

INI

Hebrews 13,7-15

Circumcision and Name of Jesus — 2 January 2011

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson, which was read earlier:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Today we are already a day into the new year, 2017.

Whether we reflect on the old year or not, there is nothing we can do to change what happened. Perhaps we have had our ups and down, our joys and sorrows, our sense of accomplishment and perhaps over some things a sense of regret. Regardless, the old year is a closed book.

Today we stand in a new year. We do not know what the year will bring.

If we look at our world, our nation, our state, or even our community, the prospects are at best challenging. Some say if we do this or that, then things will get better; however, others say that the exact opposite will occur, things will get worse. People disagree and we live with the consequences.

On a personal level, we don't know what the new year will bring either. We'll all have ups and downs, joys and sorrows,

accomplishments and perhaps regrets. But of what will any of these consist? We don't know.

Much of lives will be like last year. We'll have our routines which will take up much of our time. Let's face it, much of life is routine, and thank God for that.

But just as there were changes in all of our lives last year, there will be changes in the coming year as well.

This morning in the life of the church we celebrate the Circumcision and Name of Jesus. For a new year, it is fitting that we do this. Why? Because in the midst of life's changes, Jesus is our anchor, pledging that as He has been in the past so He will be for us in the future. This brings me to today's sermon theme, "**Jesus — A Name That Is The Same.**" I'll develop this in three parts:

- 1) A Name For Yesterday;**
- 2) A Name For Today;** and,
- 3) A Name For Eternity.**

1) A Name For Yesterday. The Letter to the Hebrews was probably written before the destruction of Herod's temple Jerusalem in AD 70 but after the execution of Paul and Peter in Rome, probably during the tail end of the persecution of Nero of Christians about AD 66-67.

The letter may well have been written to those Jews who had been converted by Paul during his first imprisonment in Rome. Paul had summoned the leaders of the synagogues in Rome and after having expounded to them the Old Testament "some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not" (Acts 28,24). As one Lutheran Bible scholar has noted, "some" and "some" sounds very close to a fifty percent division among the Jewish leaders (Lenski, *Acts*, 1123-24).

It was after the Neronian persecution, however, that Roman authorities finally distinguished between Jews and Christians. Jews and Christians had known the difference, but the Romans had not. This meant that legal privileges that had been given to the Christians under the assumption that they were some kind of Jews, were withdrawn.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews points out to his readers that those who had spoken God's Word of truth to them concerning Jesus were faithful. The Jesus to Whom Paul and others had clung in faith is the same. The Jesus of yesterday is the Jesus of today.

Also, the entire eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews gives name after Old Testament name of heroes of the faith. But the faith to which they clung goes back to the very creation of the world, for

By faith we understand that the ages were prepared by the Word of God, so that what was made was not made out of things which are visible. (Hebrews 11,3)

This echoes Paul, who wrote

for in Him [that is, Jesus] all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things have been created through Him and for Him. (Colossians 1,16)

This Jesus of yesterday is the same.

He is the One in Whom believers throughout the Old Testament had placed their faith as the One Who had been promised by God to be the "Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1,29). From Abel onwards, some of those believers gave their lives or suffered great hardship.

Indeed, Paul and Peter and the others finally gave up their lives

during the persecution under Nero, and other suffered hardship as well.

But Jesus, “Who sanctified the people through His own blood” was the One Who atoned for the sins of the world by His suffering and death on the Cross.

A chapter earlier in Hebrews we read,

fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith,
Who for the joy set before Him endured the Cross, despising the
shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

(Hebrews 12,2)

This Jesus, in the yesterday of history, died and rose from the dead. His resurrection is the victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil, as well as the fulfillment of the faith and hope of all Old Testament believers.

In the past year, in like manner, we can reflect that the Jesus of our yesterdays is He Who watched over us to preserve us in our lives and in our faith.

If we have had setbacks, Jesus did not desert us. If we have had joys, Jesus was there to bless us. If we have had illness, Jesus was there to be by our side. If we have had loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus, Jesus assures us that they are His and with Him.

Perhaps one area where we need to say one more word is if we have had regrets. If we have had regrets, then we can come to Jesus and ask for forgiveness. Perhaps what has been done cannot be undone, but Jesus assures us that His forgiveness means we have life and salvation, which continues. If we wonder whether we should ask for forgiveness, a good rule of thumb is that if we are asking the question then we had also better repent and ask for forgiveness.

