

The Circumcision and Name of Jesus
St. Luke 2:21

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

After all the ooohing and ahhhhing over a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger, the Church reminds her members that the season of Christmas—these 12 days counting from December 25—is a bloody season.

- The second day of Christmas is St. Stephen, often referred to as the first martyr. It was shortly after Jesus ascended that Stephen was martyred, stoned to death for proclaiming Christ and Him crucified, shedding his blood for the sake of the faith into which you also were baptized.
- The fourth day of Christmas is the Holy Innocents, the first to die because of Christ. The Church often refers to them as martyrs, but they didn't die because of what they proclaimed or what they did, but simply because they were young enough to be mistaken for the Infant King and Priest, Jesus.

After the First Day of Christmas, the day that Jesus' nativity is observed and celebrated, the rest of the season points to the bloodshed that Jesus' coming has brought.

That includes this day. Today, this first day of a new year, is the Eighth Day of Christmas. Eight days after a Hebrew or Jewish boy was born, a priest or rabbi is invited in to perform the ritual circumcision. Harkening all the way back to Abraham, the circumcision set Hebrew or Jewish men apart as claimed by God. These were His people, His men—the men of His chosen nation. The law was set: all males of the Hebrew people had to be circumcised on their eighth day.

This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. (Genesis 17:10-13)

It was a sign of the covenant in their flesh, "I will be their God and they shall be My people." (cf. Jeremiah 32:38; 2 Corinthians 6:16) It wasn't just about being claimed, but about salvation. First, the people were God's people, and He would save them through the promise; in fact, when God instituted the covenant, He says that the uncircumcised male is cut off from the people. (cf. Genesis 17:14) But, more than that, these are the people through whom YHWH's salvation would come—the promise—and their circumcised flesh is a constant reminder of that.

In today's short text, it is Jesus' eighth day, and He is circumcised. He is fulfilling the covenant made between God and Abraham. He is keeping the Law, even as He is subjected to it. He receives circumcision, and is proclaimed to be one of God's people. Let that sink in for a moment. The Law declared that circumcision set apart the male who received it one of God's people, and if he didn't receive it, he was cut off from God's people; Jesus' receives circumcision, and by that God declares Himself to be one of His people.

And He had to for this reason as well: He is the fulfillment of the promise. God had to become one of His own in order to save His own. As the Evangelist wrote, "He came to His own." (John 1:11) God lived among His people as one of them—He was one of them. He walked among them, talked with them, ate and drank with them. And He taught them. He proclaimed the nearness of the Kingdom of God to them—after all, He was the embodiment of that Kingdom. He proclaimed that He was the fulfillment of everything that had been promised in the Law and the Prophets.

And for it all, He was hated to the point of death. Many times, the elders, chief priests, and scribes tried to kill Jesus. Many times, the people also took up stones to throw at Him. It wasn't until a more opportune time—just the right time, you could say—that they got exactly what they wanted, and what all men needed. Jesus fulfilled the Law once again as the sacrifice to end all sin. Jesus shed His blood as “the propitiation for [your] sins, and not for [yours] only but also for the whole world.” (1 John 2:2) This happened first at His circumcision, and ultimately, at just the right time, as He was beaten to within an inch of His life, and finally gave His life upon the cross. “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)

This bleeding is keeping in step with the rest of this season of Christmas. God is incarnate of the virgin Mary by the Holy Ghost in order to assume flesh and blood. It is that first step, you could say, of God becoming one of His people. He assumes flesh and blood in order to shed His blood in keeping the Law, as the propitiation for sin, and give His flesh over to death in order to be the defeat of the death sentence that befell all humanity when Eve took of the forbidden fruit, ate some, and gave some to her silent husband. (cf. Genesis 3:6, 14-19)

And in order to seal this, as Jesus is circumcised, He receives His name, “the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.” In matter of fact, it was the name He was given before time in eternity: Y'shua, Joshua, Jesus. His name means YHWH saves. No one else does, just YHWH. YHWH is your salvation, and He saves you by shedding His blood on a cursed tree in order to overthrow for you the curse of the tree in the midst of the Garden. His cross is for you a life-giving tree, as His flowing blood is to you a river of life—your life in Christ.

Jesus—YHWH saves—is your salvation. He is the fulfillment of the Law for you. He kept the Law perfectly where you could not, where you would not. Every command and precept, He kept to the letter, where you never do. Jesus is the fulfillment! He also paid in full the demand that the Law makes of your life for your failure to keep it perfectly. The Law says, “Do this,” you never do it, and for it, the punishment is death. There, upon the cross is the punishment meted out for every last sin of every last person—those that have been committed, those that are being committed, and those that are yet to be committed.

God had given the Law knowing full well that you would never be able to keep it. He knew full well that you would never measure up perfectly to His demanding standard. But that doesn't make God the author of your sin; He simply and justly shows you the standard by which your lives are to be considered holy. Neither does that make Him merciless; for in knowing that you would not be able to keep the Law, He deigned from before the foundation of the world to be the one Himself who would keep it for you, both actively as He carried out the demands of His Law, and also passively as He assumed into His own flesh your sinfulness and received the punishment you and every sinner deserves.

And so, He receives His name, Jesus. It is the name of wondrous love, for it shows you just how much God loves you, that He would become your Savior. It expresses that in the person of Jesus is the promise kept that God would save His people. It is the name by which you, as you just sang, burst your fetters and are saved.

And, dear Baptized, it is the name which you, yourselves, have also received, as you heard from Paul's letter just a little while ago. There, at that most blessed font, you received the sign of Jesus' cross upon your foreheads and breasts to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. You were washed in the water and the Word, which is Jesus. Inasmuch as you were marked by the cross and washed in the water, the name Jesus was applied to you in order to tell you that YHWH saves you! In Jesus, He has, for in that flood, your sins were washed off of you and onto Jesus who died with them in your place. Those sins—your sins—are now not yours but His, and for them, Jesus has paid the full price and given you the benefit. This is the promise sealed to you in Holy Baptism.

And it also happens to be why, dear men of the congregation, that you no longer need to be circumcised to mark you as one of God's people and remind you of your place before the Father in heaven. You are baptized, that is the covenant that God has made with you. There, at the font, God called out your name and said, "You are my son." And this is just as true of you dear women of the congregation, for there is neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus. (cf.) By way of baptism into Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, you are all, male and female, made sons of God in Christ.

It is no wonder, then, that traditionally, baptismal fonts are eight-sided. There, you are baptized into the Eighth Day of creation, the New Creation, for you are a new creature in Christ. Six days God labored, on the seventh day He rested, and on His eighth day as part of the creation, He received His name—Jesus. You, too, receive that name at the eight-sided font wherein you are ushered into the New Creation, though for a while you still live as part of the Old Creation.

Here, in this Old Creation, there is still suffering and bloodshed, new year or not. But, as I said, that is part and parcel of this season of Christmas. The saints in Christ still have their blood shed and lose their lives for the sake of the faith in Christ, as did St. Stephen. They still are slaughtered for the sake of who Jesus the Christ is, like the Innocents of Bethlehem. But, for them all, Jesus shed His blood as their propitiation—not only as theirs, but also as yours. He first tasted that human woe for you on His eighth day, but most especially on the day that He gave up His Spirit and breathed His last. He tasted human woe for you, dear hearer; therefore, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.