

31 December 2008
Eve of the Circumcision of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Looking Back, to Look Ahead”

Text: Luke 2:21

For many, tonight is a time to forget about the past and look forward to the future. The problem is, the past doesn't like to be so quickly forgotten. Despite our resolutions and best efforts, it continues to haunt us and remind us of our past failings and failures, of hurts that continue to hurt, and of struggles that refuse to be solved. And so the good feelings that a new year brings is often followed by the hangover of reality.

But for some, for Christians, for you and me, tonight is a time not to *forget* about the past, but to look to the past, *so that* we can face the future. For tonight we remember the work of the One who holds the future in His hands, and that He came in the flesh to give us a future. And so on the eight day of Christmas, the one who truly loved us gave the flesh and blood of His Son into circumcision and under the Law, to be our Saviour.

Now, to be sure, the circumcision of Jesus is easy to overlook, and many do. For what does the removal of such a small and insignificant piece of skin really matter? Surely, we should focus on the really big and important works of Jesus! But it does matter, because God said it matters. It matters because God's Word and promise were connected to it. Circumcision was the major covenant in the Old Testament, the sign and seal of the faith of God's people - faith in the promise God had given Abraham, that one of his seed would be the Saviour of the world. By circumcision, they remembered this promise and expressed their faith in it. By circumcision, they were marked as the people of God. By circumcision, God's promise to Abraham was renewed and extended to a new generation, who would live as Abraham did - by grace through faith in our good and gracious God.

For God's people have always lived with the hangover of original sin - the sin of Adam passed down to us. It is a past that we cannot shake, no matter how hard we try. A past that not only haunts us, but continues to effect us and our future, through the hurtful and harmful thoughts, words, deeds, and desires it causes to well up within us. Circumcision was *both* the acknowledgement of this past, *and* the hope of the future - hope and faith in the forgiveness of God through the Saviour He promised to send.

We remembered the fulfillment of the promise born last week on Christmas, but

today Jesus begins the work He has come to do for us and for our salvation. Jesus is the one who did not have to be circumcised - but He was, and so in His circumcision takes our past and makes it His, and takes His future and makes it ours. With His circumcision, Jesus is marked in solidarity with us. Our place under the Law and its obligations and condemnation is taken by Him, that what we cannot do, He do for us. And then He will also do that one thing we *can* - die. But when death wrongfully takes Him who has no sin, who has fulfilled all the Law perfectly in our place, death is dealt its deathblow, and with His resurrection, Jesus provides a future for us that does not end at the grave, but goes *through it* to a life which has no end.

But tonight, we look back not only to the work of Jesus for us in His circumcision, we also look back to our own works - our sins of thought, word, deed, and desire; our sins of commission and omission; our sins of weakness and of will; the sins that haunt us, and the sin of our unbelief and doubt. We remember them not to torture ourselves or so that we can resolve to do better, but so that we can confess them and in faith, cling to the promised forgiveness of God - His promise given to us no longer in circumcision, but in the sign and seal that has replaced it: Holy Baptism. For while circumcision pointed to and joined the people of the Old Testament to the coming and beginning work of Jesus, Baptism points to and joins us people of the New Testament to the finished and completed work of Jesus in His death and resurrection. And by faith, what God has there done, He gives to us.

And so not forgetting the past but confessing it, our sins are forgiven and **therefore forgotten by God!** Which is far, far, better. And we can face the future in confidence and hope. For we have a future promised by God. A future of grace, forgiveness, and life. A future not based on our strength, but on His strength. A future where things may not always be easy, but which will be good. For our Saviour, who took our flesh and blood, and gave His flesh and blood for us, is thus committed to your flesh and blood. And His commitments He never breaks. And so in Him you live. In Him you will die. And to Him you will belong forever.

So go ahead and make some resolutions if you want this year - there's nothing wrong with them. But chiefly live under the resolution of your Saviour and His blood - His blood first shed for you in His circumcision. For that is the blood that forgives and changes you. What you are unable to do, He has promised to do in you. And thus relying on Him, you have a future different than the past. A future as sons and daughters of God. A future that has begun for you even now.

And so we end this year of our Lord 2008 and begin the year of our Lord 2009 in His name - the name put upon us in Holy Baptism, the name by which we are saved. The name of the Lord.

The Lord who blesses you and keeps you.

The Lord who makes His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord who lifts up His countenance upon you, and gives you peace.

In His name: the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.