

Sermon for Feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptizer – Luke 1:57-80

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Today, June 24th, the church celebrates the Nativity of St. John the Baptizer. The character of John the Baptizer is most closely associated with the church's season of Advent, which is the time of preparation before our Lord's coming at Christmas. You'll recall that it was John who preached, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight." This is an exhortation we hear often during the month of December, but doesn't it seem a little bit out of place to celebrate John the Baptizer and his prophetic message in the midst of the summer? Well, I suppose if commercial America can celebrate Christmas in July, the church should be more than welcome to celebrate Advent in June.

It's not typical for us to celebrate the earthly nativity of a saint. We usually celebrate the date that the saint died: the day that they entered into heavenly triumph. While early Lutherans did celebrate the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. John the Baptizer's Nativity is the only one that's made it into our latest hymnal's calendar. St. John's beheading is celebrated on August 29th, which bears ample witness to the church's high regard for John's place as a significant Biblical figure.

Now, to be clear, we don't worship the saints (including John the Baptizer) or pray to them. The Incarnate Christ is to be the only receiver of our adoration. Nonetheless we should still remember the saints, for in them we have a picture of those who struggled with sin, endured suffering, and faced hardship for the sake of Christ, and our Lord in His mercy did not forsake them, but granted them His crown of righteousness and eternal life, yes the heavenly triumph we will also receive when our Lord ends our earthly days and miseries. The Lord's saints bear crosses, but also live in the forgiveness that Jesus freely gives.

John's Nativity, June 24th, is exactly 6 months before the eve of the much more famous Nativity, namely, that of our Lord Jesus. That Nativity we call Christmass. So these two boys- John and Jesus- are born at the beginning of the Gospel of St. Luke, one born 6 months before the other. They would grow up in opposite parts of the land: Mary's boy grew up in Galilee. Elizabeth's son grew up in the hill country of Judea. One grew up in the home of a carpenter. The other grew up in the home of a priest, which would likely have been a more comfortable and cultured home. Nonetheless, John grew into manhood in the hill country and the wilderness. Like Elijah before him, John knew the winds, the storms, and the quaking of the earth. Yet he also knew the still small voice of God's Word, spoken to him through his parents, telling him the work that lay before him and what his role would be in dealing with God's people.

John was not a young man without history or without an identity. His father sang of God's dealing with Israel, God's promises to Abraham, and God's coming fulfillment of salvation for the whole world. This song is called the Benedictus, which is still sung in the Liturgy (and we heard it read in today's Gospel). John's father Zechariah sang in this canticle of the prophet who would prepare the way of salvation. That prophet was his son John. John knew where he belonged in the people of God and that he had his part to play.

So the Word of the Lord came to John, the son of Zechariah, and he went into all the region of the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John's message was sudden, swift, and devastating. "You brood of vipers! ... Bear fruits in keeping with repentance." And just as quickly as his message came, his life was almost over. Prison and then execution. John's

head was to be cut off at the request of a stripper, her marriage-breaking mother, and a half-drunk prince. In prison, John wondered if it was all a mistake. Was he suffering in vain? He searched for the answer the only place the answer could be found. From prison, John sent his questions to Jesus: Are you for real? Should I look for another? Are you the One?

The answer John received from Jesus was nothing he didn't already know; "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." 'Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.' That last phrase was for John. It was his last temptation. Jesus was doing His work His way, which may not have been the way same way John would have done it. After all, crowds flocked to John in the desert wilderness, but then they left him and went to Jesus. John sternly denounced all sin, but Jesus was associating with shady and unlikely characters, tax collectors, and prostitutes, and so forth: not the sort of people you would expect to be connected to the kingdom of God.

So now John was faced with the question: Jesus' way or the way I think things should go? He had already answered the question before in words: "He must increase, I must decrease." Now it's time to answer that question through deed, in living out those words. And John answers the question in His own death. Against His doubts and against His uncertainties he lays his head on the block, and with his death he confesses with ultimate clarity: "Yes, you are the one. Your way, not mine. You are my God forever and ever. You will be my guide, even unto death."

In John the Baptizer, we see how we can lay our lives on the line, refusing to serve our advantage by accommodating the Herodias and Herods of this world. Dearly beloved, Refuse to make popularity and success the measure of your life. Refuse to keep quiet the Law and the Gospel when called to witness to the truth. Rather, in John, see the faith that holds even through death; the faith which is Christ's gift. And this gift is the only status that matters.

From John the Baptizer we hear the message of repentance, but above all, a message that points to Christ for you. Follow the hand and the word of John as he points to Jesus. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." So our sins, all our failures, our doubting God's plans and promises, and our insistence on our own way instead of His – all these – Christ answers for these sins. He is the Lamb slain for our forgiveness. By His death, we are included in God's people. We have an identity. God associates with such unlikely characters as us, and with us, He does His work in the world. We're forgiven. We're accepted. We're freed from the slavery of sin to live lives shaped by His love.

So thank God for John the Baptizer and above all give thanks to Christ who has joined us to Himself and to one another with a love that holds through death itself. Him whose birth we will celebrate, God willing, six months from tonight is the One and Only Savior who John the Baptizer proclaims. And John still serves us today, as he points to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