

We celebrate the naming and circumcision of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

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Introduction

Happy New Year, one and all! New Year's Day doesn't fall on a Sunday all that often but does the round of the days of the week. Speaking of rounds, it happens every year. Yet each year we look back on the events that happened during the previous year and our experiences, and feel a sense of ... what exactly? Again! That went fast! Of renewal? Of progression, a moving forward? Maybe a fresh start as we look at the year stretching before us like an untrodden path but with some known milestones and landmarks. Bit like the view of parenthood seen for the first time even though we know that it was similar for our parents, their parents, and our ancestors. Similar, but not exactly the same in an ever-changing world. No wonder Hebrew thought saw time like a spiral!

Luke 2:15-21

On this our healing Sunday, we celebrate the naming and circumcision of our Lord, Jesus Christ. People everywhere are aware that names convey meaning and usually choose a name for their little one with care. At Christmastide, we celebrate the birth of the one named before his conception. The Archangel Gabriel spoke his name to Mary, his mother elect. His name was confirmed, post-conception, with its meaning and messianic purpose to the understandably troubled Joseph. Jesus, the one who saves his people from their sins (Matthew 21), the one foretold by the prophet Isaiah. Thus, Scripture too testified to the faith God had in Israel and has ultimately in humanity. It was the joy, wonder, and witness of the shepherds that made real for Mary God's faith in her and Joseph, a treasure. God

came in Jesus to be Emmanuel, God embodied like us to be with us, ever-present. This was the fulfilment of seeing and understanding God as desiring to be in a living relationship with us. That desire is part of the wonders of the faith which we Christians inherited from our Judaic religious forebears and share with them today.

As people of faith, we are signs of God in the world, just as were Jesus and his male, female, Jewish, Greek, Roman, fishermen, Pharisee, tax collector disciples; as were Mary and Joseph, and all those right back to Abraham and Sarah. Let's begin at the very beginning just like the song in the 'Sound of Music', the doh-ray-me of faith: call and promise!

At the call of God and in faith, Abram and Sarai journeyed to the Promised Land, settled, and prospered, except they remained childless. Now Abram means 'exalted father', and Sarai, 'princess'. Just as we use 'princess' today, Sarai has the meaning of an exalted, noble one or of a contentious, self-entitled, or bitter one. It was Sarai who contended that Abram should follow a custom for otherwise prosperous couples with no heir. Abram was to father a child for Sarai with her maidservant, Hagar. But the adoption of Ishmael as her son brought neither happiness to Sarai and Abram nor, as can sometimes happen, did it bring Sarai a child. Yet God had promised Abram that they would have many descendants and that their descendants would become a great nation. It seemed that their increasing age was making a mockery of God's promise and of their faith in that promise.

Then, God appeared to Abram again, saying "I am God Almighty (El Shaddai), walk in my ways and be blameless, and I will make you exceedingly numerous." To underline the promise, God said "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham". The addition of the syllable, in Hebrew 'heh' changed the name from 'exalted father' to 'father of many', a multitude of nations. Likewise, Sarai was named Sarah meaning 'my princess', one blessed. Thus, Abraham and Sarah each had

one of the 'heh' sounds of the unspoken name of God 'Yahweh'. Their names now conveyed the meaning of a close relationship with God, a mutual belonging.

As an everlasting physical sign of this belonging and of the covenant with God, Abraham obeyed God and every male of his household was circumcised. It was following Abraham's own circumcision that Sarah conceived and bore Isaac. Circumcision among the nations around them was a rite of passage at puberty signifying entry into manhood and fertility. But every following generation of male babies born in Abraham's household was to be circumcised eight days after birth. What was the full meaning, then, of circumcision for Mary and Joseph when they brought Jesus to the priest at eight days old?

For Mary and Joseph, circumcision clearly had no association with a male fertility rite. The significance of the eighth day is found in Leviticus. There is the prohibition: "When an ox or a sheep or a goat is born, it shall remain seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable as the Lord's offering by fire." (Leviticus 22:27). No animal was to be removed from its mother for sacrifice to God within its first seven days of life. God's prerogative was deferred out of respect for the intensity of the mother-child relationship. Circumcision on the eighth day signified the very first time that a male infant might be dedicated to the service of God symbolically. The rite renewed the covenant between God and Israel, in continuity with Abraham, and Sarah. The mark became a lifelong external sign of apartness. A baby was considered almost an extension of his mother until the eighth day, when it became clearer that the child would live and could enter into partnership with God. The giving of the name at this time highlighted the infant's transition to individuality and responsibility to live according to God's law.

This holy day points us in the direction of another innovation

of God and his people: The baptism by John in the Jordan to return the wayward but would-be-faithful to their inheritance by the washing away of sin. In his way of living and dying, Jesus was, and is today, also the sign pointing beyond facts and events to his meaning for humanity. Jesus saves his people from their sins (Matthew 21). Jesus fulfilled the meaning of his name. Yet there is more, there is always more. Jesus inspired his church to the fulfilment of his circumcision. Whatever constitutes our worldly identity, we have a higher one. We are set apart at baptism as those who walk our life-path in the way of faith, who belong to Christ, and are Abraham's offspring (Gal. 3:28-29). For the ultimate reality of faith in Jesus, Son of God, in God the progenitor, Father of all that is, and the Holy Spirit whose loving-kindness in us reaches out to heal and bless – the reality of faith is this: This God and we belong together. God is not against us. God is with us.