

Circumcision & Naming of Jesus | St. John 1:16-18
January 1, 2016 | Parkland Evangelical Lutheran Church

In Nomine Iesu

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O merciful and eternal God, heavenly Father, You caused Your Son to endure circumcision and to be made subject to the law that we might be redeemed from the curse of the law: We beseech You, grant us grace to become partakers of this redemption and thus obtain eternal salvation; through the same, Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH p. 149)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

And from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, the enfleshment of God's grace, dear fellow redeemed:

The LORD God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. But it wasn't simply a temporary covenant. The LORD called it "*an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*" Then He added, "*And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession*" (Gen. 17:7-8). His promise was to be the God of Abraham and his descendants and to give them a place to live and grow. Contained in this promise, was the promise, the promise that a Savior would come into the world. This is what made it "*an everlasting covenant.*" As a sign of belief in this promise, the LORD told Abraham that he and all the male members of his household should be circumcised, and that this practice should continue in each succeeding generation. If any descendant of Abraham should ever discontinue this practice, the LORD said that he "*shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant*" (v. 14).

As the generations passed, the covenant God made with Abraham seemed to be less certain. The Israelites had become slaves in Egypt. The possibility of inheriting land in Canaan was little more than a dream, and they wondered if the LORD had forgotten about them. Then God led them out of Egypt after performing great wonders in the land. But by this time, the people's knowledge and understanding of the LORD's Word and will had dulled. Therefore God gave them His holy law – law to govern their moral, ceremonial, and civil conduct. This law would remind the people both of their sinfulness and of His holiness.

But as more time passed, the distinction between God's covenant of promise with Abraham and His giving of the law to the Israelites became blurred. Circumcision came to be regarded as another aspect of keeping God's law. It is understandable why this happened. God had

commanded circumcision after all, which makes it seem like law. And when a male child was circumcised this officially marked him as an Israelite, which then made him obligated to keep the law of God. But the covenant marked by circumcision was not a covenant of law. It was a covenant of promise; the law came later. St. Paul writes, *“the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise”* (Gal. 3:17-18).

The practice of circumcision that began with Abraham continued through the decades and centuries. When Jesus was born, His parents arranged for Him to be circumcised on the eighth day, which by our calendar lands us on January 1st. Several significant things happened on this eighth day. It was the day that Jesus officially received His name, *“the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb”* (Lk. 2:21), a name which means *“the LORD saves.”* It was the day that Jesus first shed blood as He set out on the path of suffering and death to redeem us. And it was also the day which officially marked Jesus as one of Abraham’s offspring and an heir of God’s promise, and also as an Israelite bound to keep God’s holy law.

So on the eighth day, Jesus received the visible sign through circumcision of His own coming to save the world. That may seem a bit strange, but remember that Jesus came *“to fulfill all righteousness”* (Mt. 3:15), as He said. Jesus is the bridge between the Old and New Testaments. He was both circumcised according to the old covenant and baptized according to the new. He observed the Passover according to the old covenant and instituted His Supper for the new. He ties together in His holy body those who believed that He would come and those who believe that He has come.

It would be strange if His coming had no effect on the religious practices of His people. Why continue to sacrifice goats and bulls and sheep and sprinkle their blood on the altar and the people, if the blood of Jesus was shed for the world’s redemption? Why observe the Passover feast if the spotless Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world? Why continue to insist on circumcision if the promise of that covenant was fulfilled? Of course it is easy for us to see the significance of things like the temple curtain tearing apart at the death of Jesus, to show that the old way had expired. It is easy for us to sort out prophecy and fulfillment. But it would be quite another thing to come to this understanding if all you had known was the old way. Would you presume to know which religious practices should be retained and which ones discontinued? When to emphasize the holy law and when to speak about the promise fulfilled?

Sorting out these issues was a great challenge for the early Christians. This is why Jesus sent out the apostles to teach and preach the truth. These are some of the ways they articulated the transition from the old to the new: *“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes”* (Rom. 10:4). *“So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith”* (Gal. 3:24-26). And from the sermon text for today: *“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”*

It is not that the law has no more place in the lives of Christians. It functions in three ways in our lives: as a curb to keep us from outbreaks of sin, as a mirror to show us our sins, and as a guide to show us how to live God-pleasing lives. But the law has no place in the equation of our

salvation. It is not the promise of the Gospel + the works of the law. It is not Jesus + anything else. It is Jesus' holy life + Jesus' atoning death = our salvation. Your and my contribution to the equation is only and always sinfulness, weakness, and disbelief. But for each of your sins, Jesus counters with grace. And if that grace seems too little to cover the "bigger" sins, He applies more grace. As sins multiply, so does His grace. St. John writes, *"From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace"* – grace and more grace, grace on top of grace, super-abundant grace. This sounds a lot like Isaiah's words centuries earlier when he prophesied about the coming of the Christ, *"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins"* (Is. 40:2).

The Son of God took on flesh and was circumcised in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham made so long before. He also came to keep the law given through Moses to the people of God. He was *"born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons"* (Gal. 4:4-5). What this means for you is that you do not need to beat yourself up for past transgressions, sins committed in 2015 or years ago. It is true that consequences of our sins can follow us, but the guilt of your sin was taken up by Jesus, and He made atonement for it. Unburden yourself of this guilt through repentance, and trust what God's Word says: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1Jn. 1:9).

You may have all sorts of ideas how you plan to make this year better than last year. You may resolve to be stronger and kinder and more generous. Those are good things, but if you trust in your own strength to accomplish them, you will most certainly fail. You and I cannot keep one bit of the law, we cannot do any meaningful thing, if God does not work that good in us. And He will. He is gracious. Therefore we enter this year in the same way we enter each day – by grace. You have been chosen for salvation by grace (Rom. 11:5-6). *"By grace you have been saved through faith"* (Eph. 2:8). And you are constantly *"strengthened by grace"* (Heb. 13:9). Grace upon grace upon grace! Amen.

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Law No More – Grace upon Grace!