

***“Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given.”***

Firstly, I would like to wish you all a Happy 8<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas and a Happy New Year. The Christmas season is still going strong until Thursday, which is the 12<sup>th</sup> Day. Today, as I have said is the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas – the 8<sup>th</sup> day after Christ’s birth. This is significant because on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after the birth of a Son, according to the Jewish Law, that Son must be brought to be named and circumcised in a special religious ceremony. Genesis 17:12 is the first mention of this in the Bible when you read from the beginning. In this passage, God reaffirms his covenant with Abraham and tells him, *“He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised”* – and that this shall be a physical symbol of the Covenant God made with his people. This covenant, we recall, is that God told Abraham that through him, all the nations of the world shall be Blessed. It is through this covenant that Genesis tells us God chose the descendants of Abraham to be *his* people, and He their special protector.

After the Exodus, when the people of Israel were delivered from their Egyptian captivity through the bottom of the Red Sea, this requirement for circumcision was renewed when the law was codified – and this can be found in Leviticus 12:3. So, on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after his birth, Jesus was brought to be circumcised, according to the Law, and was officially given his name – that name which was told to Mary by the Archangel Gabriel. So, on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, Jesus did what every other 8-day-old Jewish boy had done for centuries and was marked as a member of Abraham’s covenantal family. So, this weekend, we recall on this Octave Day of Christmas, both the *naming* of Jesus *and* his circumcision.

Why is this important? It was a demonstration that Jesus was *truly* an adherent to the Jewish faith because he was subjected to all the same rituals. Jesus was truly and wholly God and Man, but specifically he was truly and wholly God and a truly and wholly *Jewish* man who was subjected to the Law so that he might *fulfill* the law in his later death and resurrection.

Our Gospel story for today picks up just after the Angels departed from the shepherds abiding in their fields by night. They were just told that the Christ – the Messiah – had been born in Bethlehem. How terrified and awed those shepherds must have been, for the Messiah – *THE messiah* – was finally among them. We turn to our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Isaiah to understand just some of what that meant. Though it is widely accepted that the first part of this book was written before the Jews were exiled in Babylon, that exile and subsequent troubles led Isaiah to be a widely-read prophet for his prophecies of what good was to come – and the book came to be a source of morale for the troubles the people faced later. After the people of Israel and Judah were carted away as prisoners into exile in Babylon, they eventually did return to Jerusalem.

Any of you who know your geography might recall where in the world Jerusalem is located: on the main land bridge across the Mediterranean Sea: conveniently located between the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great (and later the Roman Empire) and all of Africa – but *especially* Egypt. Unfortunately for Judea, this meant that they were constantly playing host to uninvited foreign armies who would pillage their property, abuse their families, rob them blind, and then keep on going – or worse, stay and impose their rule. Especially in the last couple centuries before Christ’s birth, this meant the Jewish people were constantly oppressed by the whims of a foreign empire who claimed them as property. Amid all this oppression, the prophecies of a coming saviour, the Messiah, gained popularity among the people. There were, of course, some who did not really believe in these prophecies. There were also some others who had differing views of what the Messiah would really be when he came, depending on which part of the prophecies they were most familiar with. The consensus, though, was that this Messiah would do great things and break the bonds which held Israel captive to the foreign powers. Remember: *“O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel.”*

This passage from Isaiah which forms our lesson today was one of these great prophecies of the Messiah. He would be a light in the darkness, would rouse the people from their slumber in

joy, would break the yokes of oppression, would confuse the enemy in battle. A child would be born on whose shoulders would rest the burden of government, who would be called “Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” And he will reign on the throne of his father David forever, because God has commanded it.<sup>1</sup>

We, of course, have the benefit of hindsight to see that, yes, Jesus was all these things. But what about those poor Shepherds? Minding their own business, then scary, flying, and bright Angels appear to tell them the Messiah is here – to go and find him! If I were a Shepherd, I’d have been shaking in my boots. Not only would I have been scared by the Angels even though they told me to be not afraid, now I’d be nervous to be in the presence of somebody so mighty and powerful that he would crumble the world’s order. But they found a small baby in a barn. He didn’t *look* powerful. He didn’t *look* like a king – and certainly not a prince. Nonetheless, the angels had told them this was the case, and they had no reason to question it. This great King who would topple the world’s order had been born! But, then he went to be circumcised just like everybody else.

It’s one of the great mysteries of the Incarnation – that God would fully take on humanity and live as a regular person, even to be the subject of the Law. He could, theoretically, have appeared suddenly as a fully grown man on the horizon with a big army of the heavenly hosts to support him – but he didn’t. He purposefully came into the world as an innocent baby so that he might have truly lived the whole human experience, so that when he died on the cross, he died the death of somebody who actually lived a whole human life. The fact that he was circumcised meant that Jesus was a mortal baby just like every other one, who depended on his family for protection and nourishment just like every human baby does.

St. Paul tells us that circumcision is not what makes faith happen – but rather that circumcision is a only confirmation of faith for the Jewish people. He says that Abraham was not made righteous because he was circumcised, but rather was already righteous by faith and that circumcision served as a sign of that righteousness for future generations.<sup>2</sup> Paul elsewhere says that Christ was subjected to the Law so that he might fulfill the Law and that through Christ we are now all children of God through baptism – not circumcision anymore. *“There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise”* (Galatians 3.28).

So on this eighth day, we recall why it was so important that Jesus was subject to the Law, because by being subject to the Law, he was able to fulfill it on our behalf. In so doing, he fulfilled the prophecies of toppling the world’s order and ushering in a new Kingdom, that Kingdom of God of which we are all now members through Christ.

No, he was not a military general commanding legions of followers to wage war with the Romans. No, he did not rule as a crowned King on the earth in ways we imagine kings to rule. No, he did not rise to popularity as a star politician and get himself elected and promise reforms. He came to us as a baby – those sacred and precious little mini humans. He came to us just as anyone else we know.

During this continued Christmas season and beginning of a New Year, we rejoice and praise God for that incredible gift received that night so long ago. And we give thanks for all the miraculous things he does in the ordinary for us every day. Maybe we don’t see them, and maybe we can’t understand them – but God is there, at work, ushering in his kingdom. Let it be our prayer that God reveals to us how we might be used to advance his Kingdom here on earth. Better yet: may we pray for the Grace of God, that he might use us to advance his Kingdom in ways we might never understand – just as he used those ordinary shepherds to witness to the rather ordinary birth of the most extraordinary saviour.

*“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase of Isaiah 9.2-7

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrase of Romans 4:8-13