

NEW YEAR'S DAY;

Sermon - Luke 2:21.

The Glory Has Departed;

This sermon appears in the Erl. Ed. 10, 319; W. 11, 391; St. L. 11, 284.

TEXT:

Luke 2:21. And when eight days were fulfilled for circumcising him, his name was called Jesus, which was so called by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

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1. It is the custom “to distribute the New Year” from the pulpit on this day, as if there were not enough other useful and salutary matter to preach, and it were necessary to present such useless fables in place of the Word of God, and to make a sport and disgrace of so serious an office. The Gospel requires us to preach on the circumcision and the name of Jesus; and this we will do!

I. OF THE CIRCUMCISION OF JESUS.

2. First let us ask the wise woman, Dame Jezebel, natural reason: Is it not a foolish, ridiculous, useless command, when God demands circumcision?

Could he find no member of the body but this? If Abraham had here followed reason, he would not have believed that it was God who demanded this of him. For in our eyes it is such a foolish thing that there can scarcely be anything more absurd. The Jews had to endure great infamy and disgrace on account of it, were despised by everybody and treated as an abomination. Moreover, there is no use in it. What benefit is it, if the body is mutilated? Man is made no better by it, for everything depends upon the soul.

3. But such are all of God’s commandments and works, and such they are to be. In our eyes they appear most foolish, most contemptible, and most useless, in order that haughty Reason, who deems herself clever and wise, may be put to shame and blinded, and may surrender her self-conceit and submit to God, give him honor, and believe that whatever he appoints, is most useful, most honorable, and most wise, although she does not see it and thinks quite differently. If God had given a sign which would have been suitable to her and useful, wise, and honorable in her estimation, she would have remained in her old skin, would not have surrendered her haughtiness, would have continued in her custom of seeking and loving only honor, gain, and wisdom on earth, and so would have become ever more deeply rooted in worldly, temporal things. But now that he presents to her foolish, useless, and contemptible things, he tears her away from the seeking after gain, honor, and wisdom, and teaches her to regard only the invisible, divine wisdom, honor, and gain, and for its sake willingly to suffer the lack of temporal honor, gain, and wisdom, and to be a fool, poor, unprofitable, and despised for God’s sake. Therefore God was not concerned about the circumcision, but about the humiliation of proud nature and reason.

4. So we also have baptism in the New Testament, in order that we should be buried in the

water, and believe that we are thereby cleansed from sins and saved; also, that Christ's body is in the bread of the altar; also, that we worship the crucified man as Lord and God. All this is immeasurably far above, and contrary to, reason. So the works and words of God are all contrary to reason, and this, in turn, is also contrary to God and recoils at the sign that is spoken against. Before men it was a very foolish speech, when Noah built the ark and said, the world would be flooded. So Lot must needs have been a fool, when he said, Sodom and Gomorrah would perish. Moses and Aaron were fools before King Pharaoh. In short, God's Word and his preachers must be fools, as St. Paul says, 1 Corinthians 1:21. In all this God seeks nothing but this humility, that man bring his reason into captivity and be subject to divine truth. Abraham and his seed received the foolish rite of circumcision, in order that by it they should give glory to God and suffer him alone to be wise.

5. Now circumcision was an external mark, by which God's people were known in distinction from other nations; just as we see that every prince gives his people and army his standard and watchword, by which they are known among themselves and by which foreigners can tell, to what lord they belong. Thus God has never left his people without such a sign or watchword, by which it can outwardly be known in the world where his people are to be found. Jews are known by circumcision: that was their divine mark. Our mark is baptism and the body of Christ. Therefore the ancient fathers called these signs, characters, symbola, tesseras, that is, watchwords or standards, what we now call sacraments, that is, sacred signs. For where there is baptism, there certainly are Christians, be they where they will in the world. It matters not if they are not under the pope, as he claims; for he would like to make of himself a sacrament and a Christian watchword.

6. Let this be enough concerning the temporal reason for circumcision. We will now also look at the spiritual reason and its significance. First, why did he not command to circumcise a finger, hand, foot, ear, or eye, or some other member? Why did he select just that which in human life serves for no work or employment and which was created by God for natural birth and multiplication? If evil was to be cut off, then certainly the hand or the tongue, of all members, ought to have been circumcised: for by the tongue and hands all wickedness is perpetrated among men.

