

“FULFILLING THE LAW”

Luke 2:21

Circumcision and Name of Jesus (Series A)

January 1, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for this Sunday is at least close to the shortest reading we ever get, because it's just one verse. It comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verse 21. And you can find it on page 725 of the pew Bible. This verse is the first recorded instance of Jesus shedding his blood. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Luke 2, verse 21.

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

What's your New Year's resolution? What do you want to achieve in 2017? Many of us would like to lose weight or achieve some other kind of self-improvement? This would be good. Or maybe instead of just thinking about yourself, your resolution might be to start doing something beneficial for someone else. That's not such a bad idea. Or maybe you want to break a bad, or even sinful, habit. Again, that's a good idea. As Christians we should always resist sin and strive toward more good works.

Or maybe you don't even have a resolution. Every year I jokingly say my New Year's resolution is to not make promises I can't keep. That's my attempt to get off the hook from making an actual resolution. I guess I don't have a lot of confidence I will actually achieve what I set out to do. Maybe you don't have an official New Year's resolution either.

But even if I don't make an official resolution, when I think about my life—especially my habits and behavior—there are many things I would like to improve on in the next year. I'm guessing you have some things too.

Now, I know we're only a few hours into the New Year. We haven't even gotten to our second meal of the year. We haven't had many opportunities to break our resolutions. But let's try to be honest with ourselves. What are the odds we will actually keep our resolutions? Fitness centers across the country will be packed this afternoon. But give it a few months, and they'll slow down. Resolutions have a way of losing momentum.

Think back to January 1, 2016. What was your resolution then? Did you accomplish it? I suspect that most of us did not. And if you did accomplish your resolution, that's good for you, but it probably means you set the bar too low. I know this might sound a little pessimistic, but let's be honest with ourselves; we are probably not going to achieve what we want to in 2017. Even when we set our own standards, we usually fail. And when you think about it, that's kind of pathetic. We can't even accomplish the things we think are important. We can't even keep the rules we make.

So God has one standard for our lives, and we have another. God's standard is perfection, and his is the one that really matters. At the end of all things, when we stand before God, we will not be judged on whether or not we achieved our New Year's resolutions. Even if we are

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judged on that standard, most of us will still fail. But we will be judged on another standard—God’s perfect and holy Law. When we are judged according to this standard, we will *all* fail.

So as we come to a New Year, what we really need is not more resolutions. We don’t even need help. Sometimes we think that if God can just give us a boost, or if we can just get some insight or inspiration from the Bible, then we’ll be able to succeed.

So we read the Bible looking for advice, inspiration, insight, tips, and strategies. And the Bible does have bits and pieces of that, but that’s not what the Bible is really about. The Bible isn’t about you. It is about Jesus Christ *for you*.

And we come to church looking for some kind of spiritual boost—like a once a week vitamin that will help us power through the week. And maybe church will help you through your week. I hope it does. But that’s not what Church is really about. What you get when you come here is the forgiveness of sins, won for you by Jesus Christ in his perfect life, death, and resurrection. And that is really what you need, whether you think so or not.

We’re always trying to figure out how to succeed and how to live “the victorious Christian life.” But if we ever think we are succeeding—if we ever think we are actually living “the victorious Christian life”—it simply means we’ve set the bar too low. Our most common theological error is that we think too highly of ourselves. If we ever read the Bible or come to Church with an “I can do it” attitude, we are grossly overestimating ourselves.

We need something better than self-help. We need a Savior. We need someone to stand in our place. We need someone to win the victory for us and give it to us as a gift. That is what we need. And that is what we have in Jesus. *Jesus fulfills the Law on our behalf and gives his righteousness to us as a gift.* This is what we see in the Gospel lesson for today.

Besides today being January 1 and the beginning of the secular New Year, in the Church it is the circumcision and naming of Jesus. This took place when Jesus was eight days old. And if you count eight days from Christmas, you get January 1.

