

June 24, 2018
Sermon for the Nativity of St John
St Peter Lutheran Church
Bowie, TX
Larry Knobloch, Pastor
Luke 1:57-80

J.J.- Jesu Juva—Help me, Jesus

Luke 1:57–80 (ESV)

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” ⁶¹ And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him. ⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, ⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; ⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” ⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

She knew what was going to happen. She had met her son and daughter-in-law in the hall. She had seen the balloons. "It's a boy." And the gift bag with the sweatshirt, "World's Greatest Grandpa." It was all out there in the hall, waiting to come in.

But first, she needed to go into the room and make sure he was awake. The nurses at the desk said that he had had a restless night. She wanted to make sure he was awake, that he was sitting up in bed, that he looked okay . . . before she called them in.

He was dying and nothing would change that. He would never get out of this bed or this nursing home. But today, he would hear that Susan was pregnant. That the baby was a boy. That he would be a grandpa. Even though he was surrounded by reminders of death, today he would have a wonderful reminder of life. God's gift of life. A little baby boy.

And so, she went into the room and prepared him for a gracious visitation. Sometimes, it is hard to hear good news. As crazy as that may sound, the circumstances of our lives sometimes prevent us from a moment of holy joy.

The presence of cancer has closed the door to any other visitors. The painful memory of divorce casts such a shadow over life that we cannot see anything that might spell out hope.

Unemployment, under-employment, mounting debt, concern for children, care of aging parents, and the anxieties of life crowd so closely and speak so loudly that any messenger of joy is easily drowned out in the din.

For this reason, it is good to give God thanks when He sends someone, anyone, to prepare us for hearing good news.

God knows that we are not always ready to listen, and so He comes to prepare our hearts and minds even before He speaks.

This morning, we celebrate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist by giving God thanks that God sends John to prepare us for Christ's gracious visitation; that He continues to send messengers to prepare us for salvation.

John the Baptist is familiar to us for many reasons. He is the one who lived out in the wilderness. He dressed in animal skins. He survived on locusts and wild honey. He baptized Jesus in the Jordan River.

He was imprisoned by Herod, and his head ended up as a party favor on a plate. In each of these cases, John strikes us as an odd and attention-getting figure. John could be remembered for many things.

Yet, of all the things for which John could be remembered, today the Church calls attention to his birth.

Why?

Because here, at John's birth, we hear how God would like John to be remembered. When John was born, his father, filled with the Holy Spirit, said, "*you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways*" (v 76).

John is to be remembered as the one who was sent before Jesus to prepare people for God's gracious visitation.

Earlier, John's conception had caused quite a stir. Elizabeth, old and barren, had conceived, and his father, Zechariah, had been struck dumb for disbelief. Now, John's birth was no different than any other Jewish mother's. Friends and neighbors gathered to praise God for the birth of this child. The exception to the norm was that suddenly Zechariah's mouth was opened and, when he spoke, friends and neighbors ended up bumfuzzled, talking to one another about what it all meant. The miracle birth, the name of John, breaking the tradition of naming the son after the father, among other things.

Rather than follow those people and their gossip out into the countryside of Judea, however, Luke directs us to Zechariah. In the words of his song, we hear what this means. Zechariah's song is divided into two main sections. He offers a grand overview of God's work of salvation throughout biblical history, and then he points to one particular moment: the birth of John. By doing this, Zechariah joins John's life to a much larger story.

John is not to be remembered because of his lineage or because of these miracles or even because of his life of limitations—wandering the desert, eating locusts and wild honey. No, John is to be remembered because of his place in a much larger ministry of mercy.

John is the one God sends to prepare His people for Jesus. John's words awaken people to their sin. When John speaks, those who listen end up entering the River Jordan and come out standing on the other side.

Wet with the waters of repentance, they wait. Then, and only then, are they ready to see Jesus.

You see, when you come to Jesus as a lost and forsaken sinner, only then will you see who He truly is: your Savior. Jesus is "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (Jn 1:29). He dies on the cross to forgive your sin and rises from the dead to bring eternal life to you.

No wonder God sent John. The world is so blind to the working of God, and the working of God is so gracious and beyond our understanding.

God doesn't want this work of Jesus to be missed. John is just one more instance of God's immense love for his people, 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 us for Christ's work.

God's ministry through John, however, is hardly over.

Today, John or someone like John still stands there at the edge of wherever Jesus is present, awakening you to God's gracious visitation.

Consider the child, brought to Baptism when he is only three weeks old. His parents are messengers, preparing him for God's gracious visitation.

These parents have chosen sponsors, godparents, who will be there as messengers throughout his life, to prepare him for hearing the words of salvation. Around the font, then, we see circle upon circle of messengers sent by God to prepare one child for God's gracious visitation.

Consider the congregation this day, singing together the Agnus Dei. As we prepare for the Lord's Supper, John's words about Jesus are sung.

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is here, offering you forgiveness.

Zechariah's song becomes our own, a faithful way for us still today to offer praise. "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people*" (v 68). Amen.

Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Amen.

S.D.G.—Soli Deo Gloria

Sermon Outline

God's Gracious Visitation

Luke 1:57-80

- I. God sends John to prepare us for Christ's gracious visitation.
- II. John's words awaken us to our sin.
- III. John or someone like John still awakens us to God's gracious visitation.