

January 1, 2023

Circumcision and Name of Jesus

Text: Luke 2:21; Galatians 3:23-29

Names matter. In Proverbs 22 we read, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.” Today we celebrate the very name of Jesus, the name chosen for Him by His heavenly Father and conveyed to both Joseph and Mary by an angel.

There is a lot wrapped up in this name, but the main point for today is this: the Father names His Son Jesus so that we might bear His name and become His children.

God gives names to many different people in the Bible, and every time He does it is significant, because it tells us something very important about the person and how God will use him.

Going clear back to creation, the first man is named Adam. The name “Adam” simply means “man, human, person.” Adam is the first person created by God. Now this name might not seem all that meaningful, like naming your dog “Dog,” or your fish “Fish.” But there are two very big things that go on here.

First, the word “Adam” is related to the word “adamah,” which means “ground,” “dirt,” or “earth.” Adam’s name tells us where he’s from: Adam was formed by God from the adamah.

Second, as Adam is the man, the first one, what he does will affect all future men. And so when the first Adam rebels against God and falls into sin, all his descendants, the other “adams,” will be affected by that, being born in sin, returning to the dust, the adamah, when we die.

Another person God names, or in this case renames, is Abraham. Formerly known as Abram, God renames him to Abraham, which means “father of a multitude.” God had previously promised to give Abraham offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, but at the time of the name change, Abraham only had one, Ishmael, who was born to his wife’s slave girl.

The promise of God had not yet been fulfilled, but so certain was the promise that Abraham is renamed in accord with it. The promise defines Abraham, grounds his identity in the promise given to him by God.

The child who would be the beginning of that promise’s fulfillment is also named by God. God tells Abraham that his son is to be named Isaac, which means “laughter.” Again, the name given by God is full of meaning and purpose.

When God promises a son to Abraham by Sarah, Abraham laughs in disbelief, reminding God that he’s a hundred and Sarah is ninety and such things just don’t happen. When God appears to Abraham once more to confirm the promise of a son given through Sarah, He does so in Sarah’s hearing. Sarah laughs a sort of dismissive, “haha, if only” sort of laugh, thinking that such a thing is impossible.

Yet despite the doubts of Abraham and Sarah God fulfills His promise and gives them a son. After Isaac’s birth, both parents laugh for joy, with Sarah declaring that such joy will spread to all who hear the news. Thus in Isaac, God’s choice of name shows His faithfulness despite human doubt and the joy that comes when God’s word is fulfilled.

Isaac's son Jacob is also renamed by God. On the run after deceiving his father and swindling his brother, Jacob is attacked by God Himself, though he doesn't realize who it is at the time. After a lengthy wrestling match, God blesses Jacob and renames him Israel.

Why this name? Israel means "strives with God" or "God strives." These might seem to mean opposite things, but put together they describe both Israel and the people who will be descended from him. He and his children will strive with God, sometimes for Him, seeking His will, but more often against Him, striving in rebellion.

Yet in all this, God is always striving for Israel, on Israel's behalf, protecting and preserving both the man and the people. And this will be true not only for the biological descendants of Israel, but for those brought in from all nations.

This will happen because of yet another name, the name at which every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, the name of Jesus. Now why "Jesus?" There are plenty of names for God in the Scriptures, why not pick one of those?

Why not simply name Him "Yahweh," or "I am?" After all, it was the preincarnate Son who spoke to Moses out of the burning bush and said His name is "I Am." The problem is, though, it would have been very difficult for a baby named "Yahweh" to exist in Israel; such a thing would have been considered blasphemous. And it also wouldn't have fit Jesus' coming in humility and lowliness for Him to openly bear the name that was considered too sacred to even speak out loud.

So then, why not some other, less "divine" but slightly more regal name? Like Melchizedek – "King of Righteousness," or Hezekiah – "Yahweh has strengthened," or Samuel – "Heard of God." All would be fitting, as the Son of God is the king of righteousness and the One who is the strong arm of the Lord and who comes in response to God hearing His people's prayers for deliverance.

Yet God names His Son "Jesus," which means "Yahweh saves" or "the salvation of Yahweh." It is a rather common name at the time, nothing that will attract any attention to the child.

And yet by this name, the Father has stated very clearly the chief purpose for which He has sent His Son. This is stated quite clearly in St. Matthew's Gospel, when the angel speaks to Joseph in a dream and tells him, "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." John's Gospel is also quite clear on this, where we read, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him."

