

## *A New Year's Sermon from Pastor Preus*

*And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.” Luke 2:21*

It's the end of 2013. Another year is passed. For better or worse, this mile marker measures the accomplishments and events of our lives. But I suppose we could use any other day as a mile marker. Think of all the other calendars that measure the year. There's the fiscal year. That's important to some people. There's the academic year. This is engraved in the mind of anyone who's been a student. There is, of course, the church year. This is the one that governs what we celebrate here in church. And finally there is the legal year, the one we're all about to celebrate tonight, which runs from January 1<sup>st</sup> – December 31<sup>st</sup>.

Legal year. That makes it sound kind of unexciting. But I call it the legal year, because that's exactly what it is. What else is it? In a couple days it will be legally, *according to the law*, 2014. 2013 will legally be over. There's no avoiding or undoing the passage of time. We know that. The law, however, with its *legal years*, makes sure that we don't forget it either. That's what the law does in all of its forms. It doesn't make anything so. It just tells you what's what. 2013 will soon be over and it will be too late to make 2013 anything other than what it was. That's the law.

So, now we close a year lived under God's grace by commending a new year into His care. But consider the better reason to celebrate New Year's Day. January 1<sup>st</sup> just so happens to mark that day when the legal calendar intersects perfectly with the church calendar. It's really kind of neat. Consider the theme. Just as the year begins on January 1<sup>st</sup>, *according to the law*, so also, for the church year, it is on January 1<sup>st</sup> that we celebrate how Jesus placed Himself *under* the law. In His birth, God submitted to our physical limitations. That's Christmas. Eight days later, in His circumcision, God submitted to our legal restrictions. That's New Year's.

*“But when the fullness of the time had come,”* Paul writes in Galatians 4, *“God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”*

These two births are two different occasions – 8 days apart from each other. But they are both equally necessary for our redemption. We celebrate Christmas. In time the almighty God took on human flesh in order to dwell with sinners. How gracious. But God did not become man just to be our example. No. Because then we would have to save ourselves. But consider that that's all He would have been for us, had He not eight days after He was born of a woman also submitted Himself to what God's law required of sinners.

But couldn't He have fulfilled the law without having been circumcised? Couldn't He have still lived a holy and commendable life in full obedience to His Father? Couldn't He have loved His neighbor as Himself, helped him, spoken well of him, protected him, and kept Himself pure from all lustful thoughts? Couldn't He have? Well of course He could have! He would have! But He would have done it only for Himself. His obedience would have done us no good.

But by submitting His infant body to circumcision, Jesus placed Himself where we were. He placed Himself under the law that held us and convicted us as sinners. Jesus was circumcised so that all the good that He did, all the bad that He suffered – He did and suffered for us – in our place, for our benefit.

Now before I go on, I'd like to explain a little bit about circumcision so that this makes sense.

God called Abram – that was his name – it means *exalted father* – but God had given him no children – sort of an embarrassing name. But anyway, God called Abram out from idolatry to come and serve only the one true God. How does one serve the one true God? Well, by believing in Christ, of course – by finding in Christ alone God's eternal favor. God promised childless Abram that in his Seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. This Seed was Christ. This was the promise that Abram believed and that was counted to him as righteousness in God's sight. It is the exact same faith by which all sinners are and have ever been justified. It is faith in Jesus.

As a sign and seal that God would keep His promise and send the Savior of the nations through his lineage – as an Old Testament sacrament – God later circumcised Abram by removing a portion of his flesh. And when he was circumcised, God reiterated the promise He had made by giving him a new name. No longer would he be "*exalted father*." He would be Abraham, "*father of many nations*." His new name reflected the promise that was made to him concerning Christ in whom all the nations would be blessed. It was for this reason that it became a tradition among the Jews to name their sons when they were circumcised. It was a confession of the Gospel.