Some of you are going to count off eight days in your head, and you might come up with January 2 instead of January 1. Today is exactly one week after Christmas, and therefore seven days, not eight. But the Hebrews counted days a little bit different than we do. They counted the day of the event as the first day. So when they counted eight days for Jesus’ circumcision, the day of his birth was considered the first day.

So for our liturgical purposes, when we count off the eight days for Jesus’ circumcision, we don’t count December 26 as being one day. We count December 25 as the first day, December 26 as the second day, and so on until we get to January 1 as the eighth day. And now you can all count in your head and come up with eight days. Then you can start listening again. ...

So this is why we observe the circumcision and naming of Jesus today—on the eighth day of Christmas. Most years we don’t do anything to observe the circumcision and naming of Jesus, because it usually doesn’t fall on a Sunday. But this year it does, so we have this short little, one-verse gospel lesson.

So let’s talk about why circumcision was such a big deal. Even today, probably the majority of male infants are circumcised for health or cleanliness reasons, but it’s not seen as a major event that needs to be remembered. It usually doesn’t get published in biographies. But it did get published in Jesus’ biography. And that means it is important.

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Circumcision is a Hebrew rite that goes all the way back to Abraham, and was instituted by God in Genesis 17. This would be about 2,000 years before the birth of Christ.

God promised to bless Abraham and make him a great nation (Gen. 12:2). God even promised to bless all the families of the world through one of Abraham’s descendants (Gen. 12:3; 15:5). This descendant, of course, turned out to be Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16). As the offspring of Abraham, Jesus blessed the world by taking all of the sins of the world upon himself and suffering the condemnation for them. This blessing that came through Jesus Christ is the greatest of the promises God made to Abraham. And as a whole, these promises were God’s covenant with Abraham.

And in Genesis 17, God gave Abraham a sign of the covenant. The sign was circumcision. God commanded Abraham that every male child among his offspring was to be circumcised when he is eight days old (Gen. 17:12). And furthermore, every male foreigner who joined the group of Abraham’s offspring was also to be circumcised. This was a sign to them that they were members of God’s covenant with Abraham.

One thing to notice in Genesis 17, is that even from this time, the covenant was not exclusive to physical descendants of Abraham. Foreigners who wished to be a part of the covenant were simply circumcised. That made them full-fledged members of the covenant.

So circumcision was the sign of this covenant, as well as the initiation for males into the covenant. So if a foreigner was circumcised, he became a full member of the covenant. And if a Hebrew male for whatever reason was not circumcised, he would not be considered a member of the covenant, despite his physical relationship to Abraham. So circumcision was kind of a big deal.

So we can understand from a cultural and historical standpoint why Joseph and Mary had Jesus circumcised. But why is it important for us to know that Jesus was circumcised? Why does Luke bother telling us? The Bible usually doesn’t tell us about baby boys being circumcised, especially when they’re Jewish. It just assumes they are. But it does tell us about Jesus being circumcised. So why do we need to know about it? And what difference does it make for us?

When we think about circumcision—what it meant religiously—it might seem like Jesus didn’t really need to be circumcised. When little Jewish boys were circumcised, they entered into the covenant God made with Abraham. They were entering into a covenant with God. But Jesus doesn’t gain anything by entering into this covenant with God. He is the Son of God. Circumcision doesn’t get him any closer to God.

Furthermore, in Colossians Paul indicates that the removal of the foreskin in circumcision represents the removal of the sinful nature (Col. 2:11). But Jesus doesn’t have a sinful nature. He is perfectly righteous. So why does he need to be circumcised? He has no sinful nature. His sins do not need to be forgiven. And he already has a perfect relationship with God the Father.

Well, similar to Jesus’ baptism, he isn’t circumcised because *he* needs to be circumcised. He is circumcised because *we* need him to be circumcised. The benefit was not for Jesus. The benefit was for you and me.

Everything Jesus did in his life was for us. He became a human being for us. He was born for us. He lived for us. He died for us. He rose from the dead for us. Nothing he did was ever for himself; it was for others. That is pure love. And that is what Jesus practiced. Everything he did, and everything he endured, was for the sake of others. And his circumcision was no exception.

