

A Sermon on the Circumcision of Our Lord, January 1, 2006

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This morning's gospel portion begins with a continuation of the nativity lesson from Christmas Eve. The birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem was proclaimed to the shepherds by the angels. Now we see the shepherds responding in faith to that (Lk. 2:15) "which the Lord hath made known." The shepherds physically get up and go. They find Mary with Joseph attending to the child lying in a manger. The faith they exhibit is not passive. Rather, it is a holistic response that combines the intellect with action.

St. Luke attests to the full humanity of the child born Christmas Day. As with all Jewish male children, on the eighth day he receives his name and is circumcised. The word most commonly used for circumcision in Judaism is *Brit*, which means covenant. The covenant referred to here is found in Genesis 17. It is comprised of receiving one's Hebrew name and the ritual circumcision of the flesh. These were to be the outward and visible tokens, or signs, of participation in the covenant God established with Abraham and his descendants.

In obedience to the message of the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation, Joseph and Mary named the child Yeshua, Hebrew for "God is Salvation." His name referred to his function in God's covenant, "for he shall save his people from their sins" (Mt.1:21).

Church tradition points to several reasons for circumcision. These include Jesus perfectly fulfilling all the requirements of the Law, to remove any reason for Jesus being rejected by the Jewish people, and to provide an example for us, as St. Paul tells us in Romans (2:29), that "circumcision is that of the heart."

Christian theologians perceived circumcision as a mystery that was to be observed until the sacrament of baptism should be instituted. Both are rites of initiation into the family of God but were not ends in themselves. Circumcision made an indelible mark in the flesh. Baptism makes an indelible mark upon the soul. They were a means of grace to live a life pleasing to God, as well as identifying with, and choosing to be, part of the people of God.

The Gospel narratives record five instances that Jesus shed his blood. The first we recall today as we celebrate his circumcision. The second was in his bloody sweat in the Garden of Gethsemane, the third in his scourging at the pillar, the fourth at the Crucifixion, and the fifth as he was pierced by the spear—and blood and water poured forth from his side.

Collectively, this shedding of his blood ushered in the new covenant for the remission of our sins.

The understanding of covenant from Biblical times to the present has remained relatively unchanged. In the 21st century, we would describe a covenant as a binding contract between two parties. Promises are made, obligations are assumed, and penalties are imposed for noncompliance.

Covenants with God are decidedly different and remarkably consistent as described throughout the Scriptures. God unilaterally chooses to bind himself, he makes all the promises, and he assumes all the obligations. God continually acts first, unilaterally, and does all the work. Humanity thus becomes the beneficiary of the covenant rather than a true partner. They need only to accept and respond in faith, living lives of gratitude and love for such an unmerited gift.

This is good news—almost too good to be true. Salvation is not dependent upon our unflinching ability to keep the covenant. We would be as successful at this as we would be in keeping all those New Year's resolutions that fall by the wayside in a day, a week, or a month. Our culture anticipates that we will fail in our resolutions and immediately purge the thought of them so that they will not be revisited for at least another 365 days, or so.

Yet God is continually calling us into a deeper relationship with him. Instead of responding to holiday over-indulgence with the usual weight loss promises, consider making New Year's resolutions that have spiritual benefits and will enable us to grow in grace and virtue. Growth in the life of prayer in the Anglican tradition is rooted in the Daily Offices in the Book of Common Prayer. It provides a disciplined approach to prayer, praise, confession, and the systematic reading of Scripture. If you would like to learn how, please join us on Friday mornings or Tuesday nights. It is a great way to start and end the day.

Anglican spiritual writers acknowledge that even steadfast resolutions to pray the Daily Offices will periodically fail. However, unlike our popular culture, they encourage us to get up and immediately start again instead of waiting for another year to pass. This too, is a reflection of the Christian life.

The circumcision of Jesus was just the beginning of his fully human and perfect covenant with God the Father. We too, can point to our baptism day as the day we began our journey of faith to the Father, joined in relationship with our brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Make 2006 the year of living your spiritual covenant with God, seeking him daily in all that you do. Join with the family of faith for encouragement and strength and know that the Lord will never give up on you.

As the prophet Jeremiah writes, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23 KJV).