Later, God gave the law to Moses, and so also reasserted the covenant of circumcision. The law did then what it does now. It revealed what Abraham had known about himself. It revealed sin. It revealed the innate corruption of man's heart, and his inborn unbelief and hatred of God. It does this still today by showing us our failures to do what God requires. This is a corruption that we're born with. That which is born of the flesh is flesh.

Circumcision indicated this by being a mark in the flesh. And consider what portion of the flesh was removed, and consider why. The very line of children that Abraham would sire and through which the Savior would come was a line of children conceived and born as sinners, under the law, accountable to God. That's why only the boys were circumcised – because it was Adam who sinned and it is through this our first father's sin that we all have inherited our corruption. This sin is ours because we were conceived in the natural way. Because of this, we are all destined to return to the ground from which we came, and from which Adam got his name. Circumcision was a mark of death. It was a mark of pain. It shed blood. It was for sinners marked as sinners who needed to be redeemed – whose *children* needed to be redeemed. It was a reminder of their need for Christ.

But in it, was also a sign of what would come in the fullness of time. Christ would be born without sin, because He was born of God from eternity. He would be born without sin, because He would be born of a virgin, without the help of a man. He would be born of a woman, who in herself bore no such sign of mortality – think of this – there's a reason why girls weren't circumcised – no seed was sown that would bring death. But from Mary's womb, God brought forth life who would freely give Himself into death. The Seed

that was promised to Abraham became the Seed of the woman who in bruising His heel would crush the serpent's head.

Christ was born to be a Savior. That's what the angel told Joseph. *"And you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."* Jesus means *the Lord saves*. But He did not receive this name until He fully committed Himself to redeem sinners by placing Himself under the law that condemned sinners. In His circumcision, Jesus was sealed as one who would die. He was marked as one who was accountable to God. He was appointed as one who would bleed, and even there in His circumcision, He would shed His first drops of blood to redeem us. And in so doing, He justly became what His name said He was: *Savior*.

Jesus came to do what the law commanded. He did. Jesus came to suffer what the law threatened. He suffered. After having lived the life that we could not, the life that earns only praise and reward, Jesus suffered on the cross for every life that fell short. He suffered in His body the death of a hundred billion sinners and more who were born spiritually blind, dead, and hostile to God. But by His perfect life and passion, He reconciled them all to their God. As St. Paul writes in Romans 10: *"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."*

The law speaks and it is done. 2013 is over. It's soon to be legal. What happened happened. The law keeps records and numbers what you have done and left undone. The law works wrath and makes a sinner out of you. But it couldn't make a sinner out of Jesus. That's what makes Him our Savior. He gives us His perfect year, His perfect 2013, His perfect life that will extend far beyond 2014. He gives to us His righteousness not where He has removed flesh from our bodies like in circumcision, but where he has removed our sin in Baptism. Circumcision marked a man as one who would die and who would sow seeds of death. But Baptism marks us as ones who will live, because through it we were buried with Christ into His *own* death and raised with Him in His glorious resurrection. In Baptism, it is not our parents who give us a name. No, this is God's work. God gives us a name – by clothing us in the perfect obedience of His Son.

God keeps His promises. The covenant He sealed with circumcision proves this. The death that circumcision pointed to has occurred. And now Christ joins us to it, so that we might rise and live with Him forever. And we rise each day. Each day as we return to our Baptism in repentance, in that same Baptism we find where God continues to call us by name. We find forgiveness. We find our identity. Only here where God gives to us new life are we going to find our new desires too, and the ability to bear fruits that please God. So if the New Year is as daunting as the old year is discouraging, remember your name. You are not named according to the law. You are named according to Christ's fulfillment of it. You are a Christian. Remember that Christ, born holy from a Virgin, willingly joined Himself to your name, Sinner, in order that you might be joined to His name, *Jesus*, and be saved from all your sin. This is how we pass through time as sinners. And this is how we enter eternity as saints.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Pastor John Preus  
(based on a sermon preached December 31, 2012)*