



The Nativity of St. John the Baptist

June 24, 2018 – 9:00 a.m.

Rev. Todd Goldschmidt, Pastor

Theme: Thank God For Sending John the Baptist to Prepare Us For His Gracious Visitation!

Sermon Text: Luke 1:57-80 (NIV)

⁵⁷When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

⁶¹They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

⁶²Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

⁶⁷His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David

⁷⁰(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

⁷¹salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—

⁷²to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

⁷⁴to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear

⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,

⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

⁸⁰And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

She knew it was about to happen. There they were in the hall of the ICU, her son and daughter-in-law, holding a bright blue mylar balloon that blared, “**It’s a boy!**” There was the gift-bag with a sweatshirt inscribed, “**World’s Greatest Grandpa!**” The happy couple was primed to share the exciting news with her sweet husband. But first, she needed to go into his room and make sure he was awake. The nurses at the desk said he’d had a restless night. So she crept into the room to see if he was alert ... that he looked and felt okay ... before she called them to his bedside.

He was dying, of course. Nothing would change that. He’d never get out of this bed or into a nursing home. But today, he’d hear the wonderful news that Deidra was pregnant—and

the baby was a boy! He'd be a grandpa after all! Even though he was hooked up to IVs, monitors and an oxygen tank—all grim tokens of death—today he'd get a delightful reminder of life. God's gift of life. A little baby boy! And so, she slipped into his room to prepare him for that gracious visitation.

At times, it's hard to hear good news. As crazy as that sounds, the circumstances of our lives sometimes prevent us from experiencing even momentary joy. The specter of incurable cancer has closed the door to any other visitors. The painful memory of divorce casts such a shadow over life that we can't read the letters that spell out hope. Unemployment, infertility, mounting debt, concerns for children, care of aging parents and the rest of life's inevitable anxieties crowd so closely and speak so loudly that any harbinger of joy is easily drowned out in the din.

So, for that reason, it's good to give God thanks when He sends someone—anyone—to prepare us for hearing good news. God knows that we're not always ready to listen, and so He comes—like that caring wife did into her husband's hospital room—to prepare our hearts and minds even before He speaks. This morning, we celebrate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist by thanking God for sending John . . .

TO PREPARE US FOR CHRIST'S GRACIOUS VISITATION!

John the Baptist is familiar to us for many reasons. He's the one who lived out in the wilderness. He dressed in frontier garb like a mountain man in the old West. He ate a Bear Grylls' diet of **"locusts and wild honey"** (Mark 1:6). He baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. He was imprisoned by Herod for condemning his adulterous affair with his sister-in-law, Herodias, and his head ended up as a gruesome party favor at an alcohol-fueled feast, lopped off at her request. John was an odd duck, no question about it. But that's what God's intended for him all along. John could be remembered for many things. But today the Church calls attention to his birth.

Why? Because here, at John's birth, we hear how God wants us to remember John. When John was born, **"his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied . . . 'you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.'"** John is to be remembered as the one God sent before Jesus came to prepare His people for His gracious visitation. **"People get ready, there's a Savior comin',"** John sang out.

John's conception had created quite a stir. His mother, Elizabeth, who was old and barren, conceived him nonetheless, and his father, Zechariah, had been struck dumb by God for his disbelief. The events at His birth are no less noteworthy. Friends and family praised God for the birth of this "miracle baby." At 8 days old, his parents took him to the temple for his circumcision and naming. We're told,

"they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, 'No! He is to be called John.' They said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who has that name.' Then they made signs to his [mute] father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.' Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone

who heard this wondered about it, asking, 'What then is this child going to be?'"

Rather than follow these folks as they fanned out into the hills, the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to ask us to stay and listen to John's father, Zechariah's ode to joy. The words of his hymn divide neatly into two stanzas. In the first, he offers a grand overview of God's work of salvation throughout biblical history. In the second, he points to one particularly pivotal moment: the birth of his son, John. The arrangement of his divinely-designed song joins John to a much larger story. John's not to be memorialized for his priestly lineage or his legacy of performing mighty miracles or his powerful sermons or even his weird wilderness lifestyle.

