

Pastor Joe Polzin  
Luke 1:57-80  
“God’s Gracious Visitation”  
Year B – The Nativity of St. John the Baptist  
June 24, 2018

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

Today the Church celebrates the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, the birth of John. It’s called a feast day, which is a day in the Church calendar to commemorate someone who has gone before us in the faith, and to give thanks to God for them. And when this day, June 24<sup>th</sup>, falls on a Sunday, that’s when it becomes our focus in this service.

So, why is this occasion *today*, the 24<sup>th</sup>? Well, we know that John was six months older than Jesus, because when Mary received word that she would conceive and bear a son, and that he would be the Christ, she went to visit her relative, Elizabeth, who was already six months pregnant with John. And what takes place six months from today? Christmas Eve, the night when we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord. So, going six months back from Christmas, and that brings us to today.

Now, more than just figuring out timeframes, what this shows us is that just as the birth-days of Jesus and John are so closely linked, the rest of their lives and ministries would be, as well. John and Jesus go together. You can’t have one without the other. And the reason for that, as we heard in our Gospel, is that God sent John to prepare the world, and to prepare us, for the visitation of Christ, the Son of God.

It was back in March that my dad was diagnosed with glioblastoma multiforme, the highly aggressive form of brain cancer. And it was right around then that my wife, Jennie and I found out that she was pregnant with our fifth child. Of course, with everything going on so immediately with my father, it wasn’t the time to talk about or share that news.

But later, in early April, when I was able to spend a week with my dad while he was in his rehabilitation hospital, I found a morning to bring him his usual coffee, just him and me, and sit with him for awhile before his morning routine began, and we had a few moments to talk. I wanted to be sure that he was ready, that he was prepared to receive the news of an upcoming visitation. The visitation of his newest grandchild later this year.

And I wasn’t certain how he would take it, or if there was a way for him to be prepared for such news. I wasn’t sure what he would think, thinking about the lives of his grandchildren, when so many things in *his* life were uncertain.

Sometimes it’s hard to hear good news. As crazy as that sounds, the circumstances of our lives may prevent us from a moment of holy joy. The presence of cancer may bring a touch of sadness or fear to good news. Or the painful memory of a divorce may cast such a long shadow over our life that we cannot read the letters that spell out hope. Or the struggles that come with unemployment or underemployment, or mounting debt, or concern for providing for our children may keep us from the joys of family togetherness. Or the witnessing of our child wander from their faith, or from the family, which seems to consume all our interaction with them.

It’s not uncommon that the anxieties of this life and the fallen brokenness of this sinful world crowd us so closely, and speak so loudly, that any messenger of joy can easily be drowned out in the din. We are sinful people, and this world is deeply impacted by our disease of our sin.

The only thing that can truly break through the noise and through the din is the voice of our God through His Word. The times and places when God visits us. And God specifically chooses people in our lives to send to us and prepare us for hearing the good news of His visitation. He knows we are not always ready to listen, and so He comes to prepare our hearts and minds even before He speaks. And that's why we celebrate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, because through John, God was preparing the world, and preparing us, for the gracious visitation of Jesus Christ, and the salvation that he brings.

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 platter. 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, it's here, at John's birth, that we hear how *God* would like John to be remembered. When John was born, his father, Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, said, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (v. 76). God wants John 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 Zechariah, had been struck mute for his disbelief. Now, John's birth was no different. Friends and relatives gathered to praise God for the birth of this child, because they were quite confident they understood the mercy God had shown them by granting them a child.

But suddenly, once the child was granted his God-given name, Zechariah's mouth was opened and when he spoke, friends and neighbors ended up scattering through the hill country of Judea, fearful, and talking to each other about what all of this meant. It shows that God's unfolding plan of salvation defies human reason, and doesn't go along any preconceived script that we could have come up with.

But, rather than following all those neighbors into the countryside, Luke invites us to stay and listen to Zechariah. In the words of his song, the Benedictus, we hear what John's birth truly means. Zechariah's song is divided into two main parts. In the first, he offers a grand overview of God's work of salvation throughout biblical history, including Abraham and David and the covenant with their fathers. And then in the second, he points to one particular moment, this moment, the birth of John. And by doing this, Zechariah connects John's life to a much larger story that spanned the history of the world.

