

**JANUARY 1, 2012 HOMILY
AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**Colossians 2: 11-12
Luke 2: 20-21, 40-51**

“CIRCUMCISION: CHRIST’S AND YOURS”

Today is New Year’s Day. Many of you may be setting some goals, making some resolutions for the new year. Don’t set the goals too low or assume that you can’t grow in 2012.

Back in the 1600s when New York City was still the Dutch settled village of New Amsterdam, the city fathers met to do some planning for the future. It was still a little place just a few blocks long. But they hoped it would grow some more. So they wanted to map out where future streets would be placed. Part of the process was making a map of how big they guessed their town would be. They decided 19 blocks was as big as the town would ever get. So they drew in streets as far as 19th St. which they officially named Boundary Street. 19th Street was as far as the town would ever get, so it would be the border. It would be Boundary Street. New Amsterdam, New York, would never get any bigger than that! Wrong! Boundary Street is now buried deep in the heart of one of the world’s greatest cities. Those 17th century Dutch settlers were not nearly optimistic enough about the growth of their town. (in “Our Daily Bread”, 12/21/89).

Often we’re like them. We want to grow, but figure it can only be just a little growth. We don’t think to change in a big way is possible from year to year. And so we drift from year to year---either not setting any spiritual goals or only very small ones. In 2012, why not be different? Why not set some real and serious goals for spiritual growth?

Today, January 1, in addition to being New Year’s Day is also a minor holy day in our Orthodox Church. Today we commemorate the Circumcision of Christ. We just heard about it in our gospel reading from Luke 2. Jewish baby boys are circumcised 8 days after birth. January 1 is 8 days after Christmas, when Jesus was born. Jesus was a baby boy, so He was circumcised on the 8th day---we commemorate that today. And it is a blessed coincidence that Christ’s circumcision is observed on New Year’s Day---because by thinking about His circumcision while celebrating New Year’s Day, hopefully we can be inspired to set some good goals and resolutions for 2012.

How does *Christ’s* circumcision relate to *your own* circumcision? Over one-half of you are now saying to yourselves---“Well, the priest really just goofed up. I have never been circumcised!” That’s true for well over half of you---you’ve never been *physically* circumcised. But if you have been baptized, then you actually have been circumcised, even if not physically circumcised like Jesus and other Jewish boys.

In today’s epistle lesson from his epistle to the Colossians, St. Paul tells that us that when we were baptized we received circumcision, a *spiritual* circumcision. Hear again part of today’s epistle lesson---Colossians 2: 11-12---“In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made *without hands*, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” When you got baptized you got circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, a spiritual circumcision.

In the Old Testament, when a Hebrew baby boy was circumcised, it meant that he was being set aside for God, his entire life was being dedicated to God. He was becoming one of God’s people.

We learn from St. Paul that since Christ came, physical circumcision is no longer a matter of any spiritual or religious importance. It's now just a medical matter, an option for parents to decide either way. But when we receive Christian baptism, whether male or female, then we receive the circumcision that really matters, the spiritual circumcision. As Paul wrote in verse 11---at baptism we are "circumcised with a circumcision made without hands." We that day are united to Christ, we become part of God's people.

In our baptisms, which are *our* circumcisions, we are firmly enlisted on one side in the long war between God and evil. We are enlisted on God's side.

China in the 1920's and 1930's was a nation in turmoil. Basically, there was a many-sided civil war going on with various "warlords" leading their armies trying to take over (not to mention the Japanese and Communist Red Army!). Each warlord general had his own army, often mercenaries more concerned about their paychecks than whatever "cause" they were fighting for. Many of the warlords couldn't afford uniforms for their troops, so they wore whatever they could. And in the heat of battle, it was hard for the soldiers to know who was on which side! So some of the warlords issued their soldiers colored armbands with a safety pin. Each warlord gave out armbands with a particular color that stood for his army---the soldiers were supposed to pin their warlord's armband on their sleeves and then everyone could know who was who. But the soldiers weren't usually the most loyal fellows. And if their army was losing, or if they heard another warlord paid better, they were quick to change sides. So many soldiers carried a few spare armbands, of different colors, in their pockets---and whenever they wished, they'd change colors and change sides! (in Stillwell and the American Experience In China, Barbara Tuchman, 1972, p. 87)

We don't want to be like those soldiers! When we were baptized we really chose sides, we permanently chose God's side, God's army. We are enlisted for ever. But sometimes it's good to re-enlist, to reaffirm our decision to be on God's side.

