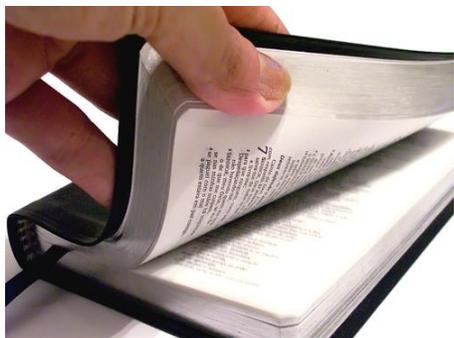


Sermon - June 24, 2018 - The Nativity of St. John the Baptist,

God's Gracious Visitation

Luke 1:57–80



Dear Friends in Christ!

As I always say, I love baptism, I love it for a very good reason, it does give a human soul a new life. And today we shall appreciate and be glad in the baptism of little Danielle Eileen.

Now as we participate of this joyous occasion, I think we can recall the moment the parent's knew they were expecting a baby, and graciously announced it to the family, friends and even friends here at church. It was something special, wasn't it!

I'm also reminded of another story, Susan's story, a girl that was pregnant, came to the hospital to give grandpa who was dying of cancer, the news. Grandma was there and seen that Susan and her husband had brought some balloons and the balloons said: "It's a girl." They had brought also a gift bag containing a sweatshirt with these words, "World's Greatest Grandpa." It was all out there in the hall, waiting to come in.

So, grandma, knowing what was going to happen, she needed to go into the room and make sure grandpa 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, of course. Nothing would change that. But today, he would hear that Susan was pregnant. That the baby was a girl. 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 girl.

And so, grandma went into the room and prepared him for a gracious visitation.

Sometimes, it is hard to hear good news, isn't it? As crazy as that may sound, the circumstances of our lives sometimes prevent us from a moment of holy joy. Take the presence of cancer for example that sometimes closed the door to any other visitors. Or, the painful memory of divorce that casts such a shadow over life that we cannot read the letters that spell out hope. Unemployment or under-employment for that matter compounded by 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 racket.

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.

June 24th, is known as John' the Baptist day. So this morning we remember his birth. And we do so by giving God thanks that He sent John to prepare us for Christ's gracious visitation; that he sends messengers to prepare us for salvation.

We here of John the Baptist from the Gospel of Luke chapter 1, which will be the bases for our meditation this morning. The Gospel of Luke 1:57–80:

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” ⁶¹ They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” ⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” ⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

I think that many of us are familiar with John the Baptist, or at least we have heard something about him. We know that he lived 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 person. These are the things we probably remember him for.

Yet, of all the things for which John could be remembered, today we are called to pay 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, the news of 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. Friends and neighbors gathered to praise God for the birth of this child, but suddenly Zechariah’s mouth was opened and, when he spoke, friends and neighbors ended up scattered, talking to one another about what it all meant.

Rather than following those people out and see what they do with the news, Luke asks us to stay and listen to Zechariah. Zechariah sings a song, and in the words of his song, we hear what this means. The song is divided into two main sections. In the first part he sings about God's work of salvation throughout biblical history, and then in the second part he points to his son John, and what he was born to do and accomplish in his life. And that's what we need to remember him for, his place in a much larger ministry, a ministry of mercy. Anything else, like his lineage, or the miracle of his birth, or even his wandering in the desert, eating locusts and wild honey, are not important really, but what he came to do.

John was sent by God to prepare his people for Jesus. His words would awaken people to their sin. That when John would speak, those who would listen will end up in the waters of the Jordan River, being baptized by him, because they repented of their sins, once they were baptized by John in the baptism of repentance, then they were ready to see Jesus, they were ready to meet Jesus, and were ready to recognize Jesus, God's Christ, the Saviour.

As you see, when you come to Jesus as a lost and forsaken sinner, only when we realize our condition, the reality of our human frailty immersed in sin, only then will you see who he truly is: your Savior. Only then, we will treasure the saying that Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). That he dies on the cross to forgive your sin and rises from the dead to bring eternal life to you.

That's why John was sent, to prepare the way. On its own the world is so blind to the work of God. It's blind to understand that God is 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, then, we give thanks to God for sending John to prepare hearts for Christ's work. But that was John, back then...

Yet God's ministry through John is hardly over. John's words still speaks to us even today. And more, there are also others in the figure of John who God sends and used to prepare us, to awaken us to God's gracious visitation.

Consider Danielle Eileen today for example, as she is brought to the waters of baptism. Her parents, Leo and Mel, you are the messengers! Did you know that? O, you knew that baptism is really, really important, but did you know that in bringing here to baptism today, you were preparing her for God's gracious visitation? Now you know. And parents who bring their children to the waters of baptism and have chosen sponsors or godparents, know that those sponsor or godparents are also, and will be messengers for the child whose baptism they witness, through his or her life, preparing the child 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.

But there is more, consider the congregation what we do today, here in this congregation, as we sing hymns and songs that display God's redemptive work through Jesus, we become like John. When we sing, with passion, the hymns and songs that comfort that assures us of forgiveness that tells of God's healing power, somebody will be uplifted, somebody will be comforted, or somebody might be even annoyed, that happens too, but in singing we are like John. And John's message did annoy many for sure. And it happens because of our sins. We are annoyed by God's words when we

are called to repentance, but when that annoyance brakes us, know this, that there is healing in the words of John, for he points us to Jesus Christ the healer, the forgiver, the lover! He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and he is here, offering forgiveness, displaying before our eyes the wonder of God's gracious visitation.

Consider the congregational members who pray for the confirmands, or those who serve in the congregation's life, consider those who speak words of kindness and Christian encouragement to those who are serving, they too are like John they are messengers that bring about God's gracious visitation.

All of these examples and many more really should inspire us to sings words of praise and thanksgiving because we now know God's gracious visitation.

In particular, we will thank God for demonstrating how much he desires to save humanity by not only sending Jesus into the world but also by sending John the Baptist to prepare the way for him. Not only has God graciously chosen to visit his people, but God has also chosen to send a messenger ahead of him so that all people are aware of this gracious visitation.

When we see these people, when we hear their words, when we open our minds and for a moment comprehend the many ways that God has prepared us for his gracious visitation, 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.