

## **Radical Surgery**

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The appointed Gospel lesson for this morning, consisting of just one verse, is one that often gets overlooked and neglected. It's wedged between the familiar story of our Savior's birth that immediately precedes it, what with the manger, angels, shepherds and all, and the almost as familiar account of the presentation of Jesus at the Temple. That's the episode that takes place forty days after Jesus' birth in which an old man named Simeon, the eyes of whose soul have been given special insight by the Holy Spirit, recognizes the baby Jesus as God in the flesh. So, he takes him from his mother's arms, and exclaims, "Lord, now let your servant go in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation!" Sitting neatly in the shadow of these two major events (and thus virtually eclipsed by them) is this brief mention that on the eighth day after his birth, the infant Lord was circumcised and given the name Jesus.

But it's not just the brevity of the account nor its being overshadowed by the stories that surround it that causes it to be skipped over so lightly. No, we pass it by with little or no comment because it deals with *circumcision*: a topic we Christians tend to avoid. We do so for several reasons. First because under the new covenant, circumcision has lost its spiritual significance and we don't do it anymore – at least not for any religious reasons. Secondly because ... well ...it's an *indelicate* topic, treating, as it does, a surgical procedure that's *most* personal in nature. We're relieved that we don't have to deal with it anymore. And finally, I think it's fair to say that circumcision is a topic most of us really don't understand. I mean, c'mon, of all the ways the Lord God could have asked his Old Testament people to keep the covenant he made with them, don't you think it's just a little weird that he'd command what amounts to the disfigurement of half the population's genitalia? What's up with that? I can easily picture ninety-nine-year-old Abraham standing there first hearing this demand and saying, "Excuse me, O Lord, but you want me to do what? Any chance you'd consider an alternative – something a little less painful?" And so, for all of these reasons: because it's a covenant sign that's been superseded, that's uncomfortable to talk about, and we just don't get, it happens that when this passage about Jesus being circumcised is mentioned at all it's usually only to say, "The Lord commanded it; and because Jesus was sent to fulfill the whole Law for us, he had to undergo the procedure too. Got it? Okay. Let's move on to the next topic."

This is unfortunate, because by doing this we rob ourselves of an important part of God's message to us. Consider that for the Old Testament saints, circumcision was (as it is for Jews still today) a really big deal. And for the 2000 years leading up to Christ's birth, as long as the Christian church has practiced baptism as the physical sign of the covenant of God's grace, circumcision was practiced by God's people for the very same purpose. And just as baptism is invested by the Scriptures with a vast array of spiritual themes that include washing, rebirth, re-creation, and being clothed Christ, to name only a few, so also God used circumcision to convey a number of concepts that if we take the time to investigate, we will come away with greater insight into God's gracious work for us in Christ Jesus, as well as a more thorough understanding of their implications for our own baptisms in Jesus' name.

Therefore, setting aside our squeamishness about the topic, as well as any inappropriate sense of prudery, let's boldly go forward into this frontier where no man has willingly gone before, and ask the question: what's circumcision all about?

First, it's worth noting that the Lord commanded that it was to take place on the *eighth* day. That's not just an arbitrary number; but one loaded with meaning. Recall that when God set the clock in motion at the time of creation, he arranged the days in cycles of seven: six for work, one for rest. So, *seven* conveys the idea of one complete time period. Eight, then, conveys the idea of the beginning of something new: a brand-new time period. This is the reason Christ died on a Friday, the sixth day. The idea is that God had finished his work of redeeming the fallen world by Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. On the seventh day he rests. And then on Easter Sunday, the *eighth* day, he rises to begin bringing forth the new creation. *That's* what we have going on in eighth day circumcision. There's the life that comes before, the purely natural life – the one that leads nowhere and ends in death, and it has to run its course; but then comes the new life – the one under the covenant of God's grace. This is the life that lasts forever; but it begins with what can only be described as some radical surgery.

And that leads us to the second idea inherent in circumcision, which is the cutting off and casting away the flesh. It's a physical sign of repentance, a tangible expression that a person is not just a little sick with sin, like he has a cold or flu that will get better after a while; but that he has an incurable disease that must end in death. Circumcision physically illustrates that for the new life of faith to begin, the sinful old flesh must first die – that is it must die the death of contrition, of being sorry for sin and recognizing that it cannot change. Ultimately it prefigures the death of the whole body and life of the sinner, which precedes the resurrection to eternal life.

Now, if this is making sense to you, maybe you're thinking, "Okay, I've got this stuff about the new life on the eighth day, and the destruction and death of the sinful flesh. That's making sense—in fact, it sounds a lot like what we Lutherans believe about Baptism. But what I'm not getting is why *that particular piece* of flesh? It's still a strange thing for God to ask." Well, if that's where you are, it might help you to understand that in both Hebrew and Greek, the original languages of the Bible, the words for *descendant*, *offspring*, *seed*, and *a male's sexual emission* are all one and the same word. And you can see how they are all related: they all have to do with how one, the parent – specifically the male parent – gives life to another: a new life that grows from what was once part of the father. With this in mind we can now see that God commands this repentant removal of the flesh to take place at the source or the point of origin of new life. And this is key because the promise God gives to Abraham that is sealed and signed by the covenant of circumcision is a promise made to him and to his *seed*, or his *descendants*, forever. The promise looks to its fulfillment in the future by the next generation and all those generations that are yet to follow. It's a promise fulfilled in the seed.