John is not to be remembered because of his lineage or because of these miracles or even because of his outlandish life. No, John is to be remembered because of his place in the much larger ministry of mercy from God Himself.

John is the one God sends to prepare the world for Jesus. Crowds would flock to him at the Jordan River, and hear what he was proclaiming. And God's words through John would awaken people to their sin. Citizens, and tax collectors and even soldiers, who were convicted of their sins, would ask John, "What then shall we do?" (3:10) And John would reply: repent, prepare for the mercy of God, which is the forgiveness of your sins, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance (3:3, 8). And he would point them to the one who was coming after him.

And the people, listening to God's words through John, would end up entering the Jordan River, and come out standing on the other side, wet with the waters of repentance, waiting with

anticipation. Because then, and only then, were they ready to see the one who came next. They were ready to see Jesus.

You see, when you come to Jesus as a lost and forsaken sinner, when you realize that you have no power to pull yourself out of your own sin, and the sinfulness of this world, when you realize that you are nothing before Jesus except his enemy in your sin, only then will you be able to see who he truly is: the one who has come to save you. John himself said, Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus died on the cross, and he bore the brunt of God’s wrath for us. And Jesus rose again, so that the eternal life that *he* is now experiencing is also given to *you*.

No wonder God sent John. This world can be so blind to the working of God, and there are even days when *we* turn a blind eye to that which God is graciously doing. But, as Zechariah says, the “tender mercy of our God” is continually breaking anew of the horizon of this world, like “a sunrise” that “visit[s] us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (vv. 78-79).

Jesus has come to pull us out of the darkness of our sin, and the shadow of death that our sin casts over us, and to finally, for all eternity, cancel the enmity between us and God, and give us true, everlasting peace with Him. God sent John because He does not want this work of Jesus to be missed. And John is just one more example of God’s faithful and unbroken love for His people, of God doing everything He possibly can to call us out of the way of sin, so that we can experience His work of salvation.

Today, we give thanks to God for sending John to prepare us for the work of Christ. But not only that, we give thanks to God for continuing the ministry of John still today. There are still moments that happen all the time, when John or someone like John, still stands there at the edge of wherever Jesus is present, awakening us to God’s ongoing gracious visitation.

Consider this congregation, when it sings together the words of John the Baptist himself, right before the Lord’s Supper: “Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us...” And perhaps on that communion Sunday, in the back pew, is a woman, who struggled the whole week with the sinful exchanges that she and her daughter had. That hymn, John’s *Agnus Dei*, awakens her to the wonder of God’s gracious visitation about to take place in that meal, and prepares her to encounter the Lamb of God who takes away *her* sin, offering her peace and forgiveness.

Consider the child, brought to Baptism when he is only a few weeks old. His parents are messengers, preparing him for a sacramental moment of God’s gracious visitation in his life, and a life full of God’s presence and power. And these parents have chosen sponsors or godparents, who will also be there as messengers throughout his life, to prepare him for hearing the words of salvation. Around the font, then, gather a circle of messengers, sent by God, to prepare one child for God’s gracious visitation in his life.

Consider the woman, who visits her friend in the hospital, knowing it’s the third time this year that the same chronic disease has landed her there. She can’t say anything that will make her friend better, but she does bring with her a Bible, and reads a small Word from God to her. And her friend is reminded by this visitation from God through the Word, that though her body may be breaking down, her hope is in the light of Christ that shows her the way to eternal life and the perfect restoration of her body in the day to come.

When we hear John in Scripture, or when we hear these various people in our lives, when we hear their words, when we open our hearts and minds and for a moment comprehend the many ways that God has prepared us for His ongoing and gracious visitation, His restoration of

our lives through the forgiveness of sins that Christ, the Lamb of God offers us, then Zechariah's song becomes our own, and it becomes a faithful way to offer God praise: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us" (v. 68). In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.