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“Circumscribed by Christ”

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Christ the King / Reign of Christ (Year C)

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Colossians 1:11–20; Luke 1:68–79

Prayer of Illumination: Source of all we hope or dread, sheepdog, jackyl, rattler, swan. We hunt your face and long to trust, that you hid mouth will say again, Let there be light. A clear new day... wellspring gold of dark and day, be here, be now. Amen.

(Reynolds Price/James Taylor, *New Hymn*)

Zechariah, the priest struck dumb by an angel,
and Elizabeth, his formerly barren wife, both well up in age,
have come to the Temple on the eighth day
with the intent of having their new baby circumcised
and blessed with a family name, all according to Jewish tradition.

This would be the usual ritual that surrounds the birth of a male Jewish child;
this is what their neighbors and relatives would normally expect to happen
without undue haste or delay early in this child's young life.

But Zechariah and Elizabeth suspect that *a new normal* overshadows their every move.

During the last year of their marriage, one or both:

- have been visited by an angel;
- have been advised to name their firstborn after someone entirely outside the family;
- have been struck dumb for disbelieving the angel's good news;
- have conceived a child after many years of barrenness;
- have been filled with the Holy Spirit upon meeting a cousin- to- be;

- have waited in silence for the new creation to dawn as heralded.

And now after nine months of patiently waiting, after the seventh day of rest,
they arrive at the Temple knowing that what appears to happen on the surface,
the cutting of the covenant into the mortal flesh of this child,
the naming of this child for his biological family,
is but a sign, seal, and foretaste of something of far greater import.

This child is about to be circumscribed by Christ and adopted into a new family of origin,
the first fruit of those following, including our own children,
who will belong to God *through Christ*, from this moment on.

Christ will be the defining mark at this child's beginning,
and Christ will be the touchstone at his ending, the focal point of his whole life.
Christ will encircle this child, as if by a boundary, hemming him in behind and before.
Christ will touch as many points of this child's life as possible.

This child will have a new orientation, a new north star for guidance and navigation,
a new alpha and omega, beginning and end.

It is so ordained when his mother boldly announces before relatives and neighbors
that this child will not receive the traditional name of a family member,
but will be named John, which her mute husband verifies in writing.

And the neighbors and relatives gasp at the elderly couple's act of ecclesiastical disobedience,
and they respond with a question that will echo through the ages
and ripple the waters of every baptismal font to this very day:

“What then is this child going to be?”

How will this child be defined:

- as the miracle child of a barren mother;
- as a child whose parents could be his grandparents;
- as a child named randomly by an angel;
- as the son of a speechless father;
- as a spirit person – a prophet of the Most High?

Laura and John, I'm sure you're wondering this, too, as you wait to come to the font
with your beautiful twins, Art and Henry, along with their big brother,

Charlie, and prepare to have the twins baptized.

What then are these children going to be?

How will these children be defined?

By an ancient covenant cut into their skin, or by something more?

Or is their future all in the hands of fate from here on out?

And some of us can't help but ponder these same questions

concerning our own children,

who were likewise dedicated, blessed, or baptized

in their very early pre-remembering days or even in their youth.

Will their lives be influenced at all in their circumscription by Christ,

or are their futures to be determined by fate alone?

And, if they do not choose, or cannot choose to adopt the faith practices of their parents,
does this matter?

Are they still circumscribed by Christ?

Will the rule of Christ govern their lives, even if *they* don't claim Christ as their King?

The silent prayer of every believing parent of the font, I think, is a whispered,

"Yes, please... so may it so be

through the tender mercy and saving grace of our Lord and King."

When I was a young child myself, I distinctly remember a song I used to hear on the radio
called, "Que Será, Será," sung by Doris Day:

When I was just a little girl,

I asked my mother, "What will I be?"

Will I be pretty, will I be rich?

Here's what she said to me...

Que Será, Será

Whatever will be, will be

The future's not ours to see

Que Será, Será.

In retrospect, I think this is the normative song, the safe song

that our increasingly secular culture would rather have us sing to our children.
It posits the same question that the neighbors and relatives ask Elizabeth and Zechariah:

What then is this child going to be? (*Ti ara ta padion touto estai?*)

And the secular song suggests a shrug of the shoulders and *an agnostic answer*

of "que será, será," who knows, it will be as it will be,

fate will have its way with this child one way or another,

there is little any of us can do from here on out.

But in our text for today, Zechariah, the tongue-tied old priest, finally finds his voice
at the unusual naming of his son, and he breaks into another song,

the alternative song of the font which we sing today as people of faith.

Zechariah's song begins with a blessing to the Lord, a doxology,

to the one who has visited his people to rescue and redeem

by raising up a horn of salvation, a sign of hope through the Davidic line

to afford deliverance from all enemies and from all fears.

He begins *his* song, his countercultural song, with seven verses of praise to the Lord,

not for the birth of a child, as we might expect,

not for sending John to this childless couple,

but for sending a mighty Savior for us, the redemptive agent,

the one whom we will know as Jesus, who has come to fulfill ancestral hopes.

