

Sermon Text (Genesis 21:1–7 ESV)

¹ The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. ² And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” ⁷ And she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

You Are Circumcised in Christ

Abraham had waited a long time to finally get the son that he was promised by God. God first promised Abraham that he would be a great nation when he was seventy-five years old. This was when he called Abraham, saying to him, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:1–2).

Since that time, twenty-four years had passed. Abraham was now ninety-nine years old, and God promised him that he would have a son in one year, when he was one hundred years old. However, before that, he made a covenant with Abraham. He said to him, “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. 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, and I will be their God” (Genesis 17:7–8). This was God’s side of the covenant. As for Abraham’s side, God said to him, “You shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised” (Genesis 17:9–10). These males were to be circumcised when they were eight days old, which pointed to God’s inclusion of

His people in the covenant promise even at a tender age. However, if they weren't circumcised, then they were cut off from God's people for breaking his covenant.

One year passed, and everything happened just as God said it would. Our reading for today says, "The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him" (verses 1–2). And so, in order to keep his covenant with God, "Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him" (Verse 4). And Abraham's descendants through Isaac, the people of Israel, continued to keep this covenant by circumcising their sons, just as God said, and Jesus was no exception.

As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4–5). If Abraham had to wait a long time for God to finally give him his son, that was nothing compared to how long the world had to wait for the promised Savior to finally arrive. After thousands of years, the Savior, Jesus, was finally born at just the right time, and since Jesus was born under the law, he had to keep the law perfectly if he was to be our Savior. That included getting circumcised when he was eight days old at the same time that he received his name. And so, we hear after the account of his birth in the gospel according to St. Luke that "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" (Luke 2:21). This would be the first time that Jesus shed his blood for us, and it wouldn't be the last.

However, this raises a question: If God required all of the children of Abraham to be circumcised in order to be children of the promise, does that mean that we need to be circumcised too? Some of the Jewish Christians certainly thought so. We hear in the book of Acts that "some

men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1). The apostle Paul made it perfectly clear in his letter to the Galatians what our stance on circumcision should be. He said, “Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:2–4). This sounds like the exact opposite of what God previously said to Abraham. So, why does the apostle Paul say this? Because Jesus already fulfilled the law for us, and, therefore, we no longer need to keep the old covenant. As the apostle says in his letter to the Colossians, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:16–17).

Since Jesus fulfilled the law for us, now, by making circumcision necessary for salvation (as well as any other kind of work), we are saying that everything that Jesus did to save us wasn’t enough. Even though Jesus said, “It is finished” (John 19:30), as he died on the cross for our sins, we are saying that it isn’t actually finished. Even though Jesus kept the law perfectly for us, we are saying that there is still more law for us to keep, and, therefore, we are putting ourselves back under the law, dooming ourselves to spend all eternity in the fires of hell. We can at times be tempted to think that we need to do something to contribute to our salvation, but by doing so, we end up losing our salvation since we can never keep the law perfectly.

The good news is that we don’t need to keep the law perfectly, because Jesus kept the law perfectly for us. Likewise, we don’t need to be circumcised, because Jesus has already circumcised us. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Colossians, “In him also you were circumcised with

a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:11–14).

We were all conceived and born in sin, and were, therefore, uncircumcised, cut off from God. Our sins cut us off from God because God demands perfection. But Jesus cut off our old sinful flesh and nailed it to the cross with him. Now, it is as if we and Jesus have switched places. Since our sinful flesh has been cut off by Jesus, we now appear to be the circumcised, the children of the promise. And, since our sinful flesh was nailed to the cross with Jesus, he now appears to be the uncircumcised, the one who has been cut off from God. Therefore, Jesus received the punishment of hell that we rightfully deserved for not keeping the law perfectly, and, by receiving our punishment, the debt of our sin was paid for, and the record of our debt was canceled. We, therefore, received the reward that Jesus alone won, eternal life in heaven.

Therefore, we are now a part of the new covenant, a new covenant in which we don’t have to do anything in order to keep it, because God does everything. This is clear in the circumcision of the new covenant: that circumcision being baptism. It’s true that Jesus has circumcised our hearts, but we take advantage of that through faith in him, faith that we receive through baptism. In it, the Holy Spirit enters our hearts. He washes away our sins through the waters of baptism; creates saving faith in our hearts, faith that believes in Jesus as our Savior from sin; and seals us as children of God. Even though it might appear on the outside that we are doing something, since

we are going to the baptismal font and agreeing to be baptized, there is nothing done in baptism that we do to contribute to our salvation; it is all the work and gift of God.

That being said, just because we have been baptized into Christ, circumcised by him, that does not give us free reign to live however we want. We all have sins that we love to commit, and the desire to commit these sins don't just go away once we are baptized because our sinful flesh refuses to stay dead and will remain with us until the day that God calls us home to heaven. Because of this, we all too often listen to our sinful flesh, often times despite knowing better. However, by living in our sins, it is as though we are uncircumcised. Even though we have faith in Jesus, if we continue to live in our sins without repenting, we are putting ourselves at risk of cutting ourselves off from God all over again.

Thankfully, the love and mercy of God never run out. Whenever we turn to God for repentance, he is there to offer it to us. We daily return to our baptisms through repentance, and our old flesh is drowned in those waters all over again. No matter how many times we cut ourselves off from him, he is there to make us a part of him again.

Through the waters of baptism, God visits us, bringing us his blessing, just as he visited Sarah and brought her his blessing in our reading for today. That blessing is the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. He makes us children of the promise and does not require anything of us in return, because Jesus has already done everything that is necessary to save us. We are now a new creation, having been buried with Christ in our baptism and having risen with him in his resurrection. These are blessings that we could never receive on our own, and so, we thank God that he loved us so much that he circumcised our hearts and made us his children.