

The Holy Name of Jesus

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Happy New Year, everyone. New things are on our minds, I suspect: the new year, new chapters in our life's story, new challenges, new joys, new gifts, new resolutions. It's appropriate to consider the new thing that God initiated two thousand years ago, which continues today, which is still as new now as it was then. That new thing is the re-creation of reality, the salvation of the world, to use theological language.

The life-event for Jesus was Jewish circumcision, eight days after His birth, related in our gospel reading this morning. In this ancient ceremony, Jesus was given His name – Savior – and made a part of His people. Blood was shed, pain was experienced, the One who gave the ancient covenant was now the One who received that covenant. He entered into the arrangement God made with Abraham, the agreement by which God bound Himself to be their God and to bless all of humankind through Abraham. Entering into that ancient covenant was the way that God made Himself a part of history, part of what humanity was doing and experiencing. God does not deal with us out of context, but always within the power of a story, the way we live our lives. The Circumcision of Jesus was the way God bound Himself to what was familiar and recognized for a Jew, as He began a human life that would take the world into uncharted, unfamiliar regions. In the new thing that God was doing, the poor would be blessed, the humble would be raised high, nothing would be lost, no one would be left out, death was conquered in resurrection, human life would not be ended but transformed by death.

There is an old, mistaken theology that sees the new thing God is doing in Christ Jesus, the Anointed Savior, as superceding the old covenant with Israel. Such thinking saw the blood of the cross replacing the blood of circumcision. The practical result of this mistake was to view the original covenant with ill-disguised contempt and the people of the old covenant, ancient and modern Jews, with perfectly clear contempt. The end result of this contempt was the Holocaust of the mid-twentieth century. The reason we know this line of thinking is wrong, besides the clear contradiction of the value of any human life to Christians, is Saint Paul the Apostle. Paul, a very pious Jew who loved his people dearly, wrestled in his letter to the Romans (Romans 9 - 12) with the question of why there was not general acceptance by the Jewish people of Jesus as the Messiah they had so long expected. Paul's answer to this to-him-agonizing riddle was ingenious. He reasoned:

- 1) God is always faithful, always keeps His promises, so the original covenant and promise to the Jews is still valid and operative.
- 2) Jewish refusal of Jesus the Messiah was foreseen and allowed by God as a way to make room for the gentiles, the nations who were not included in the original working out of the covenant.
- 3) The pagan nations were grafted – Paul's terminology – grafted onto the roots of God's covenant with the Jews.

4) In time the Jews would be brought back into the covenant as they recognized Jesus as the Messiah.

What this means is that what God is doing in Jesus is not a new covenant, but a re-defining event within the old covenant. God has not abandoned His original promise, rather He has expanded it. Christians are Jewish, spiritually circumcised rather than physically. (Romans 2.29) The practical result of this understanding is that Christians should hold Jews in high honor; they are brothers and sisters in the one covenant God has made with humanity. In God's own time and mysterious ways, our essential unity as one people will become clear. If this line of thinking had been honored throughout Christian history, the twentieth century Holocaust and the preceding centuries of shameful persecution of Jews by Christians would never have happened.

The implications of Abraham's covenant with God re-defined in Jesus Christ are even broader. If Jesus' saving death was catholic, that is, meant for all people, then all of humanity is now included in God's covenant. That means Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists – everyone – is an object of God's saving love. Would we have it any other way?

Since this is the beginning of the secular year and we have resolutions about behavior on our mind and since we have seen the wider implications of God making covenant with Her human children, let's close this meditation with some words from Saint Paul from Romans (12.9-21), what we might call marks of the true Christian. This is how Eugene Peterson puts it in his biblical paraphrase, *The Message*:

"Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

"Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

"Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with no-bodies; don't be the great somebody.

"Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. 'I'll do the judging,' says God. 'I'll take care of it.'

"Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good."

Not a bad way to begin the new year – especially as Christians, part of God's one original covenant with all of humanity, members of the Body of the Christ, who was and is named 'Savior.'