

Sermon for the Nativity of St. John the Baptist – Luke 1:57-80

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

In the church year, it's not often that we celebrate earthly birthdays besides the obvious one: Jesus Christ's birth at Christmas. For the saints, the usual custom is to celebrate the day of their death, that is, their heavenly birthday. And yet, today we celebrate the nativity of one important saint: John the Baptist.

Our Lord Jesus said of John, "Yes, I tell you ... [John is] more than a prophet. This is He of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist." How is it possible to be more than a prophet? Our Lord is saying that John is the greatest of the prophets. Why? The other prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Malachi could only from time's distance prophesy about the Messiah. Yet, John pointed with his very finger at Him. No one can better prophesy than what they witness right in front of them.

In John chapter 5, Christ says, "You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth ... He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in His light." In this way, God our Lord awakened a great prophet named John, who, even from the time in His mother's womb was filled with the Holy Spirit. In God's presence, he leapt for joy.

For those of you who wake up early and go outside, you see the sky before the sun rises. Occasionally, one rogue star shines brightly on the horizon before morning dawns. Whether it's a star or a planet, I'll leave that to the astronomers. In old times, this star had special significance. It was the precursor to the sun rising. Prior to the appearance of Christ Jesus, the promised Messiah, John the Baptist's preaching was a beautiful pre-dawn star, already risen and shining brightly, prior to the rising of the Son. Clothed in camel hair, honey dripping from his lips, and grasshopper legs and wings stuck in his teeth. Just beautiful ... the message of course, not the man.

As cousins do, Jesus and John share many similarities. The conception and birth of both were miraculous. Jesus was born of a virgin. John was born of a woman whose childbearing years had long since passed. The angel Gabriel announced both of their births. John was the last prophet of the Old Testament; Christ is the Mediator of the New Testament. John concluded the Levitical and Aaronic priesthood, consecrated to point to the only High Priest of the New Testament, Christ Jesus.

John was the voice of a preacher in the wilderness. He announced the coming of the Messiah through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. It's little wonder why John's father Zacharias, became speechless when he was to speak the benediction over the people. John the Baptist's preaching of Jesus was underway, even from the womb.

The custom of the Old Testament was that the male child was named at his circumcision, just as God renamed Abraham when He instituted this covenant. When the time came for Zacharias and Elizabeth's son, the friends and neighbors wanted to name him after his father. Mother in no way was going to allow it. She had revelation from the Holy Spirit that he should be called "John." "None among your relatives has that name," they griped. They were getting nowhere with Elizabeth. So what does Zacharias say? When given a tablet, he wrote and spoke simultaneously: "His name is John." Zacharias who had been silenced was now able to speak forth God's grace. Because that's exactly what John means — "grace." God's grace. The name "Zacharias" was not a suitable name for this child. Zacharias means, "the Lord remembers" and thereby also acts. But how does the Lord act? Now by grace for His people. Zacharias and Elizabeth's son was named John and given God's grace.

John was given his name and so we also were given our name and grace in Holy Baptism. God called us by name. According to our human nature, we in the scriptures actually have evil names, so that we on account of our sinful birth are called "flesh born of flesh," and "children of wrath." However, through Holy Baptism we are received into God's covenant of grace, we are embodied into Christ, and through water and the Spirit we are re-born. That's why we're called by name as the children of God, that's why we're called Christ's brothers, and that's why we're called temples of the Holy Spirit. Our names are written in the book of heaven. We are written into the book of Life. Indeed, we are inscribed into God's hands as the prophet Isaiah says (Is. 49:16).

When Zacharias' mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, he spoke forth God's grace and blessed God. How did he speak of God's grace? First, he says, the Lord visited His people. He kept His promise to the patriarchs and prophets. Years ago, physicians used to visit the sick in the home in order to help them. This is the way God visits us, as we are deathly ill in sin. Second, Zacharias praises God the Lord for the fact that He had redeemed him. When the Messiah is sent, He was made to be our ransom by God. He gave up His life for the ransom of many. When the heavenly Physician came to us, He found us not only to be sick, but also imprisoned. That's why His visitation was not enough. Redemption and ransom also had to come into the equation for our rescue. It was not enough that Christ became flesh and blood, true man by nature, taken up into the unity of His Person, and in this state visits us. It was not enough. He also had to give Himself up for us into death and shed His blood on the cross for our redemption and rose from the dead. And so the ransom is paid. Eternity's task is accomplished. The work is completed. It is finished.

God saw our misery and captivity. He saw that we by our own power could not save ourselves from it. His heart was broken over us. He sent His Son in mercy to redeem us. John the Baptist reminds us of this, that the Son is risen victorious, and that we too will one day enjoy His eternal day. "O grant, dear Lord of love, that we receive, rejoicing, the Word proclaimed by John, our true repentance voicing, that gladly we may walk upon our Savior's way until we live with Him in His eternal day. Amen.

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