

THE CIRCUMCISION OF OUR LORD

Luke 2:21

Amen

Tomorrow is the commemoration of the circumcision of our Lord, which we celebrate today. Here's the Holy Gospel for that day, the Gospel according to St. Luke, chapter two, verse twenty-one: *"And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."*

Luther began His first sermon on this event with these words: "This is a short Gospel lesson, and we'll make a short 'sermon' out of it." He then preached a ten page sermon. I like that, so let me just say, "This is a short Gospel lesson, and we'll make a short 'sermon' out of it."

You might not want Luther as a euchre partner, though. He reneged a few pages later, "That's why the observance of Christ's circumcision offers such a rich sermon; there's enough here to talk about for several hours!" Imagine how you'd squirm if you heard me say that!

At that point, I'd been racking my brains for quite some time with little to show. How could Luther say that it contained hours of preachment? But then I read this gem:

One lesson we can learn from the old circumcision is this: when God wants to help his people, he sometimes does it in ways that are nothing less than ridiculous as far as human judgment is concerned! ... For arrogant Gentiles what could be more laughable than that God—the eternal wisdom!—would order an eight-day child and the ninety-nine-year-old Abraham to be circumcised—together with all others in the future who might wish to adopt the Jewish faith! This became so offensive to the Gentiles that they responded with all sorts of spiteful and scoffing nicknames for the Jews!

But at the same time, here we also have an example of how God makes the world look foolish! What God proposes does not please the world, and what the world undertakes does not please God. That's how all God's commandments fare: reason butts its head against them and takes offense."¹

Let's go back in time a bit to the start of the whole circumcision thing, Genesis 17: *God said to Abraham, "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."*

Let's be honest here, gentlemen. Who of us, had we been Abraham, wouldn't have had at least a few questions before fetching the flint knife? "Are you sure, God? Perhaps there is another way? Why?" And again, "Are you sure, God? Perhaps there is another way? Why?" But we find no questions. Just faith and a flint knife.

Remember, this is Genesis 17. Isaac is born in Genesis 21. The promise to the patriarchs, like the promise to Adam and Eve, was one of offspring. *"Through your Seed, blessing"* is the refrain of the Old Testament. The glory of Israel and the light of the gentiles hung on a family tree. And so Israelite men and their wives were constantly reminded of the promise of God as it was intimately marked upon their relationship as a sign and seal. It may have seemed foolish, but on Christmas day the four finished off the two plus two.

Luther writes:

¹ All Luther quotations from *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. Lenker, vol. 5, pages 177-187

As soon as we begin asking why God has commanded this or that, the devil has already won, as is plain from the case of Eve in paradise... When God commands, speaks, does something, you should shut your mouth, fall on your knees and, without further objection, do what he has told you, hear what he says, submit what he does! ... Whoever... instead says, Why should I be such a fool? Let God line himself up with my wisdom and do what pleases me—that person is lost!

Terrifying words for us who so often want a better view into the mind of God, to drop suggestions into a divine suggestion box that just doesn't exist! When God is near in suffering, we conclude He is farthest away. When God is teaching us patience and perseverance, we presume He is punishing or harming us. Precisely when God is giving us medicine, we're sure we're being poisoned. Perhaps one of the greatest blessings of circumcision was that it drilled home the lesson we'd all do well to learn: God often brings blessing through meddling in the most intimate areas of our life and person.

When you see water poured on a child's head and hear the pastor say, "You are a redeemed child of God," speak Amen. When you have bread and wine placed into your mouth by the pastor and hear him say, "The body and blood of Christ," speak Amen. When you, knowing your wretched condition, confess to your pastor and hear him say, "I forgive you in the name of the Father and of the Son (+) and of the Holy Spirit," speak Amen. When you suffer loss and the Bible assures you that all things work for the good of those whom God has called, who love Him, speak Amen. When you experience gain and the Bible warns you that these blessings are not the fruit of your own hands but the blessing of God Almighty, speak Amen. It may not all make sense at the time, but the four is following the two plus two, as Christ followed circumcision. Be patient and trust that it'll all unravel in heaven.

Who knew the circumcision of our Lord had so much to teach us? I didn't. Apparently, though, Luther did. Perhaps the Treasurer should cut him a check for this sermon. Although, to be honest, no offense to Pastors Peil, Seafert, or Kuske, there are few others I think we'd rather have guest preach, even if he could go on for hours. But let him remind you why:

And so mark this difference well; everything depends on it! Abraham came under the Law as a sinner; the infant Jesus, however, came under it not as a sinner but without guilt, as Lord of the Law, who takes away the Law's authority and power; yes, tears the Law to pieces so that it can no longer ensnare and condemn those who believe in him.

That's why the observance of Christ's circumcision offers such a rich sermon; there's enough here to talk about for several hours! Circumcised on the eighth day, Christ puts himself under the Law to redeem us who were under the Law. And because he has freed us from the law, we are also delivered from sin and death.

Let's boil it down. Christ has placed Himself under the law to keep what we have broken, that, not the law's threats and accusations, but His own promises of undeserved love and forgiveness in the gospel might spur us on to the obedience of a son loved by His Father and not a slave terrified of His Master. Christ has received the mark of law that we might be marked with the water of grace.

Christ is circumcised. You're baptized. God is well-pleased with it all, for He has arranged it, and, through faith in Christ who permeates it all, He is well-pleased with you. It is ridiculous, all of it, but that's the beauty of it all. God has loved us with a love bigger than our hearts and lavished us with a wisdom wiser than our minds. Save the Why for heaven. Make more use of the Amen now. Amen.