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The Second Sunday after Christmas

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What Child Is This?

In his eternal majesty, the Son of God established the divine law for the human race. In taking on humanity, the Son of God placed himself under the demands of those laws and obeyed them perfectly. Already on the eighth day of his life on earth, the baby Jesus was standing in for sinners and carrying out his work as Savior. What Jesus did for the world, he also does for us. We can live in a new year with confidence and peace.

Sermon

Luke 2:21

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

Introduction – Whenever we pass from an old year into a new year, there's always a hope and a prayer that the new year will be better than the old year. Sometimes those hopes and dreams turn out and sometimes they don't. Our parents and grandparents hoped and prayed that 1941 would be a better year than 1940 but by the end of that year 2,300 soldiers, sailors, and marines were dead because of Pearl Harbor and the United States had entered the worst war in the history of the world. We began a new year after that crazy millennial year hoping and praying that 2001 would be better than 2000, but then 3,000 people were killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks and our lives changed forever. We all hoped and prayed that Covid-19 in 2021 would be less vicious than it was in 2020, but the statistics I read claim that more people died of Covid 2021 than in 2020. And now the calendar turns again, and we're hoping and praying again that this year will be better than last year. Maybe it will be and maybe it won't.

I wonder if Joseph and Mary felt about the same. They wouldn't have the calendar in mind, but they might have liked to see things calm down a little. Life had been pretty hectic for the past nine months. They weren't heading back to Nazareth yet. Joseph may have found a place to stay that was a little more comfortable. Mary would have been busy nursing the baby and keeping him warm and clean. We don't know. But one thing we do know—and you heard this when I read the Gospel from Luke 2 this morning: **On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.** Mary and Joseph were Old Testament believers and so they did what God commended Old Testament believers to do: On the eighth day after their son was born, they took him to the local rabbi to be circumcised. And then in a formal way they named him Jesus which is what Gabriel had told both of them to do.

Luke gives us this information in one sentence, one verse in his Gospel, and he doesn't add any details. And this isn't a story we hear very often. Luke 2:21 is the appointed Gospel for January 1—there's the eighth day—but Lutherans don't go to church much on New Year's Day. And where Lutherans do schedule services on New Year's Day, the preacher probably repeats the sermon he preached on New Year's Eve. And let's be honest about this. Most of us don't feel real comfortable talking about circumcision in church!

But there's an important connection between this story and our story the day after New Year's. On the eighth day of his life Jesus wasn't moving from one calendar year to another like we are, but he was moving from an old era of time to a

new era of time. And what he did on his eighth day has an impact on every day and every month and every year of our lives, past and future. It's the day after New Year's Day, but the new year is still on our minds, so let's focus on this:

From the Past to the Future with Jesus

We don't play guessing games with the mind of God, so we don't know how, when, or where God decided to undo the sin problem. We know why—he did it because he loved us—and we know who: the seed of the woman. A human person born of a human mother would crush the devil's head. Time passed and God decided the ethnicity of this human person. He would be a descendant of Abraham. To keep this plan in place God made all the descendants of Abraham his special people. He set down promises that he would grow them and guide them. He established laws to keep them faithful to him and to separate them from godless nations. The entire Old Testament tells the story of God's efforts to keep his people together until one of their own women would give birth to a son who would crush the devil's head.

So God called Abraham to be the father of the Jewish race and then he gave this command: **For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised.** Circumcision was the sign and symbol of Israel's relationship with God. This was not a cosmetic or health thing. This was a spiritual symbol. Everywhere they went Jewish men were reminded who they were and where they stood in God's plan to send a Savior. The symbol reminded them of their need to eliminate sin. It reminded them that their creation of new life would someday lead to the creation of the Savior's life.

Obviously, Joseph and Mary knew about this command and so they took Jesus to the rabbi to fulfill that law. Of course, Jesus didn't need to be circumcised. He didn't need a reminder about his relationship with God. He didn't have any sins to get rid of and he would never father a child of his own: he was the child! But God didn't interfere and Jesus wouldn't have protested. Here, under the rabbi's knife, Jesus placed himself under God's law for the first time and here he shed his first drops of blood. And so here on the eighth day of his life, Jesus began his work to crush the devils' head and undo the problem of sin.

I said before that we don't know the how, when, or where God decided to undo the sin problem. We know why he did it—because he loved us—and we know who did it: the seed of the woman, Jesus. The last question is what: What did Jesus have to do to undo the sin problem? In God's mind—and God's mind blends fairness and love perfectly—someone had to do what the first human creatures didn't do: obey God's laws as God wanted them obeyed. We don't do that either. And then someone had to endure the punishment that came with not obeying God's laws. Someone had to pay with the blood of death. Adam and Eve deserved that punishment and so do we. So that's what Jesus came to do. He stood in for us. He obeyed every law in our place. He endured the punishment in our place. He paid the penalty with the blood of death in our place. And that's what he started to do when he was eight days old. And he finished it 33 years later. Just as Gabriel had commanded, Joseph and Mary named him Jesus: In their language, Yeshua or Yehoshua: God is salvation. On that day our Lord Jesus began to look away from the past, away from the promises and prophecies, from the dreams and desires. On that day he began to look ahead to the future where God's plan to save us would be fulfilled and final and finished.

And so here we on the second day of 2022 are looking back to the past and looking ahead to the future. We're hoping and praying that 2022 will be better than 2021. Maybe it will and maybe it won't. But does 2022 need to be better? Were there sins last year that really bothered you? Did you say something that really hurt someone? Did you fall into hot anger or incredible greed or nasty lust? Jesus forgave you, remember? Were there health problems or financial challenges or family troubles? Jesus solved them, didn't he? And if he didn't solve them the way you hoped, he shared his solutions in his Word. Did someone you loved die and you felt the sadness and the loneliness. Jesus comforted you, right, and he promised a get-together in heaven someday. Were there any problems last year that were so serious that having Jesus close by didn't make them better? As long as we have Jesus, the past is never as bad as it seems. His sun always brightened our shadows.

The spiritual necessity of circumcision ended with Jesus. For us, Holy Baptism is the sign and seal of our relationship with God. The word of baptism places the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit on us and the mark of baptism—

the cross from head to heart puts the name of Jesus on us. In the Second Reading for today, St. Paul wrote: **In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.** In our baptism we have the promise that the Savior who took care of us in the past will also be with us in the future. We can be sure. On his eighth day Jesus began his journey from the past to the future. Because he did, you and I, on the second day of this new year, can move from our past to our future and we do it with Jesus. Amen.