

January 1, 2023 – Number 6:22-27, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 2:21-24

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.” Juliet famously says this line about Romeo in Shakespeare's play about the star-crossed lovers. The name she is referring to, though, is not the name “Romeo”. It's the name Montague.

If he were simply Romeo, they could be together. Nothing would stop them. There would be no problem at all. But because he is Romeo Montague and because she is Juliet Capulet, there are a whole host of problems with them being together.

Their parents. Their families. Their servants. The whole world seems to be conspiring to keep them apart. Juliet is convinced that “Montague” is just a name. Romeo is a rose to her that would smell as sweet regardless of his name. But, in reality, there's quite a lot in his Montague name and her Capulet names and those names lead directly to deaths of a lot of people. Including their own.

Today, we consider another important name. Not of a fictional Shakespearean character, but the very real name of Jesus. And specifically, of the day that he received that name.

The Circumcision and Naming of Jesus is a festival of the church that we don't often celebrate here. It falls 8 days after Christmas Day, just as Jesus was circumcised and named 8 days after his birth. And as a result, it always falls on New Years Day.

As you can imagine, New Years Day morning has never been an especially popular time for a church service. This fact actually frustrated Luther and many of the reformers. The celebration of New Years Day on January 1 actually has its origin in pagan Roman worship. The month of January is named after Janus, who was the Roman god of time and the new year. And it drove Luther nuts that a Christian festival was so often forgotten so that we could celebrate a holiday with such pagan origins.

Well, not today. Today we remember the circumcision and naming of Jesus. But you might be asking yourself... why? Why create an entire festival around this one verse?

I mean, yeah, it's in the Bible. That's a good reason. But there are a lot of other events in the Bible – even in the life of Jesus – that don't get their own festival. We don't have a “Feast of Jesus being Forgotten by His Parents in Jerusalem.” We don't have a “Feast of Jesus Feeding 5,000”. We don't have a “Feast of Jesus Cursing a Fig Tree.” So why have a Feast of Jesus' Circumcision and Name.

Well, partly it's just ancient church tradition. This festival has existed since 600 A.D. Christians have celebrated the circumcision and naming of Jesus for 1,400 years. Who are we to argue with that many Christians who have come before us?

But I think they also had good reason for doing so. Because scripture is packed with lessons about the importance of both circumcision and names for God's people.

So let's tackle that first one. Which is admittedly an awkward topic to discuss in polite company. And one that for Christians today is simply a medical decision to be made between parents and their pediatrician.

Yet, we can't ignore the profound importance of circumcision in the Bible. It was the single most important ritual for every male Israelite from the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus. But what did it mean?

Well, it meant for the Israelites the same thing that it meant for Abraham: That they were part of God's covenant. He would be their God and they would be his people. And that was a promise that included even their smallest infants. From only eight days old.

Why eight days? Well, probably because the number eight is a number of new beginnings. The number seven is the number of creation. The number of completion. The number of perfection. God created a complete, perfect world in seven days. The eighth day, then, is the number of re-creation. The number of new beginnings. The number of rebirth.

A male Israelite child was born essentially a Gentile. Uncircumcised. Separated from God and His people. But eight days later, he is reborn. He is no longer a child of the nations. He is a child of God.

If this language sounds familiar to you, it should. Because circumcision was a type of baptism. It was a symbol. A foreshadowing. A unfulfilled promise of what was to come.

In circumcision, you physically cut away something unclean, and with the shedding of that blood and the removal of that physical uncleanness, you bring that child into God's covenant. In baptism, the same thing happens, only spiritually.

In baptism, you spiritually cut away something unclean: the child's sinful heart. But it's not the child's blood that is shed. It was Christ's blood that was shed. His blood brings you into God's covenant. So that you are reborn. You are no longer a child of the world. You are a child of God.

The two have so many parallels that even the tradition of using this moment to name the child has carried over. You may recall that during the Baptismal liturgy, I always stop to ask the parents, "How is this child to be named?" That comes from the even older tradition of naming a child at their circumcision. Like Mary and Joseph did for Jesus.

And so we get back to our original question: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Jesus didn't need to be named "Jesus." He could have been named anything. George. Bob. Ringo. It wouldn't have mattered. He still would have been the Son of God. He still would have been the Christ. He still would have died and risen again.

But he's named Jesus for a reason. As the angel Gabriel said to Mary, he is named Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. You see, Jesus is literally Hebrew for "the Lord saves." And that is exactly what he was doing by being incarnate as Mary's son.

That is exactly what he was doing, in fact, by being circumcised that same day that he was named. For if Jesus was going to save us, he had to fulfill the whole Law of Moses. Even the awkward parts that we don't discuss in polite company.

The one who spoke to Abraham and made the covenant with him, submitted himself to the terms of that covenant. The one who spoke to Moses and commanded that every child must be purified after birth and every firstborn son must be presented to the Lord, submitted himself to be purified after his birth and presented to the Lord.

And he didn't do this grudgingly. He didn't secretly glare at his parents as they brought him in for circumcised and think, "You better appreciate what I'm doing for all you sinners." No, it was his joy to fulfill the Law. This was His Word they were fulfilling. His will that they were doing.

And that was always how Jesus approached the Law. The rest of us, we bear the Law as a burden. As a cruel taskmaster, giving us orders and punishing us when we fail. As Paul writes in our Epistle, the Law is a guardian that holds us captive. Imprisons and enslaves us.

Why? Because our sinful flesh is at war with God. It fights against God's Law. It fights against God's will. And apart from Christ, it condemns us as enemies of God and his Kingdom.

Because Jesus was born without that sinful flesh, the Law was never a burden for him. It was his joy to fulfill the Law. Just as it was his joy to fulfill his Father's will. And it was for the joy that was set before him that Jesus endured the cross, despising its shame.

It was still painful. Just as his circumcision was painful. But this was the Father's will. It was the Father's will that he should die and rise again. It was the Father's will that we should become children of God. It was the Father's will that we should be given a new name.

Just as Jesus was given the name of savior at his circumcision, we too are given a new name at our baptism. For we are baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are baptized into the name of God. Our new name is His name.

Which is something that God has always wanted for his people. As we hear in our Old Testament Lesson, God has always wanted to bless his people with his own name. To keep and protect them. To shine the light of his face upon them. To be gracious to them. To give peace to those on whom his favor rests.

In the blessing of Aaron and the priests, God put his name upon the people of Israel. In his circumcision, Mary and Joseph put the name of Jesus – of “Savior” – on the infant Christ child. And in our baptism, we have the Triune name of God put upon us. Because he who fulfilled the Law on our behalf has made us God's children. And he has indeed saved his people from their sins. Amen.