7. It is said that it was done for the reason, that evil lust manifests itself most in this member of the body; wherefore also Adam and Eve felt the disobedience of their flesh there, and sought a covering for their nakedness.

That is all true; but in addition to that it also signifies, as we are wont to say, that God does not condemn or save the person on account of his works, but his works on account of the person. Accordingly, our fault lies not in our works, but in our nature. The person, nature, and entire existence are corrupt in us because of Adam's fall. Therefore no work can be good in us, until our nature and personal life are changed and renewed.

The tree is not good, therefore its fruits are bad.

8. Thus God has here taught every one, that nobody can become righteous by works or laws, and that all works and labors to become righteous and be saved are in vain, as long as the nature and person are not renewed.

You see now that, had he commanded to circumcise the hand or the tongue, this would have been a sign that the fault to be changed lay in the words or works; that he was favorable to the nature and person, and hated only the words and works. But now, in selecting that member which has no work except that the nature and personal existence arise thereby, he gives clearly to understand that the fault lies in the entire state of the nature, that its birth and its origin are corrupt and sin. This is original sin, or the sin of the nature, or the sin of the person, the truly chief sin. If this did not exist, there would neither be any actual sin. This sin is not done, like all other sins; but it exists, lives, and does all sins, and is the essential sin, that sins not for an hour or a season; but wherever and as long as the person exists.

9. God looks at this sin of the nature alone. This can be eradicated by no law, by no punishment, even if there were a thousand hells: but the grace of God alone, which makes the nature pure and new, must purge it away. The law only manifests it and teaches how to recognize it, but does not save from it; the law restrains only the hand or member, it cannot restrain the person and nature from being sinful; for in birth the nature has already anticipated the law, and has become sin before the law could forbid it. Just as little as it lies in one's human power to be born and to receive natural existence, so little does it lie in his power to be without sin or to escape from it. He who has created us, he alone must take it away. Therefore he first gives the law, by which man recognizes this sin and thirsts for grace: then he also gives the Gospel and saves him.

10. In the second place, why does he command to circumcise males only, when nature and birth involve the woman also? The prophet also complains more of the mother than of the father, when he says, Psalm 51:5: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." It was surely done on account of Christ and his mother, because he was to come, and because it was possible that a natural man and person could be born of a woman without sin and natural intercourse. But in all conception from a man, the man sins as well as the woman, and sin on either side cannot be avoided. Therefore Christ willed not to be conceived of a man, in order that his mother also might not be under the necessity of sinning and of conceiving him in sin. Therefore he made use of her womanly flesh and body for natural birth, but not for natural conception, and was conceived and born a true man without sin. Since, therefore, it is possible that a pure, innocent birth, nature, and person may be derived from a woman; but from a man only a sinful birth, nature, and person; therefore circumcision was imposed upon males only, in order to signify that all birth from man is sinful and condemned, requiring circumcision and change: but that a birth derived only from a woman without a man, is innocent and uncondemned, requiring no circumcision or change. And here one may apply what John writes, in John 1:12-18: "To them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God"—with the understanding that "the will of man" refers to birth from man. If it were possible now that more women could bear without men, these births would be altogether pure and holy; but this has been reserved for this one mother alone.

11. In the third place, why was it necessary to perform it on the eighth day?

Here again the sin of nature is indicated. For the poor babe has no actual sin of its own; nevertheless it must be circumcised and assume the sign of purification from sin. If he had commanded to circumcise after eight years, one might say it was done for sins committed and for the avoidance of future sins. But by commanding to circumcise on the eighth day he excludes both ideas, that it is done for sins committed and for the sake of future sins; without doubt, because a greater than any actual sin is born and ingrained in human nature.

12. But here it might be objected that Abraham and his servants and household were circumcised when they were grown and old, Genesis 17:23: therefore circumcision might signify actual committed sins. The answer is: Scripture anticipates and abolishes the idea that Abraham was justified by circumcision, for he was already justified of his sins when he received circumcision; for it is written in Genesis 15:6 that he was made righteous by his faith before his circumcision, when he was eighty years old or a little more, and circumcision he received when he was ninety-nine years old; so that circumcision was instituted almost twenty years after his justification. From this St. Paul, in Romans 4:11, concludes, against the Jews, that not circumcision, but faith without circumcision justifies, as Abraham's example cogently shows. Therefore circumcision is not a putting off of sin, but a sign of such putting off, which is accomplished by faith alone, as was the case with Abraham. Therefore it demands, as in Abraham so in all men, faith, which removes the sin of nature and makes the person righteous and accepted.