Thus in Jesus, we see that in Him we have,

2) A Name For Today. The Jewish Christians in Rome must have been suffering some hardships or persecution on account of their faith, although elsewhere the writer says that this has not yet resulted in the shedding of blood.

The whole letter is really an exhortation to keep the course of the faith in Christ they had received. The Jesus Who had been there for believers since the creation of the world, He Who had brought their leaders to faith and kept them in faith, now stands with them today as well.

If we read in between the lines, we get a sense that these Jewish Christians may have had second thoughts about this Jesus and this Way to God.

What do we read?

Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were thus occupied were not benefitted.
(v 9)

Another phrase for “varied and strange teachings” is “false doctrine.” I know some will say, “not more stuff about false doctrine” again. Interestingly enough, at a Pastoral Conference in Tacoma our host said that he led his congregation through a Bible study of all of Paul’s letters. He was amazed by the fact that Paul speaks about false doctrine every dozen or so verses. There is a reason for that.

These “varied and strange teachings” must have been sufficiently attractive that it was a temptation for them into which to fall.

Believe me, no one is certain to what exactly “foods” refers. But it is contrasted with “grace.” God indeed gives temporal blessings in our daily bread, and we pray that we may acknowledge and thank Him for it; but earthly food does not save.

Grace is God’s good disposition towards us, based solely on what Christ has done for us. We are saved by grace through faith. This is all God’s doing — 100 percent God, 0 percent me.

The very name “Jesus” means He will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1,21). This stands in stark contrast to any participation by us.

“Varied and strange teachings,” in one way or another always, always chip away at or undermine grace. In one form or another, it asks that we begin to place our works on the scale so that the equation now reads: God, 99.9 percent; me, (point) .1 percent, or maybe it’s fifty-fifty, or some other combination. It does not matter. When we add anything, even the tiniest smidgen, to what God has done for us, we condemn ourselves before God. In effect we’re saying, “Hey, God, see, You’ve done Your part and I’ve done my part.” Scripture, however, tells us that Jesus died once for all. On the Cross, Jesus said, “It is finished.” His work for us — His dying and rising from the dead — is all-sufficient for all time.

It is all sufficient right now, today.

God’s grace, His disposition towards us in and on account of Jesus is the same yesterday as well as today.

Today we hear His Word of forgiveness.

Today Jesus feeds us with His heavenly meal, His true Body and Blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

Today He would keep us in the one true faith so that we close our hearts and minds to any “varied and strange teachings.”

And Jesus’ name which shows God’s gracious disposition towards us is also

3) A Name For Eternity. It is a name which will sustain us through all of our tomorrows, earthly or the one great tomorrow of eternity.

Those Jewish Christians in Rome lived in the capitol and greatest city of its time, Rome. But along with the heroes of faith of the Old Testament in chapter eleven, they were on a journey towards “a city which is to come,” that is, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Jesus was taken outside the walls of the earthly Jerusalem to suffer and die and then rise from the dead. When Jesus died, the veil in the Temple to the Holy of Holies was torn asunder, which meant that God’s only way towards us was through the Cross of His Son.

No matter how beautiful or seemingly strong and vibrant, all the cities of this world will not last.

What did that mean to the readers of the Letter to the Hebrews and what does it mean for us?

All Christians are on a pilgrimage through this world towards a heavenly home which is secure and eternal.

Our journeys are sustained by faith in He who is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

Jesus forgives us so that we do not become too attached to the earthly things that are passing away.

He forgives us so that we cling to the purity of His Word and the proper administration of the Sacraments, which are the only means by which He comes to us.

He forgives us so that our lives may be sacrifices of praise to His holy name, which assures us of God's good disposition toward us.

Conclusion: As we begin a new year, we know where we have been and we know Who has been with us.

Jesus has been with us since our Baptism. He is with us today as we hear His forgiving and life-sustaining Word and received His true Body and Blood.

Jesus is the Lord of creation and promises that He will be with us "to the end of the age," and not only to the end of the age, but beyond that when He will be pleased to have us dwell with Him and all believers in the eternal city made by Him for us.

Indeed, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

St. Stephen Lutheran Church of the East Bay & Central Valley
21290 Birch St.
Hayward, CA 94541-1538

SDG