

January 1, 2017 Circumcision & Name Of Jesus – Luke 2:21 (Sermon by Martin Luther)

On this day it is the popular custom to distribute New Year's gifts from the pulpit, as if there were not enough other useful and beneficial matters to preach about, instead of useless tales surrounding the New Year. The Gospel for this day requires us to preach on the circumcision and the name of Jesus; and that is what we are thus going to do.

Let us first ask that wise woman, Madam Jezebel, natural reason: Is it not a foolish, ridiculous, useless command when God demands circumcision of Abraham? Could He find no other part of the body except this one? Moreover, the Jews suffered a great deal of humiliation and shame on account of it and were despised by all the world because of it. After all, there is no use in it. What benefit is served by mutilating the body in this way? It does not make a person any better for it, since everything depends upon the soul.

But such are all of God's commandments and works. In our eyes they appear foolish and useless. This, however, is done in order that proud reason, which deems herself so clever and wise, may be put to shame and blinded, give up her arrogance, and submit herself to God, give Him honor, and believe everything that He appoints . . . even though she does not see it and thinks quite differently about it. Therefore, God was not really concerned about circumcision, but about the humiliation of proud nature and human reason.

So, also, in the New Testament we have baptism, in order that we should be buried in the water, and believe that we are thereby cleansed from sins and saved; also, that Christ's body is in the bread of the altar; also, that we worship a crucified man as Lord and God. All this is immeasurably far above and contrary to reason. Thus all the works and words of God are contrary to reason; and reason, in turn, is contrary to God. And they collide over the sign which is spoken against. In all this God seeks nothing but humility . . . that we take captive our reason and simply subject ourselves to the divine truth. So Abraham and his seed received the foolish rite of circumcision in order that by it they would give glory to God and permit Him alone to be wise.

Now, circumcision was an external mark by which God's people were known in distinction from other nations; just as a prince gives his people and army his standard and watchword by which they are known among themselves and by which foreigners can tell to what lord they belong. Thus the Israelites were known by circumcision; that was their divine mark. Our mark is baptism and the body of Christ. For this reason the ancient fathers called these "*signs*". . . what we now call "*sacraments*," that is, "*sacred signs*." For where there is baptism, there are certainly Christians, wherever they happen to be in the world.

Let this be enough concerning the temporal reason for circumcision. We will now look at the spiritual reason and its significance. First, why did God not command to circumcise a finger, hand, foot, ear, or eye, or some other member of the body? Why did He select that which was created for procreation and natural increase? After all, if the purpose was to cut off evil, then certainly the hand or the tongue, of all members, ought to have been circumcised; for by the tongue and hand all wickedness is perpetrated among us.

Some have said that it was done for this reason – because evil lust shows itself the most in this part of the body. And for this reason Adam and Eve felt the disobedience of their flesh there, and sought a covering for their nakedness.

That is all true; but something else is portrayed here too – and which we must always stress; namely, that God does not condemn or save a person on account of his works, as the Scriptures clearly state in many places. Accordingly, our fault lies not in our works, but in our nature. Our person,

our nature, our entire existence is corrupt in us because of Adam's fall. Therefore, not a single work can be good in us until our nature and very being are changed and renewed. After all, if the tree is not good, then the fruits will be bad.

But if God had commanded to circumcise the hand or the tongue, this would have been a sign that the fault simply lay in our works or words; and that He was kindly disposed toward our nature and person. But in selecting that member of the body whose main function is the creation of our very nature and being and existence, He clearly indicates that the fault lies in our entire being and nature, and that from birth we are corrupt and sinful. This is called original sin, or the sin of the nature, or the sin of the person – the truly chief sin. If this did not exist, there would not even be any actual sin. For this sin is not done like all other sins; but it exists, lives, and produces all sins . . . and is the essential sin that sins not for an hour or a season, but wherever and as long as a person lives.

Moreover, this nature sin can be eradicated by no law, by no punishment, not even if there were a thousand hells; but by the grace of God alone, which makes the nature pure and new. The law only manifests it and reveals it, but does not save us from it. The law can indeed restrain the hand or the tongue, but it cannot restrain a person from being sinful. And just as little as it lies in one's power to be born and to receive natural existence, so little does it lie in his power to be without sin or to escape from it. No, only He who has created us can take it away. Therefore, He first gives the law, by which we recognize this sin and thirst for grace; and then also gives the Gospel and saves us.

