

THE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST  
A Sermon for the Feast of the Circumcision, 2012  
On the Text: Propers for the Day  
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

On this New Year's Day, the first day of the year on our secular calendar, we celebrate a Feast that comes around on a Sunday only about once every seven years. That's because the Feast always happens on the first of January. The most recent occurrence before today of January 1<sup>st</sup> falling on a Sunday was in 2006. So, we have not celebrated this Feast on a Sunday since I first came to you as a Deacon in the team ministry in 2007.

Now the Church does not celebrate New Year's Day as such, nor do we celebrate New Year's Eve with a vigil that includes partying with loud music and drunkenness. On the first of January, we celebrate what we call, The Feast of the Circumcision of Christ. Why this Feast? Why Circumcision? That seems a rather odd thing to celebrate. Out of squeamishness or a sort of Victorian Puritanism, in 1960 the Roman Catholic Church changed its name to "The Feast of the Holy Name of Christ.", which is a name that speaks to some of the meaning of the day, but not to the primary reason the day is celebrated. They have since changed the name twice more: first in 1969 to the "Solemnity of Mary" and then in 1972 to, "A World Day of Peace". With the publication of their new PB in 1979, the Episcopal Church followed suit with the Catholics and renamed the day to "The Feast of the Holy Name".

What is the essence of the Gospel? You hear it in every Communion service. It is in the Comfortable Words, the one from St. Paul: [This is a true saying and worthy of all men to be believed, That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.](#) (1 Timothy 1:15) How could Jesus possible do this, redeem us from our sin? Psalm 49 teaches us in verses 7-9 that, [7 Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, 8 for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, 9 that he should live on forever and never see the pit.](#) Yet Jesus is a man, a male human. How does He manage to save us when no other man could possible do so? Because He is not just a man, but is the God-man.

The question then is: How and why does His circumcision have anything to do with our being saved? The answer is that Jesus has to be seen to be fully human and a descendent of King David in order to fulfill the prophecies of the Messiah such as we heard in the Epistle lesson. His circumcision also fulfills a commandment from God. It all goes back way back to Genesis

and the first time God spoke to Abraham, who, when God first spoke to him in Genesis 12, verse 1, was named Abram. Here is a digest of the most important events in Abram/Abraham's life that bear on our story for today. I'll skip over some events that are important in some ways, but that do not bear on the Feast of the Circumcision.

In Genesis 12: 1-8, God spoke to Abram and told him to leave where he and Sarai were and to go where God would tell him to go. He did and ended up in Canaan, which God told him was the land He would give him. After some adventures in Egypt because of a famine and a long series of wars, Abram meets Melchizedek. In Genesis 15, Abram complains that he has no heir, and God promises him a son and makes a covenant with Him in such a way that it is God Who promises to die if the Covenant is not fulfilled. Genesis 15 is a very important chapter of the Bible because of the description of the making of this covenant. In chapter 16 we read of the birth of Ishmael, who, God tells Abram will not be his heir. It is Genesis 17 that tells us why Jesus had to be circumcised and some other things that I hope you will be able to see the importance of before I point them out.

Let me now read you the first 14 verses of Genesis 17. This is a passage that could very easily have been chosen to be our OT lesson for today.

Genesis 17:1-14:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, **"I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, 2 that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."** 3 Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 4 **"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. 7 And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. 8 And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."** 9 And God said to Abraham, **"As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a**

**sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, 13 both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."**

This is the end of the making of God's Covenant with Abraham. Later in Ch. 17, God promises Abraham that Sarah (her new name) will bear a child whom they shall name Isaac; that He, God, will establish His Covenant with Isaac. There is much left to happen in Abraham's life, but our digest stops here because we now have what we need to know for today.

However, we do need just a little more information on another front. Many years after Abraham had died, King David wanted to build a Temple to be a house for the Lord, but God did not want to allow David to do that because David had been a warrior and had much blood on his hands. Even though it was righteous blood, it was still blood; so God would not allow David to build the Temple; that was kept for his son, Solomon, to do. In 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 17, we read that God spoke to the prophet, Nathan, at night and told him to tell this to David: 1 Chronicles 17:4 **"Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: It is not you who will build me a house to dwell in.** We do not learn the full reason until 1 Chronicles 28:2-3 **2 Then King David rose to his feet and said: "Hear me, my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD and for the footstool of our God, and I made preparations for building. 3 But God said to me, 'You may not build a house for my name, for you are a man of war and have shed blood.'** However, God also told Nathan to tell David something that has come to be called the Covenant with David: God told Nathan to tell David this: **Thus says the LORD of hosts, ... 1 Chronicles 17:10-14 Moreover, I declare to you that the LORD will build you a house. 11 When your days are fulfilled to walk with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. 12 He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. 13 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from him who was before you, 14 but I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever."** This prophecy,

directly from God, is explained a little more fully by a prophecy God gave to Isaiah about a descendent of David's father, Jesse: Isaiah 11:1-2 ESV Isaiah 11:1 **There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. 2 And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.**