The holy day we'll celebrate this week is a good time for such re-enlistment. Theophany (also called Epiphany) is this week, January 6. On the eve of the holy day, this Thursday evening, we will celebrate the Baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River long ago. Water will be blessed to be holy water. And then we will be sprinkled with that holy water. As we feel that water fall upon our heads, we are reminded of Christ's baptism and of our own baptisms. As we feel that water fall upon us, hopefully we re-enlist. Hopefully, we decide to reaffirm our baptisms, our spiritual circumcisions. And this holy day coming up is a good time for us to ask ourselves---is there any thing in my life, any part of my life, that I am holding back from God? Do I maybe have a different colored armband tucked in my pocket in case I decide to change sides every now and then? Is there anything I need to turn over to God? If so, this week is the time to decide to do it.

What a great calendar coincidence this week! New Year's Day and the Circumcision of Christ are both today and then later this week we have the holy water blessing on Theophany. All three in one week---a very good week for us to take stock of our lives. How did I do in 2011? How will I do in 2012? Will I just drift into another year? Or can I set some good goals for myself, make some good resolutions and really turn my entire life over to God, the commander of the army I have been enlisted in. This is a good week to make a commitment to renew my baptism and spiritual circumcision, to re-enlist in God's army.

What kind of commitment and resolutions should I make? We could do it very simply by saying, "I resolve to be a better Christian in 2012." That's nice---but altogether too vague. Probably not much will change in my life with a vague resolution like that. It's far better to be

specific, to make a couple of very specific commitments to work on in concrete ways.

Here are some examples of what you could do-----

1. How about your praying? If you don't set aside some time each day just to pray, why not start? Maybe 10 minutes each day. And if you're already consistently setting aside time to pray, how about increasing it by some specific amount---from 10 minutes to 20 minutes or something like that.
2. Decide to read a chapter in the Bible every day. It will only take a few minutes. And if you're not sure where to start or how to go about it, just let me know....
3. Church attendance---this is a big one! If you go to church "occasionally", maybe rarely, how about deciding to change that. Does every Sunday seem unrealistic to you? Well, then commit to twice a month to start with. Do you now already attend about half the time? Then commit to being here each week. Are you already (as many of you are) here every Sunday? Then commit to attending the various holy days services. Already doing that? How about Vespers on Saturday? Unless you're one of the few people who are always here whenever the "doors are open" you can make a commitment to improve on attendance this year.
4. What's your worst bad habit? You can probably answer that pretty quickly! Maybe others know about it, or maybe only you (and God!) know about it. Pick your worst bad habit and make a resolution that 2012 is the year that, with God's help, you will beat it. Then figure out how and go to work---feel free to contact me if you can use some advice and guidance. I know something about bad habits---I'm working on some of my own!
5. Take a few minutes to analyze what you did to help the needy in 2011. Then pick one more way you can add to that in 2012.
6. Again, a little self-analysis.... Who are you maddest at or find hardest to get along with or are "not talking to anymore"? Decide who that person is and then decide to fix the situation in 2012. This could be the hardest of all, but with God's help you can do it---or, at least, make the effort even if the other person won't respond. As I said, this is the tough one. So if you pick this resolution, you better get started right away---you may need a whole year to make peace and end up on good terms with "that person".

This list could go on and on....but that means this sermon will go on and on.... So that's enough. You can figure out other possibilities yourself. And remember, just make one or two resolutions, set one or two goals. If you set a lot, you may end up doing very little on any of them. Pick one or two. And those other things you need to work on? Don't worry, 2013 will roll around soon enough!

Today we celebrate how our Lord Jesus Christ was circumcised in the flesh 8 days after His birth. And we remember how, as St. Paul told us in our epistle lesson, we received a spiritual circumcision when we were baptized. And this Thursday evening we will celebrate Theophany, the Baptism of our Lord. And, at that service, and when you and your houses are blessed in the weeks ahead, you will be sprinkled with holy water to remind you of your baptism and spiritual circumcision. It will remind you of how you were enlisted in God's army when you were baptized and spiritually circumcised. It's a good week to re-enlist. Do so by figuring out what you can change for the better in your life so as to be a better soldier for the Lord. Make the decision this week, make your resolution---and then work together with the Lord in 2012 to grow in Christ!

