

Luke 2:21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

Dear Christian Friends,

In comparison to the mad mayhem that passes for celebration at Times Square and thousands of other places last night, our little service here doesn't seem like much. While revelers around the world are greeting the New Year—or trying to forget the old—our gathering here seems pretty tame and dull by comparison.

But looks can be deceiving. For while the clock has ticked down on another year for planet earth, we Christians are gathered to gain a firmer grip on timeless things: to hear the life-giving Word of God. For the transcendent truth of Christ and his kingdom is what counts in this world and the next. *The days of our lives pass as sands through an hourglass.* It is useless to try to stop the relentless march of time. As the hymn writer Isaac Watts put it: *Time, Like an ever-rolling stream, Soon bears us all away; We fly, forgotten, as a dream Dies at the op'ning day* (CW #441 v.5). But everything done in the name of Jesus shall last forever. And that is what brings us here at the beginning of the Year of Our Lord, 2017: the name of Jesus. And as we...

Eight days after Jesus was born he was circumcised, fulfilling the law given under Moses that every male child would receive the mark of the Lord's covenant. That circumcision marked the beginning of a new life in the kingdom of God—the kingdom that lasts forever. That eighth day was the first day of the new life of every circumcised son of Israel...the eternal life of the kingdom of God.

Count off eight days beginning with December 25, and you arrive at January 1. So it is that while the kingdom of this world observes the beginning of a new solar year in time, we Christians celebrate the circumcision of Jesus. Thus the first of January becomes for us not just another notch in time, but a genuine link with eternity through the flesh of God's own Son.

Every son of Israel was given his name at the time of circumcision. So our Lord also was given his name. But no ordinary name, his. His name had been literally given from heaven, announced by an angel to both Mary and Joseph at his conception: ***You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins*** (Mt 1:21; Lk 1:31).

And so this tiny bundle of humanity was given the strong name Jesus: "YAHWEH saves *or* the LORD saves." And he grew up to fulfill his name most wondrously. All that God's holy Law prescribed for you and me, this Jesus did perfectly and completely. All that you and I, by our sins, have deserved, this Jesus suffered patiently and thoroughly. God the Father laid on him the iniquity of us all, and it killed him. He endured the cross and grave for us. For our salvation, he was crucified, died, and was buried. He was also raised from the dead. No wonder the apostle Paul proclaimed: ⁹ ***Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,*** ¹⁰ ***that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*** ¹¹ ***and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*** (Philippians 2).

The apostles preached that name and when hauled into court for it, they confessed, ¹² ***Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*** (Acts 4).

We begin the year of our Lord 2017 with mixed emotions. Excitement and anticipation jockey with fear and trepidation within us. Where will our leaders take us? What will become of the distress in the Middle East and elsewhere in this troubled globe? We have our personal fears and trepidations as well. What about my job, my family, my health, my security? What about that inner anxiety and turmoil that seems to crop up with increasing predictability? How will I handle that, and more, we wonder?

We handle it in the name of Jesus, that's how. There is nothing magical about the name "Jesus." Rather, the power of the name of Jesus is the power and authority of Jesus himself. As famed preacher Billy Sunday once said, "There are two hundred and fifty-six names given in the Bible for the Lord Jesus Christ, and I suppose this was because He was infinitely beyond all that any

one name could express.” And here’s the way it works:

When we pray in the name of Jesus, the Father regards our prayer as Jesus’ prayer. When God’s Word is preached in the name of Jesus, it is the authority of Jesus himself that stands behind that Word.

When Christians give a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus, it is Jesus himself who provides for the physical needs of the deprived neighbor.

When we invoke the name of Jesus on the food set before us, it is Jesus himself who blesses that food to our good and to the glory of God the Father.

And whatever we do, whether in word or in deed, when it is done in the name of the Lord Jesus, we give glory to God.

Whenever and wherever we receive forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name, our sins are forgiven by the authority and power of God’s own Son. That is the greatest gift of all.

And that is why we confess our sins. By grace we are forgiven in the name of Jesus. Today again, after corporate confession, we have just heard the announcement of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name. Remember how the catechism puts it: [when] *A Christian congregation with its called pastor uses the keys in accordance with Christ’s command by forgiving those who repent of their sin and are willing to amend...it is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself.*

Do you see, then, why we have something to celebrate on New Year’s Day, why the circumcision and the naming of this baby means so much? Because everything we do, every day we live—we do in the name of Jesus!

And why? Because everything he has done, every day that he has lived – his very eternal existence – has all been about you and me! Shakespeare may have asked, “What’s in a name?” and in so doing, downplayed the meaning of a name. But we know different. We know the name Jesus, and by grace through faith we know what’s in his name. The 4th century bishop Gregory of Nazianzus summarized it this way:

- He began His ministry by being hungry, yet He is the Bread of Life.

- Jesus ended His earthly ministry by being thirsty, yet He is the Living Water.
- Jesus was weary, yet He is our rest.
- Jesus paid tribute, yet He is the King.
- Jesus was accused of having a demon, yet He cast out demons.
- Jesus wept, yet He wipes away our tears.
- Jesus was sold for thirty pieces of silver, yet He redeemed the world.
- Jesus was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, yet He is the Good Shepherd.
- Jesus died, yet by His death He destroyed the power of death.

This is why we gather in his name. For in the name of Jesus we gather for worship. In the name of Jesus we come to be forgiven. In the name of Jesus we sit at his feet and drink in his Word. In the name of Jesus we bring this year to a close. And in the name of Jesus we begin this New Year. We have nothing to fear. For whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. Therefore in the name of Jesus we live, each day fully, in the name of Jesus. And then one day, when he calls, we shall have nothing to fear then, either. For we shall then enter into eternity with just as we have lived: in the name of Jesus. **Amen.**