsthand what’s involved, they back away with very uncertain looks on their faces. Like I said, T.M.I. So why is this even on the church calendar in the first place? It’s about the shedding of blood. Very early in his life when only eight days old, Jesus’ blood is already being shed. This first shedding of blood foreshadows what is to come when Jesus’ life blood will be poured out upon the cross. It is in the shedding of his blood that we are given new life, for **“the blood of Jesus God’s Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:7).

Names are important, but do you know where your name comes from and what it means? Jesus’ Name is who his Name says He is: Savior. As the angel made known to Joseph, this Child would **“save his people from their sins”** (Matthew 1:21). And that is exactly what we need – not a CEO, not a president or prime minister, not a military leader. What we need is a Savior. A savior is one who saves, and this demands sacrifice, something which almost any world religion recognizes. In order for there to be forgiveness for sins and transgressions, there must be sacrifice, which most often involves the shedding of blood. The Law of Moses called for the blood of sheep, goats, doves, and bulls to be shed (Leviticus 4-7) in place of the people’s blood; something had to stand in to atone for their sins. Thus, a continuous offering of animal sacrifice was needed to atone for sin, day in and day out, year after year. It never ended – not until Jesus came (Hebrews 9:11-28; 10:11-14): **“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being saved”** (Hebrews 10:14). Jesus came to live that perfect and sinless life that we could not

and cannot, in obedience to all the demands of the Law. Jesus came to do for us what we could not and cannot do for ourselves. Jesus' Name is etched in blood – his own blood, beginning with that infant blood at his circumcision. Through the shedding of his precious blood, the Name of Jesus is now above every Name, so that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11).

Our worship services close with the Benediction, the blessing that pronounces those familiar words: **“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace”** (Numbers 6:24-26). But then, as we heard in today's Old Testament lesson, there is a verse which follows. The Lord instructed Aaron through Moses: **“So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them”** (Numbers 6:27). We, too, have had the Name of God placed upon us, beginning in our Baptism when we were marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit, having been baptized into the Name of our Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. On the first day of this new year, it is the saving Name of Jesus, etched in blood, that is lifted up and placed upon the people of God that we may be blessed through faith in this holy Name. And that is a very good way to begin this new year. May it be so with us now and throughout this new year. Amen.