

Rev. Danny Mackey
The Nativity of St. John the Baptist
June 24, 2018
Luke 1:57-80
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High.”

It’s only six months until we celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. This morning we commemorate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. According to ancient calendars, June 24 was the longest day of the year and December 25 the shortest. The daylight, which was getting longer earlier this week, is now getting shorter.

This imagery wasn’t lost on the Early Church. Just as the length of daylight after the celebration of John the Baptist begins to decrease, John himself must decrease so that Christ might increase. “He must increase, but I must decrease,” the Baptist cried (Jn 3:30).

We commemorate the birth of John the Baptist because He was born in an extraordinary way. After all, the Holy Spirit inspired St. Luke to record it for us in his Gospel narrative. In many ways, John’s very life echoes all of the Old Testament. He is like the patriarch Isaac, born of a barren womb. He is like Samson the judge, set apart and sanctified to labor in the Lord’s kingdom. He is like Prophet Jeremiah, for he received a pre-natal calling into the prophetic office. He is both a prophet and a fulfillment of prophecy—Malachi prophesied 400 years earlier: “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you” (Mal 3:1); and Isaiah prophesied 700 years before: “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord...’” (Is 40:3).

This son born to the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth in their declining years is more than a simple prophet. Rather, he embodies all of the Old Testament. He brings the Old Testament’s sure prophetic words to a point, preaching repentance and faith. He is the witness to the light. John is not the light. Truly, the mid-summer brilliance of John the Baptist is completely eclipsed by the everlasting radiance of the Sun of Righteousness to whom he points. John is the forerunner, the messenger who runs before the King to announce His advent and prepare for Him a

straight path in the wilderness. All of the Old Testament is brought to a point—the very end of John’s bony finger, which points and directs us to his Lord and Master.

On one hand, John the Baptist is a slave—a lowly slave, unworthy even to bend down and untie the strap of His Lord’s sandals. On the other hand, John is a prophet par excellence, Elijah, says Jesus, for those who have ears to hear. A prophet, Elijah, witness, forerunner, a voice—all these describe John and what he’s done.

John preaches *“to give knowledge of salvation to [God’s] people in the forgiveness of their sins.”* John was an extraordinary preacher; he was extraordinary because he preached not himself but Christ—a lesson we preachers need to constantly recall. His sermons were all about the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. John wore the vestments of Elijah’s office—a cassock of camel hair and for a cincture, a leather belt. Vestments cover the man, hiding the man, so that we pay attention not to the person but to the words he is given to speak. People knew what John was about because of his official garb; so, too, people recognize Christ’s ministers because of their ecclesiastical dress. And John the Baptist preached the Messiah and His advent; so, too, our preachers preach Jesus and His coming.

John preached the Law. He acknowledged sin and darkness—the cause of sin, who is the devil, that ancient serpent, whose brood is a generation of wicked vipers; the world that has embraced that sin and is an ally to God’s enemy and would seek to overcome the light and leave all in darkness; and the sin in our own flesh, in which we were conceived and which we commit in thought, word, and deed. Through John’s mouth, God condemned the sin and killed the sinner. Unquenchable fire and unerring judgment, unbelief cut to the root and uncircumcised hearts exposed—both the liberal Pharisee and the conservative Sadducee were caused to flee from the fire of Divine wrath. John named Herod Antipas’s sin as adultery when the king took his brother’s wife. He was not a reed, shaken by the wind of public opinion. He could never have been a slick prince of the pulpit, divorcing God’s work in ages past from this generation in an attempt to make his message relevant today. He didn’t wring his hands, whimpering and whining about his own spiritual shortcomings or whip his audience with the Law to work out their moral advancement. No, John the Baptist preached the Law to condemn and execute the

unrighteous. However, this preaching of the Law was all done in service of a greater preaching: a sermon not of condemnation but of consolation.

“Because the tender mercy of our God... to give light... to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Jesus is the tender mercy of our God, which visits and redeems His people. Jesus is the true light, which enlightens everyone, whose coming John prepared. Jesus is the way of peace, because, as John preached, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Jesus is the message, the announcement, the sermon that the Baptist preached. Preaching Jesus consumes John’s entire existence; he becomes a voice crying in the wilderness, calling Israel to repentance and faith in Jesus.

The deadly preaching of the Law and of God’s wrath crushes us and makes futile every attempt we would make to have God on our own terms. The Law bulldozes every rough trail that we would blaze as a highway to heaven so that our trust and confidence might be in Jesus, who alone is the way, the truth, and the life. The unyielding Law makes us to see ourselves and our sinful condition as enemies and prepares us to behold the Savior.

Because we know we are set upon by our enemies of the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature—because we understand our being held under the thumb of sin and death who hate us—we desperately strain to hear the message of comfort, comfort for God’s people. We are in enemy-occupied territory, bunkered down in a foxhole, as the fiery darts of the devil fly overhead. And then we hear the pure cry of salvation’s horn. Jesus is proclaimed. We hear the Gospel.

Throughout the generations, God sent prophets to declare the mercies of God, prophets like Isaiah and Malachi, prophets like John the Baptist. They pointed to the coming Messiah, Savior, Lord and King. In these last days, God speaks through His Son, Jesus. Jesus doesn’t simply point us to God’s mercy, doesn’t merely direct our attention to the covenantal promise. Rather, Jesus is mercy incarnate; Jesus is the covenant offered on the cross. We receive Jesus, God Himself, for our forgiveness.

We receive Jesus as we are daily joined to His death and resurrection in the waters of Holy Baptism. John baptized with water. Jesus baptizes us with Spirit and fire.

We receive Jesus in His Word both at home and in Church. We receive Jesus as we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest God's most Holy Word. We receive Jesus as we learn our catechism and pray the psalms. Christ and Him crucified is preached from the pulpit, through our ears and into our hearts, and we receive Jesus.

We receive Jesus at Holy Communion. We are made the Body of Christ as we consume His body and His blood in the Sacrament. Jesus joins us to Himself and to one another—even to John the Baptist and all the saints before us. Jesus makes us into people of a new and eternal covenant.

We receive Jesus in Holy Absolution, the forgiveness of our sins declared to and placed upon us through the voice of pastor and neighbor. Jesus gets in between us and others, healing us with His wounds and reconciling us in fervent love.

We receive Jesus in the Church, through our fellow Christians and the consolation of the brethren. We receive Jesus as we meditate together on His Word, being sharpened by the two-edged sword of Law and Gospel.

We receive Jesus, and in receiving Jesus we are being prepared for heaven and eternal life. John prepared Jesus' way on earth; Jesus prepared John's way to heaven and eternal life—likewise, Jesus prepares our way. It is a sure and certain promise that heaven and the resurrection awaits us, for God's Holy Word prophesies *"that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve [God] without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days."*

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.