This baby has been born to be the long-awaited Savior. Everything He will do in His earthly ministry – His miracles, His teaching and preaching, His passion – it will all be for the purpose of salvation, because at the end of the day salvation is the only thing that truly, eternally, matters.

And how will He save His people from their sins? That's tied in to the other event we celebrate today – the circumcision of Jesus. A Hebrew boy would not formally receive his name until he was circumcised. Thus, Jesus is named Jesus and circumcised at the same time.

On the eighth day, He is publicly proclaimed as the Salvation of Yahweh for His people. And on the eighth day, He is joined to that people. When a baby boy was circumcised, he was joined to the

covenant people of God. That covenant included God's promise to bless the people and their promise to obey the Lord their God with all their heart and soul and mind. Jesus was joined to that promise.

Now, for everyone else, it was an impossible thing. Ever since the first man, the Adam, had fallen into sin, every single person had failed to uphold God's Law. This didn't mean that the Law was null and void, though. The effects of breaking it, the consequences of sin that we know so well, these continued to come about because of this broken covenant. Paul speaks of this as our being held captive under the Law, bound by its commands.

Yet God sent His Son, Jesus, to be born of Mary so that He might also be under that obligation – and keep it perfectly. The Father sent His Son to be born into that captivity so that His righteousness might break the bonds that held us.

This is what's known as Jesus' active obedience – He actively kept the Law, doing exactly what it commanded, never breaking any Commandment in the least. Jesus was circumcised and joined to the covenant, and Jesus kept the covenant, securing its blessings for us.

Not only did this Jesus, the Salvation of Yahweh, keep the Law perfectly, but He also paid the price for all the times we had broken it. Though He had no sin, He would offer Himself in our place, paying the price for our sins. This is called His passive obedience, and it was foretold of Him by the prophet Isaiah centuries before when he said, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."

Even at His very birth, this Child was the Lamb of God, sent to take away our sins. And just how would He take those sins away? The shedding of His blood, for as the Law says, summarized by the author of Hebrews, "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins."

Now, where did Jesus first shed His blood for us? The cross is the high point, but already at His circumcision He is shedding His blood for us. His blood of the new covenant begins to be poured out for us from His infancy. The work of the thorns and the whips and the nails and the spear are begun by a knife a week after His birth. He is Jesus, the One who will save His people from their sins, even as a eight-day-old infant.

The Son of God came and did all this for you, taking the name of a man, dying the death of a man, so that all men might be given the name of God, sharing in the eternal life of God. You are Christians, meaning you bear the name of Christ.

This is no mere outward label, some box that you check on surveys. When God puts His name upon you, it changes your whole identity, your reality. When God puts His name on you, it means you belong to Him, and not just as property, but as family. To bear His name is to have Him as your Father. His Son becomes your brother. His Kingdom becomes your inheritance.

This was all lost when man fell into sin, when we like the prodigal son reject our Father and run away. But because of Jesus, the Yahweh who saves, that sin is all wiped away. We are reconciled to our heavenly Father and brought back into His house. He provides for us, protects us, disciplines us, teaches us, just as a father should, and He does it perfectly.

When does this name change happen? In Holy Baptism! You aren't just baptized generically, but baptized specifically in His name, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You are sealed by the sign of the Holy Cross, given an invisible and yet eternal birthmark. God the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in your heart, granting you saving faith.

Paul spells all this out for the Galatians, when he writes, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith." How does this work? Paul continues, "for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." When God baptized you, He covered you in the righteousness of Christ.

You are joined to His Son, and so you become His son as well! This is why we don't use last names when we baptize; Holy Baptism makes you a member of God's eternal family. Like He did with so many of the saints of the Scriptures, God gives you a new name, His name, the name of His Son, and through this grants you blessings beyond compare.

In Jesus, God has joined Himself to humanity, taken on a man's name to save mankind. He became the new Adam, the new man, so that even though the first Adam's sin brought death upon us all, He as the second Adam would be righteous and bring life for all.

Through the saving work of Jesus, all nations are brought into His family; all peoples – a great multitude – are made children of Abraham.

Because of what Jesus has done and the life He brings, we may have joy and laugh as Abraham and Sarah laughed at Isaac's birth.

In Jesus, God has striven for us, His new Israel, conquering our foes and winning the victory for us.

And you who have been baptized in the name of Jesus, you bear the name of God Himself, joined to His people, covered in His righteousness, filled with His Spirit. You are Christians, bearing the name of Christ, and that name is the name that truly matters.

In the name of Jesus, amen.