

**Goal: That we hear John's message to repent and prepare for Christ's coming.**

Today, we celebrate the nativity of John the Baptist, which seems odd, doesn't it? I mean, sure, we have certain days in the church year, set aside to honor saints, but they all focus on they remained faithful to the point of death. But only John and Jesus have their birthdays celebrated. So, there must be something important about today, because the Christian church has celebrated it since the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, over 1700 years.

First, notice that God often proclaims His message through the names He gives. The name Jesus means, "Yahweh saves?" Zechariah means, "Yahweh remembers," and John means "Yahweh is gracious." So, what will this child of Zechariah and Elizabeth be? He will be the one who goes before the Lord to prepare His way, and the Lord is coming because He remembers His promises and He comes to be gracious.

Look back at the Gospel this morning, which really seems more like a reading we would hear in December and not in June. The angel appeared to Zechariah in the temple and told him that his barren wife Elizabeth would have a son. But Zechariah didn't believe the angel, so he was struck mute. Sure enough, the barren and aged Elizabeth conceived and gave birth to a son. Then family and friends gathered on the 8<sup>th</sup> day for his circumcision and naming. Everyone expected he would be named Zechariah, but his mom insisted that his name would be John. (***"And on the 8<sup>th</sup> day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him."***) (Luke 1: 59 – 66) When they looked for Zechariah to correct her, he wrote the same name on a tablet. Then, suddenly, Zechariah could speak again. And immediately, he begins to bless God. You've got to admit, it's not what anyone expected. So, they all started asking, ***"What then will this child be?"***

The next we see John, he's wearing a coat of camel's hair, eating locusts and honey. Many thought, *"This is the prophet of the Most High? This uncivilized, outcast man is the one who the Lord says is the greatest? This intolerant fanatic who preaches a strong message of repentance and is unwilling to bend is the greatest in the kingdom of God?"* Well, yeah, he is, in the eyes of God.

In the eyes of the world, though, John the Baptist is anything but great. He's just another intolerant religious nut who's so focused on his message that he's lost touch with reality. In the eyes of the world, he needs help. Maybe he needs a talk with Dr. Phil or Judge Judy. Someone needs to tell him that he's not going to get very far with his approach. If he really does have an important message, there are better ways to do it.

Some would suggest that he needs a complete makeover, getting rid of that rugged appearance and crazy diet for a more modern look. Maybe he needs to go meet

people where they are, instead of making them come to him, out in the middle of nowhere. I think many would tell him to change his approach, because his *“bull in a china shop”* style just doesn't work. He needs to realize that people won't care about how much he knows until they know how much he cares. And most importantly, many today would tell him to stop telling people how sinful they are. I mean, who really wants to hear that? Who in the world would listen to that? In the eyes of the world, John is anything but great and his message that there is only one way to heaven through faith in this Messiah is too intolerant and too out of place in this world.

People want to hear that the path to heaven that they have chosen, whatever that may be, is just as valid as the next guy's. People want to be motivated to do what they can for their salvation. Instead of telling people what they can't do, John needs to focus on what they can do. Instead of telling them how bad they are and how they must rely on this coming Messiah, he needs to tell them to release the good inside. He needs to stop preaching Law and Gospel and start delivering motivational messages. If John would be willing to make these changes, there's no limit to the success he could have.

But, John isn't willing to bend and he's not interested in the ways of the world. He's has no use for tolerance and he could care less about popularity or political correctness. He's too focused on the Coming Messiah and he's obsessed with his mission to prepare the way for the Lord. He acts as though this is not only the most important thing in all the world, but that it's the only thing that matters. And he's right. That's what makes him the prophet of the Most High.

From the day of his conception to the day that he was beheaded, John was set apart by God for the single purpose of preparing the way for the Lord. No other man born of a woman throughout history was as dedicated to his mission as John. ***“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (Luke 7: 28)*** He was so consumed with his mission, so passionate to proclaim his message that nothing else mattered; not manners, not respect for human authority. He only cared about his message, and his message was the same to all, from peasants to religious and political leaders, ***“John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,)*** ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3: 1)*** Turn from your worldly ways of thinking and embrace God's perspective. Confess your sins and put your faith in the Lamb of God who takes your sin away.

Today, John's message still remains the same. He continues to be the voice of one crying in the wilderness of this sinful world: ***“Make straight the way for the Lord.”*** You

and I need to continue to hear his voice. You and I need to listen to John as he reminds us of our sinfulness and points us to the Lamb of God who takes away our sins. You need to hear John because, if you don't hear him, you won't be prepared for your Savior.

So, hear John's message today, *"Repent! You who have sought the easy road way too often. You who have cared more about your own desires than about Christ and His Church. Repent, for you are a sinful people who are more worried about your status in society than the Lord's judgment. Repent, for you've been guilty of thinking you can right your own wrongs and earn favor with God. Repent, for you claim to be a Christian, but you fail to live as though you are. Repent, because you have no problem pointing your finger others, but fail to point it at yourselves. Repent, for you are all sinners who deserve God's eternal wrath!"*

It's not easy listening to John's voice, is it? He wouldn't make it as a pastor in our modern, pluralistic environment. He's too strict, too demanding, too concerned about doctrine and the purity of the Word. He lacks the ability to live and let live; to allow people to define God on their terms. He doesn't want to coddle you or to appeal to your emotions. He's a radical extremist who allows no room for false teaching.

But, it's through John's voice, that the Most High, seeks to kill you and to remove any false hopes you have in yourselves or in this dying world, so that you realize your need to turn to Him for help. It's only after you've been completely convinced of your sin and your desperate need for a Savior that you can truly understand the reason the Son of God came into this world. God kills you so that He can make you alive in Christ. John points and says of Jesus, ***"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*** (***"The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus."***) (***John 1: 35 – 37***)

John breaks you down so that he can point you to the Savior. Jesus is the one whose sandal straps we are all unworthy to untie. He is pure, clean, and righteous. He doesn't give in to the world, and He accomplishes that which He was sent to do, fulfilling His Father's will. He is the God Who sheds His blood, Who suffered and died on a tree for your sins, to make you safe and whole and free. He died, but He lives. And, because He rose from the grave and lives eternally, He is with you always. He is here now, to give you His Body and Blood for your forgiveness. And, He will remain with you to true everlasting life. That's what matters. Not who I am, not who you are, but who He is, and who He calls you to be in Him.

This morning, listen once again to the voice of John the Baptizer, prophet of the Most High, the greatest born of women, for he prepares you for your Savior by giving you the knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of your sins. That salvation comes through repentance and faith. We celebrate that today, and every day, in Christ Jesus. Am