13. If now Abraham's faith had not been described before his circumcision, it would have been a certain sign of original sin in him, as it is in the case of children, whose faith is not described beforehand. The Scriptures have ordered it so, that Abraham first believed and afterwards was circumcised, and others were first circumcised and afterwards believed, in order that both truths might stand: first, that circumcision is only a sign of justification and nobody is justified by it; secondly, that faith justifies alone without the cooperation of circumcision, and therefore faith and its sign are clearly distinguished, to the discomfiture of the righteousness that trusts in works.

14. Perhaps the eighth day was also appointed for bodily reasons, in order that the babe might first grow stronger, lest it might appear that it had died from the circumcision, if it were circumcised directly after birth and had died from weakness.

15. But the spiritual significance is of greater importance. Seven days signify the time of this world until the last day, because this present time is measured by the week or seven days described in Genesis 1. The eighth day is the last day after the present time, when weeks, months, and years will cease, and there will be only an eternal day. On that day circumcision shall be fulfilled, when not only the soul, but also the body, shall be redeemed from sin, death and all impurity, and shall shine as the sun.

Meanwhile the soul is circumcised from sin and an evil conscience by faith.

16. So we see that the Scriptures in all places urge to faith, but only to faith in Christ. Therefore circumcision was not given by the law of Moses, nor to the fathers before Abraham, but to Abraham, to whom Christ, his seed, was promised for a blessing, so that the bodily circumcision might everywhere be in accord with the spiritual circumcision.

17. Why then has it ceased, if that same faith in Christ, to which it points, still remains? The answer is, God has always, from the beginning of the world to the end, maintained one faith in Christ; but he has not given only one sign of it. If all the signs which refer to faith remained, who could keep them? But since faith is inward and invisible, God has foreshadowed it to men by many external signs, in order that they might be incited to believe as by many examples, and has permitted each to continue for its time. How many signs did Moses alone do in Egypt and in the wilderness, which have all passed away and lasted during their time, and still were all signs of faith? So when God promised to Abraham the blessings in his seed and gave to him a sign of it, namely circumcision, it could not exist by virtue of that promise longer than the fulfillment of the promise. But when Christ, the blessed seed, came, the promise was finished and fulfilled; it was no longer to be expected. Therefore the sign also necessarily was finished and fulfilled; why should it continue any longer, when the promise on which it depended was finished? But that which it signified, faith, remains always, whether the promise with its sign passes away or remains.

18. Yet circumcision has not been abolished in such a way that it is sin to be circumcised, as St. Jerome and many others contend; but it has become free. If anybody wishes, he may circumcise himself, or not circumcise himself, as long as he does not act from the opinion, that it is necessary and commanded, or that the promise of God to Abraham is unfulfilled and still to be expected. For faith can endure none of these opinions. Therefore it does not depend upon the work, but upon the imagination and opinion of the one doing the work. If anybody circumcise himself with the same opinion with which he cuts his hair, beard, or skin, in love and service to another, he would not commit sin; for he would do it bound not by the law and by necessity of justification, nor against the fulfilled promise of God, but from free volition and his own choice, because the promise is fulfilled and the sign attached to it is finished.

19. Moreover, God never has had the custom of establishing a sign again, when once it has come to an end, but he has always instituted other new signs. So after the fulfillment of his promise, after the coming of Christ, he instituted for Abraham's seed another new sign, namely, baptism. This indeed is the last sign to be instituted before the last day, because he instituted it in person. Nevertheless the same faith in Christ, which was in Abraham, abides always; for it knows neither day nor night, nor any outward transformation. This baptism has the same significance as circumcision, as is to be shown at the proper time.

II. THE NAMING OF JESUS, AS WAS THE CUSTOM AT CIRCUMCISION.

20. Finally, it was the custom to give the child its name in circumcision, as we see here and in the instance of John the Baptist, to whom his name was also given in his circumcision. However, just as Christ was not obliged to be circumcised and this sign was empty in this case, so also his name had been given to him before by the angel, so that he did not obtain it by circumcision. This was done and is written, to the end that he should be altogether free from the law and from sin above all other men, and only serve us by submitting to the law and becoming like unto us in order to redeem us from it, as St. Paul said in the last Epistle: "He was born under the law, that he might redeem them that were under the law," Galatians 4:4-5.