All of this points toward Jesus. Now let's look back at that passage from Genesis 17. One of the first things God does there is exercise His authority over all things by changing Abram's name to Abraham, from a name that meant "exalted father" to a name that means "father of a multitude". God then promises the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession to Abraham's offspring before telling Abraham the sign of the Covenant for his offspring, **"<sup>10b</sup> Every male among you shall be circumcised."** And then he tells him when the newly born shall be circumcised: Genesis 17:<sup>12a</sup> **"He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations";** but then in verse 14 adds on the warning of what happens to those who are not circumcised: **"14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."**

If we put these three quotes together, the conclusion is obvious: For Jesus to be a bona fide member of the tribe of Judah, a descendent of Abraham and thus of Jacob and David, he has to be circumcised when He is 8 days old; and if He isn't, He will be cut off from His people. But do you see this? If He is not circumcised, Jesus as the God/man would have broken the Covenant that He, as God, had made with Abraham! To be a fully human member of the actual descendents of Abraham, and to keep the Covenant on both sides, He had to be circumcised.

But what else happens at Jesus' circumcision? He ... is ... given ... His Name! Both Mary and Joseph had been told to name Him Jesus, and that was when Joseph gave Him that Name. That name, in Hebrew, is Yeshua, and means "God is salvation" or "God saves". What we have here are examples of obedience from all involved. Joseph and Mary obeyed the commandments of the Covenant about circumcision which had been written into the Law in Leviticus 12:3 and the commandments they had been given by angels and took the baby Jesus to the Temple as we are told in the Gospel lesson: Luke 2:21 21 **"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."**

Jesus obeyed the wishes of the Father and, as we say in the Nicene Creed, "came down from heaven, and was made man." to live the full life of a human from birth to maturity as the only

person to ever do that without sin,, and then to bleed and die for us on the Cross. In His obedience to satisfy the Law and the Covenants, He even bled for us at His Circumcision; and then, as St. Paul puts it in his Epistle to the Philippians: Philippians 2:8 [8 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.](#)

The obedience of Jesus was instant and complete just as was the obedience of those He chose to be His Apostles when He said to them, **“Follow me!”** We need to ask ourselves, “How good is our obedience to God? How good is it supposed to be?” We all know the answer to that. We just don’t like to hear it or even think of saying it. Our obedience is not only not very good; it’s terrible; and it is supposed to be as good as Jesus’. In Romans 8:28-29, St. Paul told us [28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.](#) If we are among those whom God foreknew, who want to be brothers and sisters of Christ and live with Him forever, then we have to be conformed to the image of His Son, which means we have to learn to have that same sort of unquestioning obedience. We don’t get to ask, “Why?”, or “Can it wait? We have to learn to conform to the image of the Obedience of Christ.

Oh, and that Name He was given, Yeshua, which means God is salvation or God saves, and we know that He, Yeshua, is God, it is not a stupid question to ask, “What is it that He saves us from? R. C. Spruill has written a little book with the title, *Saved From What?* His answer is a little different from mine, and both are correct. My answer is that Jesus saves us from ourselves, from our inherent tendency to sin. Spruill assumes that we have that tendency and gets to the end of the process. He says that Jesus saves us from the Wrath of God. I would note that it is our sins that make God angry. God asks us to repent, to turn away from our sins and to live a life of faith in Jesus Christ. That is a request to which we should be obedient. His wishes should be our commandments. For that we have to try to conform to the Obedience of Christ.

AMEN!

Let us pray.

Almighty and most merciful Father, from Whom cometh all things; Grant us thy grace that we may learn to be obedient to Thy commandments, and as we are Thy children, we beseech Thee to be patient with us as we grow in love and service to Thee; for without Thy Grace we know that we can do nothing that pleases Thee; Fill our hearts with such love of Thy Truth that we shall not be able to bear it when we wander off Thy Path. Grant this we pray for the Love of thy Son Jesus Christ whose obedience took Him to the Cross to die that we might live. *Amen.*