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Remember, circumcision was commanded by God as the sign of the covenant. It is part of God’s Law, and Jesus came to fulfill the Law. He came to do the things we fail to do. He came to do them in our place.

Now, circumcision seems like a fairly minor point. It’s not one of the Ten Commandments. And it’s a relatively easy law to fulfill. The doctor or the rabbi just takes a knife, cuts off the foreskin, and then it’s over. Most males who are circumcised don’t even have a say in the matter. Their parents decide it for them, and they are too young to even remember. The law of circumcision is usually fulfilled before the child even knows it needs to be fulfilled.

So why does it matter that Jesus was circumcised? However painful circumcision might be for the moment, it actually seems like the one law we might be able to handle on our own.

It is important that Jesus was circumcised, and it is important that his circumcision is recorded for us, because it teaches us that Jesus came to fulfill the Law for us—all of it—every little part of it, and every big part of it. From the very beginning of Jesus’ life, he was here to fulfill the Law in our place. In his birth he identified with sinners, and he lived his entire life under the same Law that condemns us.

We have failed to keep this Law. We can’t even keep our own resolutions, never mind the resolutions God makes for us. We haven’t kept God’s Law, and we won’t. That’s just the way it is.

Jesus was circumcised because we needed someone to fulfill the entire Law for us. We needed a sinless person to be circumcised for us. And beyond that, we needed a sinless person to be obedient to his parents. We needed a sinless person to help and befriend his neighbor, keep himself chaste, protect his neighbor’s property, speak truthfully at all times, and do everything else that accords with godliness. In short, we needed someone to perfectly fulfill the Law in our place. And that person is Jesus. From his birth to his death, he kept the Law for you.

He did this so that he could be the perfect sacrifice for sin. Everything is leading up to his death. His circumcision is leading up to his death. Even his birth, eight days earlier, is leading up to his death. He was “born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law” (Gal. 4:4-5). He was born under the Law, to fulfill the Law on our behalf, and to suffer the curse of the Law on our behalf.

In his death, your sins were placed on him. He actually bore them in his body (1 Peter 2:24). There’s a transfer that takes place. Your sins cease to be your sins, because they become Jesus’ sins. He takes them from you.

But it’s not just a one-way transfer. Your sins go to Jesus, but there’s something that comes back to you instead. It’s his righteousness—his perfect keeping of the Law. His love for his neighbor, his chastity, his honesty, his obedience to his parents—all of it, including his circumcision—comes back to you. He fulfilled the Law for you, and all of his righteousness is credited to you. Your sin becomes his, and his righteousness becomes yours.

This trade happened in your baptism (Col. 2:11-13). Jesus accomplished all of this in his life, his death, and his resurrection from the dead, and it comes to you personally in your baptism. Your sin is cut off, and Jesus Christ is placed on you. This is why Paul calls baptism “a circumcision made without hands” (Col. 2:11).

Baptism, by the way, is a gender-inclusive circumcision. It is for everyone—male and female, Jews, Greeks, Gentiles, and everyone else. Baptism is for all different kinds of sinners. It

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is a putting off of the body of flesh, and a putting on of Christ’s righteousness. In baptism, your sins were transferred to Jesus, and his righteousness was transferred to you.

So if you ever wonder if your sins are forgiven, and if you ever wonder if you have Jesus’ righteousness, simply ask, “Did Jesus die and rise again?” and, “Am I baptized into that death and resurrection?” And if the answer is “yes,” then you have your answer.

When you stand before God on the Last Day, you will not be judged based on how well you kept your resolutions. And if you belong to Christ, you will not even be judged based on whether or not you kept God’s Law. You will be judged based on whether or not *Jesus* kept God’s Law for you. And he did.

Jesus has fulfilled the Law for you. Every big part, and every little part, has been accomplished by Jesus. He kept the Law perfectly. And he did it for you. Your sin has been placed on him, and his righteousness has been given to you. Glory be to Jesus. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.