

Sermon for the Nativity of St. John the Baptist

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76).

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

In the Words of Jesus Himself,

John the Baptist was the greatest man ever to be born among women (Luke 7:28).

Of course, his birthday is celebrated today only in the church.

Sorry - no long weekend off...

There is no Federal holiday in his name -

no bridges, elementary schools, or roads named after him...

He doesn't even appear in my book of the 100 Most Influential People in the history of the world.

And yet, he is great beyond compare, because he is the prophet of the Most High

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the Last of the Old Testament prophets, and the First of the New -

a man heralded by the angel Gabriel, sanctified by the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb,

and given for you and me as the one who steadfastly, unflinchingly, and unceasingly points us to Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

And no, we are not here to worship John today, because John is NOT the Messiah.

He is NOT the One who would bare his heel as the sign that he was willing to pay the price for our redemption.

That job was reserved for One mightier than John -

One whose sandals John was not even worthy to untie (Luke 3:16).

No, John was the Last of the Old prophets and the First of the New whose job it was to point to the Christ and to proclaim salvation in His Name alone.

He was chosen to “go before the Lord to prepare His ways,

to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins (Luke 1:76-77).”

And he didn't waste any time!

Beginning with his dramatic leap in his mother's womb (Luke 1:41), John never once failed to direct our attention to Jesus. Even before he had seen the light of day, he was proclaiming the Light of Life who had come "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79).

John came to us in the wilderness - the dark wasteland of our sin - the place of our suffering and death to proclaim that our warfare is over - that our sins are forgiven, and that we have indeed received an abundance of grace from the hand of God (Isa 40:1-2).

He came to prepare the way for the Lord and to pour out God's comfort for us in our time of greatest need.

Of course, he did it in a way that the world has never really understood or gotten on board with - for He did it by showing us our sin - by showing us what it is we need to be rescued from - and by calling us to repentance.

In sermons the likes of which I would NEVER get away with, John gets in your face and tells you like it is:

"Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2ff) -
The Day of God's wrath is coming!

He called people to confess their sins.

He offered a baptism of repentance.

And when the good, focused, determined "church people" finally started showing up, he really got down to business:

"You brood of vipers!"

You spawn of the devil who think you are following in God's ways, while all the while you are giving yourselves over to the prince of this world -

You cunning snakes in the grass who lie low, hide your vile natures, and bring pain and death to everything you touch by your malice and self-serving ways.

Don't even say to yourselves, "We're good people. We go to church. We have Abraham as our father... we have Luther as our father..."

Because you KNOW better -

you KNOW what you are, and you KNOW what you deserve.

Pretty harsh, right?

But that's John - no bent reed shifting his position with every breeze of public opinion or political correctness -

No smooth-talking softy reaching out to delicate ears with cautious words to accommodate our ceaseless desire to feel good about ourselves.

No, this is full-blast, full-frontal Law telling us like it is, damning us for who we really are,

driving us to our knees and hurting us - killing us in fact...

Because only in that way is the LORD'S way truly prepared.

In the words of Johann Gerhard, "Christ cannot enter the heart with His grace unless the way is prepared by true repentance.

If this Prince of Heaven is to take possession of us, the filth of sin must first be removed.

[And] if we are to have the saving knowledge of His blessedness, we must first know ourselves" (Quoted in Lindemann, "The Sermon and the Propers).

And so, St. John holds up the mirror -

He speaks the truth, and he brings us to our knees in repentance.

But thanks be to God, he does not leave us there.

For death under the Law is not the desired goal.

Nor does John show us our sin so that we might climb our own way out of the pit.

He shows us our sin that we might fall into the arms of our Savior who has come to rescue us out of the pit.

For GOD "has visited and redeemed His people," as Zechariah sings -

GOD has raised up a horn of salvation for us -

GOD has remembered His Holy Covenant...

that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives (Luke 1:68-75)."

St. John comes to us with the Law so that we might be raised up by Him who comes to us in His body and blood.

As the last of the Old and the first of the New,

John shows us the way of God's comfort in Christ crucified and risen:

"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world..."

Behold, the beloved Son of God who was anointed by John to the throne of the cross.

Behold the One who bared His heel to the serpent's strike and crushed the

serpent's head to set you free.

Your accuser has been destroyed.

Your death has been taken away.

Your sins are paid for.

And in the rising of the Son to new life in the resurrection, you too shall be raised up through the water of Holy Baptism.

At the font, Jesus has washed you clean and united you to Himself.

At the rail, the Blood of the Lamb passes over your lips and into your hearts (Petersen),

filling you with His Holiness, His righteousness, His forgiveness for YOUR life and salvation.

And as you take your place in Christ's presence confessing your sin and receiving this tender mercy of our God,

you, too, may rejoice and leap for joy like the one whose birth we remember and celebrate today -

in the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Preached by Rev. James R. Holowach

Sermon Text: Luke 1:57-80