

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ,

While we focus heavily on Christmas at this time of year, and rightly so, you may not know that there are many other things we have the opportunity to celebrate and remember at this time of year.

The Feast of Stephen falls on the Second Day of Christmas, December 26. On that day, we remember the death of the protomartyr Stephen as he was stoned to death for confessing his faith in Christ Jesus. You can read about it in the sixth and seventh chapter of Acts.

On the Fourth Day of Christmas, December 28, the church remembers another day of blood. We remember the paranoid dementia of King Herod as he ordered the death of the sons of Bethlehem. He ordered his assassins to Bethlehem to execute every male child two years old and younger.

It is said that if you want to find the church, just follow the trail of blood. In that respect, the week after Christmas is one more week of bloodshed where we remember the innocents and the martyrs who bled because the world hates Christ and His church. On this day, we remember another shedding of blood, but this shedding is of a different sort...

*And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you." (Genesis 17:9–11)*

God gave this command to Abraham and to his descendants to set them apart as His people. This command produces a mark in the flesh that sets a man aside as a member of this community ... this culture.

The mark of circumcision took on an added significance when a man became a father. It marked the instrument by which he had passed his image on to his children. Just as he had inherited a sinful

image from his father, so he passed that sinful image down to his children. The mark of circumcision was one more symbol that we are all conceived and born sinful and would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation. The mark was also a sign of God's covenant promise to send a Savior through the descendants of Abraham. Sadly, although the bodies of God's people were circumcised, their hearts were not; they frequently worshiped and served other gods and walked in other ways.

The day of circumcision soon became the day of naming as well. Since this rite sets a man aside as a member of the community, it is reasonable that that man should receive his name as part of that rite. So, it became the custom. When a baby boy passed through circumcision, he also received the name by which he would be known in this circumcised community. This initial shedding of blood was actually a time of celebration for the men as they welcomed their newest member into their community. Of course, the guest of honor did not do any celebrating as he was too young to understand that significance of this rite. All he knew was that it was painful.

We have another example of this day of circumcision and naming in Luke's account of the rite for John the Baptist.

*On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." (Luke 1:59-63)*

The record of this event shows that the naming and circumcising are so intertwined that the connection is simply assumed.

Today, January 1, is the eighth day since we celebrated the birth of Jesus. It is the day of His circumcision and naming. We heard it in the Gospel for this day.

*At that time: When eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:21)*

Jesus must fulfill the law perfectly for me and for you. He must fulfill all the moral, civil, and ceremonial law ... even this law of circumcision. He must fulfill it on the eighth day, and so, on the eighth day, He shed real, human blood. This shedding of blood also reminds us that God has come in the flesh of a real, human, male. He has come in the flesh for you and for me.

But the eighth day is also the day of naming. You may not have noticed this, but Luke never refers to Jesus by name until this point in his account of the Gospel. He is Mary's firstborn son, the Savior, the Christ, and the Lord. He is the baby lying in the manger, but He is never Jesus until this verse in the text.

Names in the Bible are more than just labels for identifying people. Names have meaning and significance. Recall that both Mary and Joseph received instructions for naming the child from angels:

The angel told Mary, "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus" (Luke 1:31) An angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21)

In order to understand the name of Jesus, we need to spend a moment in the languages that Mary and Joseph understood. In Hebrew, you would not say Jesus. You would say יהושוע (YAH-HO-SHUA). YAH is the root of the name God gave to Moses at the burning

bush. HO-SHUA finds its root in the word for salvation. So, in Hebrew, YAH-HO-SHUA points to the God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and it points to salvation. It means God saves or God is salvation. In Hebrew, His name tells us who He is and what He came to do.

As His name says, Jesus is God in the flesh who has come to save us from our sin. His circumcision is not merely a reminder of the promise of Messiah. Unlike previous generations, his circumcision was not the sign of a promise made but of God's promise kept; he was the Savior of the world, the promised offspring of Abraham.

The shedding of his blood in his circumcision foreshadows the cross as the final place of salvation. It shows us how Jesus saves: by blood, by suffering, and by death. In Jesus' crucifixion, our sin and death were removed and "cut off" so that we might have true circumcision of the heart. In place of the old covenant of circumcision, Jesus gives a new covenant and promise: he takes bread and, by His promise, it is also His body; he takes the cup and, by His promise, it is also His blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. At this altar, you receive Jesus, the entire Jesus, the true body and blood of the one who is your life and your salvation. You are heirs of forgiveness, life, and salvation through the blood of Jesus.

In this sinful world, every New Year begins with bloodshed in many places, and that is an evil tragedy. But in the Church, there can be no better beginning than the shed blood of our Savior whose name is Jesus ... God saves. And so we begin this New Year and live our lives with the blood of Jesus on our tongues and with the name of Jesus on our foreheads and our hearts. For the One Who shed His blood on the Eighth Day after His birth, and rose from the dead on the third day after His death now gives us forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation so that we may live with Him and enjoy His presence forever. Amen