

Christmas continues.

You wouldn't know this from the store windows or the radio play list or your Internet home page, because the world has long since moved on to New Years remembrances and resolutions, but the church continues to celebrate Christmas.

This is not only because the church is slow, true though that may be.

This is because while the angels and the shepherds all left, the baby did not.

The angels went back to heaven, and *the shepherds returned* to their fields, and the world went back to work, but Mary and Joseph still have this infant on their hands, this baby that needs to be fed and bathed and burped and blanketed.

New parents learn this quickly and understand it keenly.

So do new widows and widowers.

The thing happens, the birth, the death, the moment that changes life forever, yet it doesn't seem to change much of anything for the parade of well-wishers that pass thoughtfully and kindly through the door, bring a card and a casserole, express their reactions to the news, and then go off to go on with their lives.

But the spouse is still dead, and the baby is still alive, and for the arms that hold them, daily life will never be the same again.

Christmas continues, because the baby continues to have needs.

One of those needs, of course, is an identity.

The child needs a name and a story.

On the eighth day of Christmas, our true love becomes even more real.

In years gone by, Lutherans and other Christians celebrated this day until the title "The Circumcision of Our Lord."

There are no hymns for this day celebrating how *the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes*; even the most pious perfectionists in the tradition recognize that that surprise has got to hurt.

And that painful ritual is more than some mere formality.

It links Jesus to a history, a family, a story; it tethers him to the people of Israel, to the sacred soreness of little Isaac and his old father Abraham, to Sarah and Rachel and Ruth and a whole line of personalities tethered together to the God of creation and exodus and promised land and prophets, the God of so many generations before and since.

Circumcision links Jesus to us, because at least for us males, the skin tingles and the teeth clench at the thought of it, and for a moment we feel in our sensitive bodies what the church calls incarnation, that God is in our skin, and that human skin will get cut and hurt like anything, and not only here at the beginning but also along the way and certainly at the end.

The marvel of Christmas is that God both comes and continues in human flesh, vulnerable and sensitive skin exactly like ours, as prone to the basic pains and pleasures of life as the rest of us.

Circumcision, among other things, is a reminder that religion is more than some spiritual mind game or personality preference; it makes deep and daring claims on our day-to-day life in the real, physical world with promises that are deeper and stronger still.

This world and these promises are going to be the ongoing setting for God's life now that God has chosen Christmas.

The baby has a specific story just like the rest of us, and so the baby will also need a name.

*And he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*

The angel is nowhere to be seen now, but the angel's word continues.

Mary holds it in the treasure chest that is her heart, which now she opens and shares so that all the world, from the priest in the temple then to the priests in the church today, can speak the name *Jesus*.

This is another stunning marvel of Christmas: that God now has a name which can be spoken by unholy human lips.

The circumcised are wise enough to know that in daily conversation, God only goes by nicknames and circumlocutions.

The name of God is too holy for us, too perfect and pure, and just like the sight of God would kill Moses, the speaking of God's name would do us all in.

But now we can see God, touch God, slice open God's skin, and also speak God's name: *Jesus*.

It is a name full of hope, partly because it means that sometimes, we get things right.

The word of the Lord came to Mary and told her to name the boy Jesus, and she did.

Really, it would have been the father's place to name the child, and the father, who was nowhere around during the conversation about the name, chose to go along with her word, somehow accepted her story enough to name the boy Jesus.

Sometimes we humans get things right.

This is a wonderfully hopeful reminder on the day that we traditionally make resolutions for our lives moving forward, often time resolutions intent on reversing old decisions and patterns of behavior we regret.

The name of Jesus is an example of God giving direction and human beings taking it, a noticeable change from the garden of Eden episode, an occasion of the divine-human relationship coming together and working, which of course is who Jesus truly is and what his story is all about.

Our year begins with the good news that in Jesus, humanity gets something right, and that is an important part of the story and celebration of Christmas that continues.

We do, sometimes, listen and love one another.

We do sometimes remember the word of the Lord, the voice of the angel, and it guides our actions and blesses lives, our own and those around us.

We do glorify and praise God in this place and elsewhere, we do share the startling news of God's real love in very real words and real ways sometimes, we do treat each other with dignity and tenderness, with justice and kindness, with peace and joy.

Sometimes, the simple story of the name of Jesus reminds us, we get it right.

Far better, however, is the promise in this name that God gets things right, that God makes things right.

The name Jesus means *God saves*, and that is the beautiful truth of Christmas that continues.

God saves, and does so not only from the distant reaches of a gilded heaven but from a manger and a mother's arms, from a creche and a cross.

God lives among us, in our muddle and mortality, and from here, in this kid Jesus, finds a strange and unpredictable and palpably real way to save us forever.

It is a story full of real pain with promise that is deeper and stronger still, leading us ultimately to

a surprise and a someday beyond our most daring imagination, a joy that shepherds and even angels can barely guess.

But before then, until then, Christmas continues.

Jesus is with us, here, in bread that breaks like skin and wine that flows like blood.

God is with us here, now, in faces we can see and names that we can say.

Love so real it has scars is in our midst still, in word and wafer and wine and the wrinkles of our community with its own unique identity and name, legacy and story...and as the world moves on quickly to its next thing, the sun rises on a new year to sing to us that God hangs in there with us, that grace persists, that love keeps going, that Christmas continues.