

Nativity of John the Baptist: "Child of Promise/Speaking Truth to Power"  
June 23-24, 2018  
Luke 1:57-80  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

We celebrate a birth this weekend, but it's not accompanied by a red rose in the chancel. It's a birth that happened over 2,000 years ago. The bouncing baby boy was circumcised, not christened, and he was named John, meaning "God is gracious," "God is good beyond all our telling and all our deserving."

This child's birth **was** gracious. His parents had waited and prayed for so long that they had **stopped** waiting and maybe even **stopped** praying about it, resigning themselves to being a childless household. Who knows the story of how they learned they'd be needing to make an appointment with the obstetrician??

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- We find this wonderful story only in St. Luke's Gospel. Luke's symbol is an ox, because the first scene in his Gospel is of Zechariah, a priest, serving in the temple, offering a sacrifice of incense.
- Imagine Zechariah's surprise when he realizes he's not the only one there! An angel is standing to one side of the altar. Zechariah almost faints with fear, but the angel (who turns out to be Gabriel) tells him not to be afraid:
  - *"... Zechariah... your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord..."* (Luke 1:13-15a)

Zechariah voices the doubt most of us would have felt:

*"How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years."* (Luke 1:18)

Gabriel didn't take kindly to the pushback:

*"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. [Remember: the word *angel* means messenger.] But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be*

*fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” (Luke 1:19-20)*

Elizabeth became pregnant, as promised. I guess the household was pretty quiet for the next 9 months since Zechariah had been struck dumb. Maybe just as well. Elizabeth had a lot to turn over in her heart. St. Luke tells us *“for [the first] five months she remained in seclusion”* (Luke 1:24). We can only guess why, since we’re not told. What do you think?

I wonder if Elizabeth pondered the future of the baby growing in her womb, as any expectant mother does. Did she know what the angel Gabriel had told Zechariah?

*“...many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:14b-17)*

So why is John’s birth remembered at this time of year?? With the arrival of summer, the hours of daylight have begun to decrease. John famously said of Jesus, whom He called the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world: “He must increase but I must decrease.” (John 3:30)

Our first lesson this weekend is from Malachi and talks about the messenger of the covenant who will prepare the Lord’s way, the one who will be:

*“like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.” (Malachi 3:2b-3)*

The refiner’s fire and fullers’ soap are not gentle cleansing agents. Ouch!! The messenger will say things the people do not want to hear.... You know that phrase, “Don’t kill the messenger!” That’s said because sometimes people **have** killed the messenger.

What became of Elizabeth and Zechariah’s baby boy John?

- Odd duck.... Diet of bugs and wardrobe of camel's hair. Strange.
- Out in the wilderness – in seclusion, like his mother, but for more than 5 months....
- Preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” And he **named** those sins, never a popular thing!
- **Spoke the truth to power....**
  - Herod's marriage to the wife of his brother Philip.... John ended up beheaded.
- Any other courageous folks come to mind who have spoken truth to power?
  - Martin Luther before Emperor Charles V at Diet of Worms:  
“I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.”
  - Thomas More and Henry VIII
  - Dietrich Bonhoeffer and members of the Confessing Church
  - MLK, Jr. : We're discussing *Strength to Love*, a compilation of his sermons. In the one about the Good Samaritan, he preached this:
    - “No longer can we afford the luxury of passing by on the other side. Such folly was once called moral failure; today it will lead to universal suicide. We cannot long survive spiritually separated in a world that is geographically together... I must not ignore the wounded man on life's Jericho Road, because he is a part of me and I am a part of me. His agony diminishes me, and his salvation enlarges me.<sup>1</sup>
  - Protestors today.... Re. separation of children from their families.

As Christians we are also called to go before the Lord to prepare His way – working for holy righteousness, for justice, that we may have peace. Before he says anything about John's impending birth, St. Luke says of Zechariah and Elizabeth:

*Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. (Luke 1:6)*

Righteousness isn't just avoiding doing what's wrong. It's actually doing what is right. It's loving God above all else, and it's also loving our neighbors as ourselves. It's caring for the

last, the lost, the least, the widow and the orphan, the displaced and the wartorn, the victims of violence and the victims of injustice. It's giving our highest allegiance to God. It's speaking truth to power when necessary, despite the risks of others' displeasure, of unpleasant consequences. It's using our voice to advocate for the voiceless. Pick your issue. It includes not separating children from their families. It includes reuniting children with their families. It includes lobbying for policies that reflect our Judeo-Christian value of honoring the aliens in our midst, for our forebears were sojourners in Egypt, and because we are strongly reminded by the author of the letter to the Hebrews (ch. 13):

*<sup>2</sup> Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. <sup>3</sup> Remember those who are in prison [or in detention] , as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.<sup>[a]</sup>*

God's promise voiced by Zechariah has already been partially fulfilled but **waits for** complete fulfillment:

*<sup>78</sup> By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon<sup>[a]</sup> us,  
<sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide [all] our feet into the way of peace."<sup>(</sup> Luke 1:78-79)*

Amen

<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), p. 30.

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