No, John's to be remembered for his place in a much larger mercy ministry. He's the one God sent to prepare people for Jesus, to awaken them to their sins. Some repented at his preaching by the power of the Spirit and waded into the Jordan's shallow waters to be baptized. Out of the river they rose, wet with the waters of repentance and forgiveness, to wait in eager expectation for their coming Messiah. For then, and only then, were they truly ready to see Jesus. When you come to Jesus as a lost and condemned sinner, with nothing in your hand to bring, only then will you see Him as the One John pointed to as **"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"** (John 1:29). For Jesus went on to die on the cross, to fully atone for your sins and endure your punishment in hell. He rose again on Easter to bring eternal life to you and to secure your place at His side in heaven.

No wonder God sent John. The world is so blind to the working of God, and God's will and His ways are so gracious and so far beyond our limited comprehension. God doesn't want this work of Jesus to be missed—not by John's contemporaries, not by us and not by anyone. John the Baptist is just one more example of God's immense love for His people; one more example of God doing everything He can to call them from sin so that they might experience His work of salvation. Today, we give thanks to God for sending John to prepare our hearts for Christ's saving work!

God's ministry thru John remains. Today, John—or a believer who fills his ancient sandals—still stands at the edge of wherever Jesus is present, awakening us to God's gracious visitation.

Think of the child who's brought to Baptism when she's only three weeks old. Her parents are conduits, preparing their daughter for the gracious visitation of the Holy Spirit as He descends on her, claiming her as God's own dear child, scrubbing her clean from the filth of her sins and equipping her—young as she is—to glorify God in the newness of life. Sponsors stand alongside her Dad and Mom, promising—as do we all—to continue to keep her in their prayers and do everything within their power to see to it that she remains a child of God until death. And the angels sing for joy as they vow to protect her from all harm and danger as God's **"ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation"** (Hebrews 1:14)—all to prepare *one* child for God's gracious visitation!

Marvel at the gracious visitation Jesus brings when He comes to us in His Holy Supper, inviting His penitent people who share a common understanding of His will: **"Take and eat, this is my body,"** as I hand you a wafer of bread and then offer you wine, saying as Jesus did, **"Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"** (Matt. 26:26 & 28). Jim, who has struggled all week with his relationship with his daughter, his head bowed as he prepares to approach the table, sings the words of John the Baptist in the **"Agnus Dei"**—**"Lamb, of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us"**—and his eyes overflow with tears of gratitude

and his heart swells with the confidence that Jesus will reconcile he and his daughter somehow, some way, some day—even if it that reunion has to take place in heaven’s halls.

“Do, re, mi, fa . . .” Most of us know this method of memorizing the musical scale. But we may not know the origin of these syllables. Almost a 1000 years ago, a Benedictine monk named Guido of Arezzo used most of these same sounds to teach the musical scale. Where’d he get them? From a hymn to St. John the Baptist, whose birth we celebrate today. These familiar sounds were drawn from the first syllables of the first six lines of the hymn “*Ut queant laxis.*” Hidden beneath this common approach of learning music is an ode to John the Baptist!

In a similar way, we could say that John is the hidden figure behind our songs of thankfulness and praise this morning. John was born to be a prophet, a solitary figure, a wilderness preacher, calling all people to repent. Thru his voice, God prepared the way for Jesus. When Jesus arrived on the scene, He embodied God’s gracious visitation to our fallen race. Thru His suffering, death and resurrection, sins are forgiven and death is destroyed. And we—having been awakened to grace by God’s Spirit—now join our voices of praise to Jesus in never-ending song. When we open our minds and for a moment comprehend the many ways that God has prepared us for His gracious visitation, Zechariah’s song becomes our own—a faithful way for us still today to offer our praise! Yes, **“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.”** Amen.