

Luke 1:57–80
Nativity of St. John the Baptist
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
June 24, 2024

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. This birthday party has been celebrated for quite some time in the church. In the 5th century AD, St. Augustine said: "This day of the nativity [of John the Baptist] is handed down to us. We have received it by tradition from our forefathers, and we transmit it to our descendants to be celebrated with like devotion." This festival most likely has its origins in the North African church and gradually spread to the West. By the 5th century AD, it was considered one of the most important days of the church year. What's interesting about John the Baptist is that besides him and Jesus, and sometimes Mary, no other birthdays are celebrated liturgically in the church. All the other saints are celebrated on their heavenly birthdays, on their day of death or martyrdom. But so much is tied to the birth, life, and death of John the Baptist that we also commemorate his birthday.

We celebrate Jesus's birthday on December 24th, 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, commonly known as Christmas. The lives of John the Baptist and Jesus are intertwined from the beginning.

Interestingly, Christmas is celebrated near the winter solstice, when we have the least amount of daylight in the northern hemisphere. On the other side of the calendar, exactly six months later, we're near the summer solstice, when we have the most amount of daylight in the northern hemisphere. Jesus is the light who comes into the deepest darkness of this world. John the Baptist is a great light, but only an indication of the greater light to follow in Jesus Christ, the sun of righteousness.

Nature can serve as a pattern for how we think of God's Word. Jesus tells us that the greatest of those born of women is John. This is the most daylight you will see. The pagans used to celebrate the summer solstice with bonfires, a tradition then taken up into festivities surrounding the birthday of John the Baptist. Some of you experienced this that last night. John is the greatest. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of Heaven is greater than he (Matt 11:11). Jesus is the least in the kingdom of Heaven. He appears as the most insignificant in his humble life and death. Darkness reigned when He died on the cross, and yet He is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. The Sun of righteousness rises again with healing in His wings.

Though not one of the readings for today, John the Baptist also shows up in the last chapter of the Old Testament, Malachi 4. Before a 400 year period of silence, the Old Testament ends looking ahead to the End Times, to the day of Judgment. "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." The Last Day is already burning like an oven, like a bonfire on the Eve of St. John the Baptist. The wood has been chopped, the fire has been ignited. The coals are burning and getting hotter and hotter as more fuel is added. The grill is being prepared, and soon the meat will be

roasted and the bread baked. It's hard to not look at a campfire without thinking, if even for a moment, about the fires of Hell. We talked about it last night! Just a foot away the heat is intense. You can't even imagine your entire body suffering that kind of pain and that it never stops. Like a burn, time only seems to make the pain worse. That's the way it is with Hell. That's the way it is with separation from God. The day is coming, burning like an oven, and the LORD Jesus Christ will soon return to separate the wheat from the chaff. The chaff, that is, the arrogant and all evildoers, will burn eternally in the fires of Hell.

“But,” God says, “for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.” Like so many things, the sun is a paradoxical image. Fly too close to the sun, like Icharus, and you burn up. If the earth were much closer to the sun, we'd go up in flames. And yet, without the heat and the light from the sun, we couldn't survive on this earth. Plants need the sun; the vitamin D you get from the sun is necessary for your life. The sun can burn you, and the sun can rejuvenate you. The sun can blind you and the sun can give you light to see. In many ways, the sun is like God himself. Approach Him in the wrong way, in arrogance and unbelief, and you burn up. Approach him in humility in the ways He comes to you, in the Word and in the Sacraments, in prayer, in the consolation of fellow Christians, and He brings life to you in a way that nothing else could. For those who fear the name of God, for those who repent and turn to their maker in Jesus Christ, God brings the healing rays of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

“You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.” Like a caged animal that's now free, yet still safe and secure in the pasture of the Good Shepherd, so is the joy of the Christian on the last day. Like a child who has been cooped up inside because of the rain and rejoices when he can run outside again, so will you celebrate when the LORD returns. “You shall tread down the

wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet” on the day the Lord acts. They wicked and evildoers, the unrepentant, will burn in the fire of God’s wrath, but you will rejoice in your Lord’s presence. A new city shall arise from the ashes, life will come out of death, and you will know even as now you are fully known (1 Cor 13:12).

God tells His people as they are about to enter 400 years of silence to keep paying careful attention to God’s Word. “Remember the Law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded Him at Horeb in Israel.” As we await the Day of the LORD, we pay attention to God’s Word as to a lamp shining in a dark place. His Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. It’s our only direction in life and in death, the only roadmap that won’t mislead us, the only compass to get a bearing on where we are, where we’ve been, and where we’re going. God tells His people to pay attention to His Word and that’s a message He still has for us today. When it seems like God is quiet, or like He doesn’t have anything in this world under control, then pay more careful attention. This world and its desires are passing away, but the Word of the LORD and those who order their lives according to it abide forever.

God says: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” That’s the last verse of the Old Testament. God promises to send Elijah the prophet. The disciples asked Jesus why the scribes say that first Elijah must come before Jesus rises from the dead. Jesus answered: “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that He was speaking to them of John the Baptist (Matt 17:10–13). John the Baptist came prior to Jesus, six months prior,

to be precise, in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). He came, like the prophet Elijah, to call the people to repentance and faith. He would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, inspiring a care for future generations and their eternal salvation that the pagans just don't have. He came to call the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to call sinners to repentance, in short, to make ready for the LORD a people prepared (Luke 1:17).

And the people certainly were prepared. They confessed their sins and were baptized with the Baptism of John, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And that forgiveness of sins comes in the person of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Once Jesus came onto the stage, John could recede into the background. As John himself said of Jesus: "He must increase, I must decrease." The sun of righteousness had risen with healing in His wings. John prepared the people for the coming of the LORD, and the church continues preparing you for the coming of the LORD. Like John the Baptist, we point the world to the Lamb of God, our LORD Jesus Christ, who takes away all sin. We preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins in Holy Baptism. We give our life proclaiming not ourselves, but our LORD Jesus Christ. We must decrease; He must increase, that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).
Happy birthday, John the Baptist! 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.