This works on two levels. On one hand, the promise to Abraham was that he would be the father of a great multitude – of many nations. The Lord told him that he would become the father of descendants as countless as the stars or the grains of sand on the seashore. So, each successive generation of Abraham's seed was a link in the chain and a partial fulfillment of that promise. And therefore, each male descendant, like Abraham, was to bear the mark of the covenant in his own body at the place of life's source – the means in his flesh by which God fulfilled the promise. That's one aspect of it; but there was an even greater fulfillment of the promise that was to be carried out by one particular Seed (or Descendant) of Abraham, because the Lord had promised to raise up the Savior of the world through his progeny. So, Abraham and all who came after him carried in their procreative flesh the reminder that all their hope ultimately depended upon one specific child who was to come. *He* would be the one to establish the everlasting kingdom and the rights of inheritance for all Abraham's offspring to the eternal Promised Land. But again, the sign of circumcision kept the focus of attention and hope looking forward to the One who was to come of Abraham's line.

And with this in mind, we don't want to miss the fact that circumcision is a bloody covenant. It involves pain and bloodshed, and so it has a *sacrificial* character to it; thus pointing ahead to the fact that the Seed of Abraham who was to come and ultimately fulfill the promise would do so by being himself cut off and cast away as the atoning sacrifice for sin. He who knew no sin would become sin for us, and for our sakes he would be made to suffer God's wrath. And in so doing, he would become the source of eternal life for all Abraham's descendants.

So hopefully you see that there's a whole lot of meaning in circumcision. It wasn't just an empty ritual. But while we're on the topic, a question that invariably arises is "What about the females? Since they could not undergo circumcision, were they excluded from the covenant?" The answer is no, not at all. And to understand this it's important to see that while the covenant promise sealed by circumcision looks forward for its fulfillment, actual participation in the covenant looks backward. The promise is to Abraham *and his descendants* – not just the male ones. So, if someone were to ask, "Am I included in this covenant?" or better yet, "Am I an heir according to the promise?" The place to look is back one generation. If my father is circumcised, the answer is, "Yes. I am the seed of Abraham and one to whom the promise applies." You were born into the covenant by right of birth. And parents circumcised their male children with a view toward ensuring that their grandchildren would be heirs of the promise too.

All of which highlights something else that's important about the covenant of circumcision: it was one of pure grace. As I said, you were born into it because of who your father was – and even he didn't choose it. Except for the occasional adult convert to the faith, no one willingly chose circumcision. It was something normally done to eight-day old infants who surely did a lot of kicking and screaming, but who were in no position to stop it. The point is that's how the Lord works with sinful people: by grace. We don't do anything but receive his gracious action. And though sometimes that involves a lot of reluctant kicking and screaming on our part, it's he who destroys the old flesh with his Law. And he's the one who grants new life by creating faith in his promise.

And now, this morning, we observe how all of this about the covenant of circumcision is fulfilled when Christ our Lord, on the eighth day of his earthly life, undergoes the procedure himself and first sheds his holy blood for sinners. And it's no coincidence that as he begins to bleed, he is given the name *Jesus*, which means "the Lord saves"; "For", as the angel told his parents, "he will save his people from their sins." How it is possible for him to do so, we know because we have the inside story. Though legally, in a fleshly sort of way, Jesus is a descendant of Abraham; but having just reviewed again the story of his miraculous conception and birth, we know that his true Father is not a man named Joseph, but God the Father in heaven. So instead of being born of the sinful and perishable seed of fallen man, Jesus is born of the imperishable Seed from above – which is God's Word, as St. John says at the beginning of his Gospel: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Or, as we heard Paul say it, "In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily".

The upshot of that is the circumcision of Jesus is different than all those that came before it. In him there was no sinful flesh to cut off and cast away. He was instead circumcised to place himself under the obligations of the law so that he could become our substitute when later he surrendered his whole body to suffering, bloodshed, and death.

And when he did die as our substitute and rise again to life, circumcision lost its significance. No longer did the promise of God to Abraham have to look for its fulfillment in the

future in the line of his descendants. From then on, the promise had to look backward to its completion in Christ. This is why we see the sign of the covenant change immediately after the Lord's resurrection. Jesus doesn't command his disciples to go out and circumcise, but to *baptize* in his name. The focus goes from Someone who *is to be* born, to Someone who *has already been* born, and who suffered, died, and rose again. And now, when we are baptized, that's what we become part of. Through the faith God creates in us by his Holy Spirit working through water and the Word – which is the imperishable Seed from above – we are given new life in Christ. We are born again from above and we become children and heirs of the promise.

So, what I'd like you to see is that circumcision and baptism are really just two sides of the same coin. Both are the means God gave his people to physically participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ through faith in his promise. And both are all about new life in him. I think that's especially important for us as today, a theologically loaded eight days after we celebrated the Lord's birth, we begin a new calendar year. You know, a lot of people make resolutions at this time. They make vows to change this or that about their lives – usually nothing major, mind you; more like the moral equivalent of a tummy tuck or face lift. I'd like to suggest something different. With Paul in this morning's Epistle, I'd like to suggest for us all some more radical surgery: the circumcision of our hearts. He writes:

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ... Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ... In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put-on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Now, *that's* a worthwhile New Year's resolution for the children of God in Christ Jesus. I pray that you make it yours; for by his grace, he will accomplish it in you. We have the Lord's promise on it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***