

A New Beginning

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Today is a day just like another any other on the calendar. And though that's true, we afford it a special weight and significance because it's the first day of an entirely new year. Traditionally on New Year's Day people take the time to reflect upon the past, remembering its joys and sorrows, its gains and losses, its triumphs and defeats. It's also an occasion to deliberately forget the mistakes that were made in the past year, and to start over with a clean slate. It's a new beginning: a time to look forward to the future with renewed determination to make changes for the better. We call this making New Year's resolutions. And these resolutions are good things because there's no one who couldn't stand some improvement. Perhaps you've already made some resolutions for the New Year; and if not, I encourage you to do so, whatever they happen to be: maybe to eat better and more healthily, to exercise more, to give up an unwise or unhealthy habit, to make a point of staying in better contact with family and friends, to be wiser and more frugal about spending your time or money, to read more or watch less TV; maybe to achieve some goal that has been sitting on the backburner way too long. And while you're making resolutions, don't forget the spiritual side of your life; perhaps resolving to be more consistent in setting aside time for prayer and for private or family devotions, to do more Bible reading, to attend a study, to try to be more regular in attending Sunday services in order to feed your faith so that in and through you the Spirit can accomplish more good for Christ and his kingdom. These are all good things; and like I said, it's a new year. What's past is past; it's water under the bridge. It's time for a new beginning.

And so it was also for Jesus as we heard in today's very brief reading from the Gospel of St. Luke. On the eighth day after his birth he was circumcised in accordance with the Law and he was given the name Jesus. At first brush that may not sound like much; but there's actually a lot going on in that brief sentence – a lot going on that speaks of new beginnings both for Jesus and for us. So allow me to unpack some of it for you.

There is first the number eight. We could ask, "Why was Jesus circumcised on the 8th day?" A simple answer would be: "Because the Lord told his people to circumcise their sons on that day." But that would miss an important part of what we're being told. As I've mentioned before, some numbers are theologically loaded; that is, they are used to convey certain spiritual concepts. And eight is one of those numbers. In general, it tends to signify a new start, a new beginning, and the idea of re-creation. How's that? Well, consider that *four* tends to be the number the Bible associates with the Creation. It speaks of the four corners of the earth, the four winds, the four principle directions, and so on. You've also got everything about the earth itself and solar system all completed by the fourth day of Creation. So if four is Creation, then twice four – eight – is the re-creation.

You've also got the week that God establishes. In six days he completes all of his work and the seventh day he rests. He lays this down as the pattern for all his Creation to follow. So, if seven days complete one cycle, then the eighth day is the beginning of a new cycle. This is highlighted again in the New Testament. Jesus dies on a Friday, the sixth day; six being a number associated with man because God made man on day six. On the seventh day Jesus (God) rests from his labor on the cross – the labor by which he earned our salvation and made possible the re-creation. Then on the eighth day he rises from the dead – and if that's not a new beginning, I don't know what is.

And then there's the flood that happened in the days of Noah, through which Noah and his family, *eight* souls in all, were preserved from the destruction that fell on the rest of the world. These eight people were the ones who inherited the newly washed and restored earth – a re-creation of sorts. This, incidentally, is why baptismal fonts in many churches have eight sides, because in Baptism God grants new life and makes us part of his New Creation in Christ.

So it's not arbitrary that the Lord chose the 8th day for circumcision; there's a message there about a new beginning. But what about circumcision itself; what was *that* all about? Again, a short answer is that it was a key part and the principle sign of the covenant that the Lord made with Abraham and his descendants after him. But to understand *why* it was part of the covenant is going to require some explanation. Let's start with Abraham. Remember Him? He's the guy the Lord called out of the lands from the east, from beyond the Euphrates River. The Lord chose Abraham, called him, and he promised to make of him a great nation, and to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan as their inheritance. Most importantly, the Lord promised to bring the Savior into the world through Abraham's line of offspring. And all of that sounded pretty good to Abraham. He believed what the Lord told him. So he packed up his stuff, and with Sarah his wife he traveled to Canaan. There he found that it was a very good land, just as the Lord had said.

But there were a couple of problems. The first was that the land was already occupied. There were lots of people – idol worshipping pagan people – living there. Abraham must have wondered how the Lord was going to give him this land when those who were already living there probably planned to pass it down to their children. And that leads to the second problem: Abraham and Sarah didn't have any children – not a one. Not only that, but when the Lord called Abraham, he was already 75 years old and Sarah was 65. They had spent many sad and disappointing years trying to have a baby, and they had long since given up on the idea. But hey, the Lord promised them; so even at their advanced age, they were hopeful.

But it didn't happen. After living in Canaan for 11 years or so, and still no baby, they were desperate. It seemed to them that the Lord was not keeping his word. They figured they'd have to help the Lord make his promise come true. So Sarah, who was now 76 and well passed her childbearing years, suggested that Abraham attempt to father a child by her maidservant, a young Egyptian woman named Hagar. The idea was that because Hagar belonged to Sarah (she was a slave), by a sort of legal fiction that was popular back then, her child could technically be considered the offspring of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham went along with this idea and sure enough, Hagar conceived and gave birth to a son whom she named Ishmael. And the boy was the pride of Abraham's life.

But this wasn't the Lord's plan. He doesn't want and he certainly doesn't need human help to make his promises come true. So after another 13 years had passed, the Lord came to Abraham and said, "Now I'm going to give you the son I promised; and Sarah is going to be his mother." They both laughed at this. They couldn't see how it was possible that at 99 and 89 respectively, they could become parents. But the Lord insisted that it was true. At this time next year, he said, Sarah will be holding your son in her arms.

