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“Circumcised to Set Us Free”

Text: Luke 2:21 (Galatians 3:23-29; Numbers 6:22-27)

It is customary on this last night of the year to look back over the past year and remember all that has happened. The joys and the sorrows, the victories and the challenges, those things that have remained constant and those things that are new. There are always so many things that have changed. . . . But the one thing that will crop up for us all, in our memories, is our sin. How we have fallen short and in how many ways. How we have sinned against and failed our spouses, friends, and neighbors. The many and various ways we have not done all that we should. And how we have failed our Lord, and perhaps even taken our relationship with Him for granted.

And maybe those things are sticking in your mind tonight. It’s an amazing thing, how our minds work. How easily we forget about the good things that we want to remember, and how easily we remember the bad things we just want to forget! You see, that’s exactly how satan wants it, and so he keeps reminding us of our failures, our shortcomings, our unworthiness. He wants us to remember them all, and so drive us to despair and shame.

In response, many will make resolutions tonight. To improve next year. To do better and not fail so much. But that doesn’t work, because somehow, sometime, someday, we will fail. For we will always fail. No matter how hard you try not to. Your sinful nature will do what sinful nature does: sin.

And so it is a great fortune for us that on this last night of the year, the church year directs our eyes not back to how we have lived this past year, but back to how our Saviour lived for us. And specifically tonight, back to His work for us in His circumcision. For on this night when most people are thinking about and focusing on their own promises, commitments, and resolutions, the circumcision of our Lord proclaims to us the great promise, commitment, and resolution of our Lord for us. That He would not leave us in our sin, and that we do not have to deal with our sin ourselves, but that we have a Saviour.

For that is what all circumcision was about. Back in the Old Testament, when God made a promise to Abraham and told him that the Saviour would be one of his descendants, the Lord gave Abraham a sign of this covenant, this promise: circumcision. Not for them to do something for God, but to remember that God

was doing something for them; to remember that God was with them and saving them; and to keep their eyes focused not on themselves, but on God. So that every time a male child was born and circumcised on the eighth day, they would remember and celebrate God's work and God's promise.

And so tonight, in remembering and celebrating Jesus' circumcision, we remember and celebrate God's promise.

For in Jesus, Abraham's Seed, our Saviour, has come. And with His circumcision, He is already beginning the work His name proclaims: *to save His people from their sins.* (Matt 1:21) For not only is Jesus one with us in our flesh, tonight He becomes one with us under the Law, to fulfill it all perfectly in our place. That what we are *unable* to do, He will do as our substitute. And the first requirement was His circumcision on the eighth day.

This is why the early church fathers would say that with His circumcision, Jesus gives us the downpayment of His blood, and that this is the beginning of His giving of His flesh for us; the beginning of His suffering for us. For the fathers saw what we often neglect to see: that *all* that Jesus did, He did for us. That His saving was not limited to the cross and resurrection, but that He took our place in every stage of life - from the moment of conception, through His perfect life, to His innocent death, to being laid in the tomb, to His resurrection and ascension. All He did was for you and for your salvation. For the forgiveness of all of your sins and failures - past, present, and future; to give you life and a future of hope; and to set you free.

For you see, sin is captivity. Sin is the captivity of satan trying to shape and direct our lives instead of Christ. Sin is satan trying to keep us captive to the past instead of free to look forward to the future Christ has planned for us. Sin is the captivity of fear and doubt instead of the peace of Christ. Sin is the captivity of selfishness instead of the freedom of love.

But tonight, we hear a truth that sets us free. **That our Lord, in freedom, made Himself captive, that we who are captive, might be set free.** For our Lord has come to set captives free, beginning with His circumcision. And in fulfilling the Law in His perfect life, atoning for sin in His death on the cross, and bursting the bonds of death in His resurrection, we are captives no more, but free. And joined to Him, we are defined no longer by the things of this earth, the opinions of others, or the accusations of satan - but defined by our union with Christ. So that, as St. Paul told us tonight, ***"there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."***

And that is the wonderful reality that is ours in Holy Baptism. For baptism is where we have been united with Christ in His death and resurrection and all that He has

done for us. Baptism is where our Lord has put His name upon us, and so blessed us in ways greater than we could ever imagine.

It is where He gives us His love, so that we may, in freedom, love others.

It is where He gives us His forgiveness, so that we may, in freedom, forgive others.

It is where He gives us His life, so that we may, in freedom, live for others.

Will we, therefore, love, forgive, and live for others perfectly this new year that lay before us? No. Better than last year? Perhaps. But the freedom that Christ gives you is the freedom to fail. Now, I know, that sounds funny, but it's true. For if you *had* to do things perfectly, you would be paralyzed into inactivity, for fear of failure. But if you are free to fail, to try to live the life of love and forgiveness that Christ has given you, then you can live in all of your vocations and not be afraid that in some small way you messed up and so ruined it all. No! Your mess ups and sins are forgiven, dear child of God, and Christ is using you as His blessing to others. He is working through you, and is with you, still doing what we are unable to do. For tonight is about His promise and work, not yours.

And knowing that, the turn of a new year brings not dread or the burden of new resolutions and obligations, but the freedom of Christ and the excitement to see what He is going to work in you and through you this coming year. And He is able to do far more than we ask, think, or imagine. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

So as the last few hours of this year tick away, give thanks to your Saviour for His work and for His never-ending forgiveness. For as He kept His promise and came at Christmas, as He kept His promise and came to you in Holy Baptism, so He is keeping His promise and coming to your now in blessing, [to] ***ble ss and keep you . . . [to] make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you . . . [to] lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.***

For you are His. This year, next year, and forever.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.