

January 1 & 2, 2012 – Church of the Epiphany

- The Rev. Dr. Tim Perry

“After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

It seems like such a trifling detail, doesn't it? That after eight days, Jesus was circumcised and named. Every Jewish boy was. This was the way of things. No swarthy shepherds shouting in amazement about angelic armies now. Back to life as usual. Jesus, just like every other boy born, was made a child of the covenant. The covenant—the contract that God had made with Abraham and his descendants—was literally cut into him. He was circumcised.

It's not only trifling, but it's also kind of gross. Do we really need to hear about that? I know some of you are thinking that. Especially in our day when it is such a controversial procedure. When it has become a debate that has itself become politicized. Do we really need to hear about that? It's ok to ask that question.

It's ok to ask that question provided you're willing to wrestle with Luke's answer. For Luke, the circumcision of Jesus is neither trifling nor offensive. It is, on the contrary, absolutely essential to his story.

I say it is absolutely essential because of the way it sticks out in Luke's telling. It sticks out first because it doesn't really fit in the nativity story. That story—which we read last week and partially re-read this week—naturally concludes with the shepherds leaving and Mary pondering. Neither does the circumcision of Jesus fit as a beginning to the presentation story—the story of baby Jesus at the Temple, where he is blessed by Simeon and Anna. It just sticks out. That one verse is neither fish nor fowl. It doesn't belong to the nativity; it doesn't belong to the presentation. Yet there it is. Sticking out.

It sticks out for another reason. It sticks out because of its sheer ordinariness. In the nativity, there are angelic armies singing the praises of God. There are awestruck shepherds shouting their amazement to all who will listen. In the presentation, Jesus' identity is disclosed in Simeon's song of praise, and in his subsequent warning to Mary. That identity is then declared by the prophetess, Anna, to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Bookended by the

miraculous is this one verse that is, just, boring. After eight days, Jesus was circumcised and named. In its everydayness, it sticks out.

Luke, I am convinced, wants us to notice this one little verse. He does not want us to treat it as trifling. He does not want us to pass over it as everyday. He certainly does not want us to flinch at the nature of the procedure, for the sake of our easily offended scruples. Luke bookends this one verse with the miraculous. Luke makes sure it fits in neither story that surrounds it. Luke wants us to notice it.

Why?

Luke wants us to see God not simply in the miraculous, but in the every day. In the ordinary.

Last Sunday we spoke about John's four words that turn all our ideas about God upside down—the Word became flesh. If we really stop to think about it, those words are revolutionary. For if they're true, they mean that God is not trapped in his transcendence unable to communicate with his creatures. If they're true, they mean that God's transcendence, his "otherness," is most fully expressed in his entrance into time and space as the human Jesus of Nazareth. One who is fully human. Ordinarily human.

Luke is making the same point here with this one verse wedged into his accounts of the miraculous. There may well have been miracles surrounding God's entry into our world, but that entry point was itself ordinary. He was born. Mary really is his mother. He comes not as a generic human being, but a specific one. He belongs to a specific people—the Jews. And as a Jew, he is circumcised just like every other Jewish boy. And on that eighth day, He is given a name, just like every other Jewish boy.

God comes to us in the ordinariness of human life. He takes all that it is to be human and he makes it his own.

Luke, without denying the miracles—he narrates them after all—wants us to notice the ordinary. Here he is. In so many ways just like everybody else. Undergoing all the same things. And yet, here he is all the same. This one, who is the heir of David, the Son of the Most High, the Lord come among his people.

Right there, in Joseph's arms as the moyle conducts the operation. Right there, as the wound is bandaged and his name is proclaimed. Right there in the ordinariness of everything. There is God.

But we must press further. For Luke's point is not simply that God has entered into the everyday so that we can see him. It is much more than that. It is that God has entered into the everyday to that he can save it.

His name discloses his identity.

His name discloses his saving work.

This entry into the everyday was not simply some sort of divine experiment. It was God's radical embrace of all that it means to be human in order to save us from God's enemies and ours—from sin death and the devil.

God enters into history *for us*. And that for us is there. In the everydayness of being made a child of the covenant. Of having that covenant cut into his body.

Why did Jesus need to be circumcised?

Probably not a question that has kept you up at night. Me neither. It did vex the early fathers, though. Jesus—if he was indeed God come in the flesh—did not need to become a member of the covenant people. He was already *the* senior covenant partner. Why then?

He was circumcised, the fathers reasoned—and they are in line with Luke in their thinking—*for us*. His entry into the covenant people—the Jews—as one of them is part of his saving work. It is part of his taking up of human nature. It is part of his undoing of Adam's fall. Already, at eight days old, he is taking the way the sin of the world.

He does so as one of us. As the one human being who did keep covenant with God. So that all of us who are united in him in baptism are covered by his faithfulness. We find our disobedience undone by his obedience, our sins forgiven, our estrangement reconciled, our diseased healed.

Most pregnantly, of course, the spilling of his blood at his circumcision was seen by the fathers as a foreshadowing of the spilling of his blood once and for all to seal the covenant made between God and all people. For the blood of the cross opened the covenant that God had made with the Jews to us Gentiles too.

Paul put the same point plainly in our New Testament lesson:

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, though God.”

Because he comes as one of us—born of a woman, born under the law—we might become the adopted children of God. St. Athanasius, in his book *On the Incarnation* put it this way: “He became human in order that humans might become divine.” To use the Pauline language, he takes on our nature—born of a woman, born under the law—so that we might enjoy by adoption what is his by nature—sharing in the life of God.

He has taken our humanity into God’s very life. And if we have been united to him in baptism, we are already starting to share in that life too. We share in God’s life not by being born into the right family. Not by having the right connections or doing the right things. We are made children of the covenant; we are made God’s heirs, because this one became a child of the Covenant, because this Son was not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters.

And so on this Naming Day, we celebrate the Descent of God to us. It is a descent heralded by angels and proclaimed by prophets. AND We celebrate the ascent of humanity to God. AND we celebrate Him who is both the descent and the ascent. Who is the ladder who connects heaven and earth, humans and God? Who in his divinity is God come to seek and to save the lost and who is, in his humanity, God’s one faithful covenant partner?

He is the one who, on the eighth day, was circumcised *for us*. And that is neither trifling nor offensive. That is good news.