And it was at this point that the Lord gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. It had to be done now, before this miracle child was conceived. He was to be a child conceived and born of the covenant; a covenant that depended upon what someone else (namely the father) had to do – had to *suffer in faith*. It's vital to understand this. Abraham already had the promises of God, even before he was circumcised. But the promise was made to Abraham *and to his offspring after him*. And so Abraham was to bear in his body (in his organ of procreation,

no less, the place from whence children proceed) a mark that wasn't so much for his own sake – he was already in the covenant with the Lord – *it was about his son*. The first child, the one conceived naturally by Abraham and Hagar without the covenant and sign of circumcision, was not considered an heir of the promise. The second child who was conceived miraculously after the sign of the covenant was the rightful heir – the one the Lord chose to bless. And so was everyone else subsequently born of the covenant. Taking this forward throughout the generations of God's people who followed, it's clear that parents didn't circumcise their sons to include them into the covenant, but rather to ensure that their grandchildren – whatever children their infant sons might father in future – were also made heirs of the promise.

And again, the point is that you don't become a child of the covenant because of what you do, or because of what happens to you; but rather because of what someone else, in this case your father, experienced. It's *his* keeping of the Law, it's *his* being cut and bleeding, that includes you. This explains why there was no corresponding sign to include females in the promise. It wasn't necessary because it wasn't about you. It was about your *father*. If he was circumcised, then regardless of your gender, you too were a child of the covenant and an heir to the promises of God.

And the main idea being stressed in all of this is grace. If you are a child of God and an heir of the promise, it has nothing to do with what you do; it's because God made you what you are. When Abraham tried to make the promise of God come true by his own effort and natural ability, the result was unacceptable to the Lord. He doesn't want our good works, our noble intentions, or our best efforts. We are sinners, and all we produce – even the best we produce – is sin and unacceptable to the Lord. No, to be a child of God everything depends on him. It depends on his supernatural work. And that's what happened to Abraham and Sarah. They were both given a new beginning. Though their bodies were dead to the possibility of procreation, with the covenant of circumcision and their faith in God's promises the Lord miraculously rejuvenated them to the point that they were both fertile. And Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac, the child of promise. And on the eighth day after his birth, he was circumcised to ensure that all of his children would be heirs of the promise too.

And that brings us back to Jesus, who is the ultimate Child of Promise, the one conceived not of the flesh or of natural ability; but supernaturally of God. He is one to whom all those generations of cutting and bleeding pointed. Why? Because he was the one who would ultimately suffer – suffer a horrifying death on a cross, where his bleeding body cut to ribbons by whips and his limbs pierced by nails hung in agony – in order that he might become the father of all the rest of God's children. It's his work, his suffering, his bleeding, and his dying that gives life to God's offspring. And we see this work beginning – his perfect fulfillment of the Law for us – on the 8th day of his life, when he was circumcised for us. And something else happened that day: he was given the name Jesus, which means “the Lord saves”. It's not a coincidence that he was given that name on the day that he first began to suffer and bleed for us. It was the first step in his mission to save us from our sins.

And it was the beginning of something new for the covenant that the Lord made with his people. What I mean is this: all those circumcisions over the generations of God's people were pointing to Christ and his work on the cross to save us from sin and make us God's children. So when Jesus was circumcised, circumcision lost its significance. It was no longer necessary. Jesus was the last one to whom it applied because now, in the Christian Church, he is the father of us all. And we may not be used to thinking of Jesus as our father, but in a sense, it's true. He is called the husband of his bride the Church. And through his ongoing work – his planting the Seed of his Word in her – she gives birth to sons and daughters through (wait for it) Holy

Baptism, of course. This is why we no longer circumcise boys for any religious reasons; and why instead everyone comes into the covenant of God's grace through their rebirth in Baptism.

That was your new beginning in Jesus: the day you were baptized. Then Jesus became your father by faith and it was then that the saving effect of his suffering and bleeding was applied to you. Then you were forgiven of all your sins, you were made an heir of God's promises in Christ, and you were given the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit who even now supernaturally gives you the ability to do things that are otherwise humanly impossible.

What things? Well, to have faith in Jesus, for starters. You can't do that on your own. If you believe, it's because God supernaturally worked in you the gift of faith. And it's the Spirit's ongoing supernatural strength and power that cause your faith to grow as you continue to hear and meditate upon the Word of God. With that faith come other supernatural powers: the power of spiritual discernment – to know sound teaching when you hear it and to reject what's false, the power to resist temptation and overcome sinful habits, and the power to produce works of love and mercy that are pleasing to God in Christ Jesus.

And the thing to see here is that this goes on. You know, the vast majority of people do not keep their New Year's resolutions. Oh, they may try for a while; but before long, they are back to doing things exactly the way they did in the past. The main reason for this is that they have only their natural abilities with which to make the changes they desire. And since at their very cores they are weak pathetic sinners the results of their efforts to change are going to be also weak and pathetic. But that isn't true of us. Like Abraham and Sarah, through Jesus and the covenant of God's grace, we have been given supernatural power to change. And we can renew and revitalize this power not just once a year, but every day of our lives. We do it by returning to our Baptisms – to our new beginnings in Christ. We confess our sins and failures to the Lord. He washes us anew. He applies the grace and forgiveness that Jesus earned for us. He reunites us with him. And he gives us the Holy Spirit who enables us to do what we cannot do with our own strength and natural ability.

So every day with Jesus is potentially a new beginning – made so because he was born for us, he was circumcised for us, he was crucified, killed, and raised for us, and he was given the name Jesus, because he saves his people from their sins. Therefore, forgetting what is behind, and pressing on toward the goal for which we have been called upward in Christ, let us all resolve to make every day that God grants us from this day forward a new beginning with Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!