

Luke 1:57–80
Nativity of St. John the Baptist
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
June 24, 2023

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today we celebrate the nativity of St. John the Baptist, or John the Baptist's birthday. We celebrate Jesus's birthday on December 24th/25th, and John the Baptist was six months older than his cousin, Jesus. When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear the Son of God, he also said: "your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren" (Luke 1:36). That's why we celebrate the nativity of John the Baptist on June 24th, six months before the Nativity of our Lord, also called Christmas. The lives of John the Baptist and Jesus are intertwined from the beginning.

John's dad, Zechariah, was a priest, a Levite. And John's mother, Elizabeth, was also of the tribe of Levi. Serving the Lord was in their blood. John was a "pk," a pastor's kid. Elizabeth was old and barren, as were so many matriarchs of Israel. Just think of Sarah and Abraham (Gen 17:17), Rebekah and Isaac (Gen 25:21), and Rachel and Jacob (Gen 29:31). The wives of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were all barren. They couldn't have children, and then God miraculously and mercifully opened their wombs, that the Messiah, the promised seed of Abraham, might come through their line. The living God delights in life and fruitfulness: "He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD!" (Ps 113:9). Barren Elizabeth in her old age fits into that same pattern, a mother of Israel whom the LORD miraculously grants a son.

John's dad, Zechariah, was ministering in the Temple at the hour of incense when the Angel Gabriel appeared to announce the birth of John the Baptist. The angel Gabriel said John would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, that "he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before Him the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:15–18). John would be the last Old Testament prophet, not only pointing ahead to the coming Messiah, but pointing directly at Him: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." John's role was to prepare the people for the coming of God in the flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ. Zechariah didn't believe what he was being told, so he was inflicted with muteness until John's birth. The priest who should've been proclaiming this good news of the coming of a great prophet instead was forced to ponder all these things in his heart.

Finally, John the Baptist was born and on the eighth day, like all good Jewish boys, he was circumcised, becoming part of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. They would have named him after his dad, Zechariah, but Elizabeth, seemingly out of nowhere, said: "No, he shall be called John." Zechariah confirmed the choice of the name "John" because of what the angel Gabriel had told him, and "immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. The name "John" means "God is gracious," and that's exactly what all of John's preaching would be about. John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). God is gracious by not utterly blotting out sinful flesh. God is gracious in His calling of sinners to repentance and by washing away our sins in the waters of Holy Baptism. John's calling to repentance was a call to flee from sin and return to the God who is gracious.

Everyone in the region who heard about this miraculous birth of John the Baptist treasured these things in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him. John’s dad, Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, responds with a hymn of praise inspired by the Holy Spirit. We call this hymn the “Benedictus,” from the first word in Latin, “Blessed.” “Benedictus,” like the word “benediction,” means blessed; it means to speak a good word over somebody. Zechariah blesses the Lord, he praises God for his miraculous deeds by extolling those deeds before all the people: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people.”

You’ll notice that the song of Zechariah, the Benedictus, has two parts, two run-on sentences. The first part talks about Jesus and the second part talks about John the Baptist. The Lord “has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.” Remember, John is from the priestly tribe of Levi. Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, a descendant of David according to the flesh. The promises made to the line of David are fulfilled not in John the Baptist, but in John’s relative, Jesus Christ.

The Lord God of Israel visited and redeemed His people throughout the Old Testament, by leading them from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the promised land, by ending their captivity in Babylon and preserving them, as promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And ultimately, the Lord God has visited and redeemed His people in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, the LORD united Himself to our flesh and blood, to offer His flesh and spill His blood for our redemption, to buy us back from sin, death, and the power of the Devil. Our Lord’s visitation in Jesus Christ was greater than his visitations in the Old Testament. God did not visit us only to leave again and let us fall into captivity again. In Jesus Christ, God visits us and stays with us, giving us a redemption that is limitless. Captivity has been led away captive and death itself has

died. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, death and captivity are swallowed up in victory, never to rule over us again. And our LORD Jesus Christ remains with us in His Word and in His Sacraments, with His flesh and blood in the Lord's Supper. He remains with us always until He returns on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord delivered us from the hand of our enemies, that we might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. Jesus Christ is your holiness, for in Him you are holy. Jesus Christ is your righteousness, for in Him you are righteous. Baptized into Jesus Christ, you become holy and righteous in the sight of God because the holiness and righteousness of Christ are accounted on your behalf. When God looks at you, He sees the holiness and righteousness of Christ, which cover all your sins. In Christ Jesus, you are holy and righteous. You don't need to be afraid of God because of the sins you've committed, and you don't need to be afraid of making mistakes. You are free to serve the LORD without fear all the days of your life. God graciously saved you in Jesus Christ so that in Jesus Christ you might serve Him. So don't let fear stop you from doing anything to advance the Kingdom of God. In Jesus Christ, you have absolutely nothing to be afraid of.

In the second part of the Benedictus, Zechariah then addresses his son, 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." As all the prophets of the Old Testament, John the Baptist points to Jesus. He prepares the way of the LORD by calling sinners to repentance for the forgiveness of their sins, a forgiveness that comes in Jesus Christ alone. John knows the salvation of God because he knows Jesus Christ, and his purpose is to point to Jesus as the one who forgives sins: the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And all this "because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high. John the Baptist is the light before the sunrise,

the sign that day is about to break. And Jesus Christ Himself is that Sun of righteousness, who arises with healing in His wings (Mal 4:2). Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome (John 8:12; 1:5). He has come from on High to visit us and to remain with us to the end of the age, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Jesus shows us the way to the Father because He is the way to the Father, and John the Baptist shows us the way to Jesus.

“And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.” John baptized the people with water for repentance and preached: “He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” John then baptized Jesus to reveal Him to Israel. “He must increase, I must decrease.” We celebrate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist not for the sake of John the Baptist, but for the one John reveals: our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.