Only after praising God for finally fulfilling the long-awaited promise of a Messiah

does Zechariah turn his attention to his own son, John, and answer his

neighbors' and relatives' question about the future of this child.

And in two short verses, he gives the alternative answer to the question about fate.

O Yes, O Yes, he sings, this child will be circumscribed by Christ,

by this One who has come to fulfill the promise.

This child will be a prophet of the Lord, who will go before Christ, the Messiah,

and prepare the way for him, by giving people knowledge of their salvation

through the forgiveness of their sins.

John's identity and his future importance will lie in relationship to Jesus,

the one through whom God's tender mercy shines upon God's people.

John's identity and his future will lie in relationship to the rising Son of Righteousness,
who comes to bring light into the world's darkness.

Zechariah, the mute man, speaks as if this has already happened,
because it has, and it will, and he knows this to be true.

John's story will matter because it is part of God's larger story of redeeming love,
beginning with Abraham, David, and the prophets,
and now flooding in on this new prophet of the Most High.

And then Zechariah's song returns to its theme of God's benevolence and salvation.

The family and friends thought Zechariah and Elizabeth were bringing their baby
to the Temple this day to circumcise him and give him an appropriate family name.

What they didn't realize was that in this ritual, the baby was being encircled
by Christ, the King, named by an angel, and embraced by the larger
narrative of God's love for God's people.

At his beginning and at his end, John's life is now circumscribed by Christ.

His story will be defined by its relationship to Jesus' story, and in that way,
Christ will be King to John.

His story will not be subject to fate, but to God's tender mercy.

His story will not be subsumed at its end by the darkness of death,
but will be pierced by the light of Christ's resurrecting love.

And so will Art's story, and so will Henry's story, and Charlie's story, and the stories of
all who are baptized into God's family, so will we be circumscribed by Christ.

Princeton theologian Ellen Charry says this of baptism:

"To be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit...

is to be set into the Trinity for life in this world in preparation for the next...

The washing... and marking of a person as Christ's own

provide a norm of belonging that marks a person off from other types of belonging.

Baptism is a guiding ensign that can direct the Christian

through temptations and vicissitudes of daily life

by means of an internalized God-given identity...

Baptism becomes the drumbeat to which Christians march,
and the beacon that offers security and hope...

It means that one is never alone, but always accompanied by the Holy Spirit,
and the fullness of the Trinity itself."

(Ellen T. Charry. "Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity." *Theology Today*, October, 1997, p. 372.)

Poet David Adams has written a beautiful modern Celtic *caim* that put it this way:

"Circle me, Lord. Keep protection near and danger afar."

(Ian Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven*, p. 84)

Some children may reject this placement,

claiming that it is not a setting of their own choosing.

Some may prefer a story that can be proven scientifically, to this one that

hints of supernatural visitations by angels, old barren women and dumb-struck men.

Some may refuse the faith tradition of their parents, finding little use for old songs

that fail to move them, and stilted prayers and liturgies from a former day.

Are they circumscribed by Christ, still?

Which song will govern their lives after baptism:

The secular culture's song of the *whatever* or the counter-cultural song of *blessed be?*

Que será, será, or Benedictus?

And with some of our grown baptized children who have chosen other spiritual expressions,

I can't help but think that Christ, the King, continues to shape their identities
when they live lives ruled by peace, kindness, service, and non-violence.

I can't help but think that Christ, the King, continues to shape their identities
when they live lives ruled by justice and treat others by what they see
within their hearts and not by external earthly standards.

I can't help but think that Christ, the King, continues to shape their identities
when they are ruled by forgiveness and are willing to give others
the benefit of the doubt and multiple second chances.

I can't help but think that Christ, the King, continues to shape their identities
when their lives are ruled by love and tender mercies,
by deeds that bring light into people's darkness,
by acts of healing that restore people to wholeness,
by welcoming strangers and restoring outsiders to community.

We may no longer use the language of kingship to describe our relationship to Christ.

It seems antiquated, political, patriarchal, and subject to tyranny.

We may prefer the language of the secular world that retreats to the safety of fate,
when supernatural agency cannot be proven or sufficiently explained.

But the language of circumscribing, writing around, marking off, surrounding,
encompassing as if by a boundary, encircling so as to touch

as many points as possible is something we might use if we were
cartographers, making maps, plotting directions, orienteering,
setting the GPS to determine future direction.

What then is this child going to be?

This child, these children, are going to be circumscribed by Christ
whether they are aware of it or not.

These children are going to circumscribed by Christ,
who will be *as King to them*, ruling their lives with his self-giving love,
keeping protection near and danger afar.

These children are going to be circumscribed by the values of Christ
whether they grow up to claim Christ as their King or not.

Blessed be the God of Israel, who sends his servant, John,
to proclaim the advent of Jesus, Christ the King,
the one who circumscribes and surrounds us with God's love
from beginning to end. Amen.