21. For when death fell upon him and slew him, and yet had no right or cause against him, and he willingly and innocently submitted and suffered himself to be slain: death became liable to him, did him wrong and sinned against him, and completely exposed itself, so that Christ has an honest claim upon it. Now the wrong which death became guilty of toward him, is so great that death can never pay nor atone for it. Therefore it must be subject to Christ and in his power forever: and so death is overcome and killed in Christ. Now Christ did not do this for himself, but for us, and has bestowed upon us this victory over death in baptism. Therefore all who believe in Christ must also be lords over death, and death must be their subject, nay, their criminal, whom they are to judge and execute; even as they do when they die and at the last day. For by the gift of Christ death has also become guilty to all those, who have received this gift from Christ. Behold, this is the sweet and joyous redemption from death through Christ; these are the spiritual victories of Joshua over the heathen of Canaan, notably the five kings, upon whose necks the princes of Israel put their feet by his command, Joshua 10.

22. So also circumcision did Christ wrong, for he was not subject to it. Therefore it is justly subject to him and he has power over it, has conquered it, and has granted to us, that it must cease and has lost its right over those who believe in Christ. He has released us from circumcision only by submitting to it innocently and by bestowing his right against it upon us.

23. Behold, this is putting Christ under the law, in order that he might redeem those who were under it. Galatians 4:5. Moreover, he has subjected himself to all other laws, to none of which he was bound, being Lord and God over all. Therefore they have all fallen into his power, have done him wrong, and must now justly be subject to him.

24. Now all this he has also given to us. Therefore if we believe in Christ, and the law would endeavor to punish us as sinners, and death would insist upon it, and try to drive the wretched conscience to hell; and if you then hold up to them in turn their sin and wrong, which they have done to Christ, your Lord: do you not suppose that they also shall be put to shame and be more afraid of you than you of them? Death shall feel its guilt and flee in disgrace; the law shall be compelled to give up its terror and smile friendly upon Christ. In this way sin must be banished by sin. The sins, which they have committed against Christ and now also against you on account of your faith, are greater than those which you have

committed against them. In this case God, the just Judge, will not suffer that a great thief should hang a little one; on the contrary, if the great one is to be free, much more must the little one go free. Of this St. Paul says, Corinthians 15:55-57: “O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin; but thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ; for death is swallowed up in victory.” Behold, is not this a precious redemption from the law through him, who innocently subjected himself to the law?

25. Praise God, what an exceedingly rich and mighty thing faith is! It indeed makes of man a god, to whom nothing is impossible, as Christ says, Mark 9:28: “If thou canst! All things are possible to him that believeth,” Therefore it is also said in Psalm 82:6: “Ye are gods, and all of you sons of the Most High.”

26. His name is rightly called on this day Jesus, that is interpreted, Savior: for Savior we call one who saves, redeems, brings salvation and is of help to everybody; this one the Hebrew language calls Jesus. So the angel Gabriel spoke to Joseph in sleep, Matthew 1:21: ‘She shall bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for it is he that shall save his people from their sins.’ Here the angel himself explains why he is called Savior, Jesus, namely, because he is help and salvation to his people. We have now heard how this comes to pass through faith, to which he gives all his right and possession, that he has over sin, death, and the law. He makes it righteous, free and blessed.

27. Now as circumcision signifies our faith, as we have heard: so the naming of children signifies that by faith we have a name and are known before God. For God knows none of those who do not believe, as is said in Psalm 1:6: “For Jehovah knoweth the way of the righteous; but the way of the wicked shall perish.” And in Matthew 25:12: “Verily, I say unto you, I know you not.” What then is our name? Doubtless as Christ gives us all that is his, so he also gives his name to us; therefore we are all called Christian from him, all God’s children from him, all Jesuses from him, all Savior from him, and whatever is his name, that also is ours; as St. Paul writes, Romans 8:24: “In hope were ye saved,” for ye are Jesuses or Saviors. Behold, there is therefore no measure to the dignity and honor of a Christian! These are the super abundant riches of his goodness, which he pours out upon us, so that our heart may be free, joyous, peaceable, and un-terrified; and willingly and cheerfully keep the law. Amen.