In the second place, why does God command only males to be circumcised when nature and birth involve the woman also? The psalmist, after all, laments more over the mother than the father when he says: ***“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”*** It was done, obviously, for the sake of Christ and His mother because He was to come as a natural man and person, could be born of a woman, and, yet, without sin and without intercourse. For in all conception from a man, there is sin in both man and woman. And so, He made use of her womanly flesh and body for natural birth, but not for natural conception, and was conceived and born a true man without sin. But because only a sinful birth, nature, and person can come from a man, circumcision was imposed upon males only, in order to show that every birth from man is sinful and condemned, requiring circumcision and change. Here one might apply what St. John writes: ***“To all who received Him, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”***

In the third place, why did circumcision have to take place on the eighth day? Here again natural sin is once more indicated. For the poor babe surely has no actual sin of its own; nevertheless, he must be circumcised and so receive the sign of the cleansing from sin. But if God had commanded to circumcise after eight years, one might say that it was done for sins already committed. But by commanding to circumcise on the eighth day, He indicates that a greater sin than any actual sin is being born . . . our sinful human nature.

To be sure, Abraham first believed and afterwards was circumcised, and others after him were first circumcised and then believed. Both truths must stand; namely, that circumcision is only a sign of justification and nobody is justified by it; and that faith justifies alone without circumcision. . . so that faith and its sign are clearly distinguished.

In addition, the eighth day was perhaps appointed also for physical reasons . . . that the babe might first become a little stronger so that it should not appear that it had died from circumcision. Yet, the spiritual significance is of greater importance. Seven days signify the time of this world up to the Last Day, because this present time is measured by weeks or seven days as described in Genesis. The eighth day is the Last Day after this present time, when weeks and months and years shall cease and there will be only an eternal day. On that day circumcision will be fulfilled, when not only the soul,

but also the body, shall be freed from sin, death and all impurity, and shall shine as the sun. In the meantime, the soul is circumcised from sin and an evil conscience through faith.

So we see that the Scriptures in all places direct us to faith – to faith alone in Christ. Therefore, circumcision was not given by the law of Moses, but to Abraham, to whom Christ, his seed, was promised as a blessing and to bring a blessing to all people.

Why then has circumcision come to an end, even though that same faith in Christ, to which it points, still remains? The answer: God has always, from the beginning of the world until the end, maintained one faith in Christ; but He has not given only one sign of it . . . but has foreshadowed it by many external signs in order that people might be incited to believe, and has permitted each sign to continue for its appointed time. So when God promised to Abraham the blessings in his seed and gave to him a sign of it, namely circumcision; it could no longer exist when that promise was finally fulfilled; namely, when Christ, the blessed Seed of Abraham, came. But that which it signified – faith, always remains.

Moreover, God never establishes the same sign again after its purpose has come to an end, but always instituted other signs. So after the fulfillment of His promise, after the coming of Christ, he instituted a new and different sign, namely, baptism. This, to be sure, is the last sign to be instituted before the Last Day, because He established it for all time until the end of the age. Nevertheless, the same faith in Christ, which was in Abraham, abides always. Thus, baptism has the same significance as circumcision . . . but this we will say something about at another time.

Finally, it was the custom to give the child its name when he was circumcised, as we see here and in the instance of John the Baptist. However, just as Christ was not obliged to be circumcised and this sign was empty in His case . . . being without sin; so also His name had been given to Him before by the angel, so that He did not obtain it by circumcision. This was done to show that He, above and alone from all other men, was free from the law and from sin, and serves us by submitting to the law and becoming like us in order to redeem us from sin; as St. Paul says in Galatians: ***“He was born under the law to redeem those who were under the law.”***

His name is rightly called on this day *“Jesus,”* that is Savior . . . the One who saves, redeems, brings salvation, and is of help to everyone. So the angel Gabriel said to Joseph in a dream: ***“Mary will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”***

Now, as circumcision signifies our faith, as we have heard: so the naming of children signifies that by faith we are known before God by name. For God knows none of those who do not believe, as is said in the Psalm: ***“The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”*** And as our Lord Christ has said: ***“Truly, I say to you, ‘I do not know you’.***” What, then, is our name? Without a doubt, as Christ bestows upon us all that is His, so He also bestows upon us His own name. We are thus called Christians after Him, children of God after Him. There is, therefore, no limit to the status and honor of being a Christian. For these are abundant riches of His goodness which He pours out upon us, so that our hearts might be free, joyful, peaceful, and undaunted; and so willingly and cheerfully keep the law. Amen.