



CIRCUMCISION OF OUR LORD

January 1

THE GOSPEL READING

Luke 2:20-21, 40-52

[The Naming of Jesus, His Childhood in Bethlehem, and His Father's House]

At that time, the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. 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. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom; and when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the company they went a day's journey, and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances; and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking him. After three days, they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

And when they saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously." And he said to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.



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THE SERMON

The Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all of the promises of God. He is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, which we call the Old Testament. He brings the New Covenant and eternal redemption, as we read in the New Testament.

God, Who loves His people, has taught us throughout the ages according to our ability to understand in progressive disclosures of His being and glorious truths. In this reading, we see Christ fulfilling the promises of God by being circumcised, by entering the Temple, and by being named Jesus, which means "God saves." All the Scriptures pointed to Christ, and now He has come, fulfilling God's promises and bringing about our salvation and redemption. He makes all things new.

The Old Testament promised Christ, the Messiah, and provided all kinds of symbols pointing to the Son's coming. For example, circumcision and the Red Sea crossing symbolized the Baptism which Christ would institute in His Church. The manna, the daily heavenly bread God gave to the people of Israel in the desert, represented the Body and Blood of Christ, which we receive in Holy Communion.

Moses received the Law from God and was himself a symbol of the Law. As such, in his old age, he could not enter the Promised Land, a symbol of heaven. Therefore, God appointed his successor, Joshua, to cross the Jordan and lead the people into the Land. The name "Joshua" means "God saves," and it is the Hebrew version of the name Jesus. As Saint Gregory the Theologian says, "The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New Testament manifested the Son and suggested the divinity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit Himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of Himself."

The symbolic connection between circumcision and Baptism is that both were rites that respectively incorporated individuals into the people of God. In the Old Testament, all Jewish male children (and converts) entered God's Covenant through circumcision. In the book of Genesis, God commanded Abraham and said, "A child of eight days shall be circumcised by you – every male child throughout your genealogy" (Genesis 17:2).

Baptism is the New Covenant's fulfillment of Baptism. As a Sacrament of the Church, it expands the function of circumcision, in that Baptism is not only for males but for all human beings, male and female. It is not only for the Jewish people but for all peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations. The Lord Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day and baptized in the Jordan River at the beginning of His earthly ministry. He is named Jesus, like Joshua of old, because in Him, "God saves." He leads us through the Jordan, as it were, the waters of Baptism, into the presence of God, the Promised Land. Jesus Christ fulfills the Law and brings the fullness of grace in everything He is and by everything He does.

By His Incarnation, which we celebrate during this Christmas season, God the Son took human nature to heal and save it. He took a body and a soul with a human mind

and human will. He was born and grew up as a young Jewish boy. We read that the Child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon Him. As His Mother, the Most Holy Theotokos was *highly favored* (in Greek, *κεχαριτωμένη*), so the Son has the *favor* (in Greek, *χάρις*) of God upon Him. He is the promised Messiah, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). He is the eternal Wisdom (in Greek, *Σοφία*) of God, and He also grows in wisdom, in His human nature. He redeems all steps of our development as human beings.

The Most Holy Theotokos and Joseph, to whom she was betrothed, also kept the Law. Because of this, they traveled each year to Jerusalem by foot, forty miles each way, to keep the Feast of Passover. This was commanded in the Law of Moses, and they traveled with all their relatives – men, women, and children, to bring a sacrifice in that Feast which was called in Hebrew “Pesach,” which we now call Pascha.

When the Lord Jesus was twelve years old, He and His family were in Jerusalem for the Feast. Twelve is a symbolic number in Scripture that indicates the people of God, both in the twelve tribes of Israel and in the twelve Apostles. The Lord entered the Temple to dialogue with the Jewish teachers and Rabbis. The Theotokos found Him sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. All who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers.

When the young Lord enters the Temple, God enters His own Temple. Even more important, Jesus is Himself the true Temple (John 19:21). As the glory of God had entered the Temple in the Old Testament, now the glory of God the Son comes humbly as a Boy. Gently, He enters the Temple to teach the teachers and to lead us into the knowledge of the Father and of eternal life.

The Mother of God was anxious to find her Son. She is the perfect human being, the chosen one to bear God in her womb and to lead us all to Him. She is our Mother also because we belong to her Son. She loves her Son, and so she loves us and cares for us. Because of her love, she was distressed since she could not find Him, and said, Son, we have been looking for you for three days. Later, she would also look for Him for three days, between the Cross and the Resurrection.

The Lord Jesus answered her and said, Mother, did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house? He would eventually make every one of us, His people, as His own Temple, the Father’s house, which is the Church. The Lord Jesus is always in His Father’s house because He is always in our midst. He is and ever shall be.

His Mother did not fully understand what happened then, but she kept all these things in her heart. She also grew in wisdom in the indescribable – and often challenging – journey of raising the Son of God. All the same, the twelve-year-old Lord Jesus submitted to her and Joseph.

When the Lord humbles Himself, submits to His parents, and honors them, He is also fulfilling the Law and giving us an example. Saint Cyril of Alexandria says, “For as He

was humbled for us, so for us He increased, that we who have fallen through sin might increase in Him. For whatever concerns us, Christ Himself has truly undertaken for us, that He might restore us to a better state.” He teaches us both humility and wisdom.

The Son of God, Jesus, who saves us from sin and death, has incorporated us into the divine life through Baptism. He has, by the power of the Holy Spirit, circumcised our hearts. The circumcision of the heart is a radical change, an inner transformation, where we receive faith, hope, and love.

By the circumcision of Christ, we were buried with Him in Baptism and raised with Him through faith in the working of God, Who raised Him from the dead. May our lives always shine the light of the grace and favor of God in the world. We are His Temple, so all people can come and encounter the love of God in our midst.

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