

The Nativity of St. John the Baptist, A ✕ D 2009

Luke 1:57-80

A Sermon by Dr. Luther

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Luke, the Evangelist, records that the angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias in the temple beside the altar of incense. He announced to him that his wife Elisabeth would bear a son, that he was to call his name John, that he would be a source of joy and gladness, and that many would rejoice at his birth. He also records the miraculous circumstances surrounding John's birth, namely, that he was conceived of aged parents, of a mother who had been barren, and that he was filled with the Holy Spirit while still in the womb, that John's birth, in fact, was particularly notable, much different than that of other human beings.

2 It was not for John's sake that all this was written, but for the sake of his office, in that he, as his father Zacharias stated in his Benedictus, would be teaching the way to obtain forgiveness of sins and entrance into heaven, not by one's own works and merit, as the Pharisees had hitherto taught, but by grace alone, through the tender mercy of God, who gave his beloved Son for the sin of the whole world.

3 Now, in spite of the fact that all the papists used to sing this Benedictus of Zacharias in their churches every day, and even now continue to do so in their morning matins, they have never understood it, nor do they understand it now. They have always kept this festival and observe it still, but only for the sake of St. John himself and his ascetic life. But we do not observe this day for St. John's sake, but for God's sake. We praise and glorify him because he brought the beloved John into the world and made him the preacher he was, one whose word of proclamation was that the world cannot be saved in any other way than by the forgiveness of sins.

4 This was the nature of John's preaching, as Zacharias foretold, and his sermons themselves testify. He rebuked and scolded the Pharisees and Jews for teaching that men

must obtain salvation by personal piety and holiness. He called them a generation of vipers, and admonished them to exhibit the fruits indicative of genuine repentance. In other words, as if by clap of thunder, he hurled everything into one lump, calling all to repent, those whose repentance was not genuine and who supposed they had already repented, and the counterfeit "holy men" who fancied themselves as not in need of repentance. And his preaching focused solely on the Lamb, who would bear the sins of the world, that is, of all mankind born into the world.

5 So we ought to thank our dear Lord God on this day of remembrance, for giving us the man John the Baptist, who was the first to preach the gospel for us, and to direct us to the Lamb of God. To be sure, the prophets preached Christ and pointed to him, but from afar, as to one who was to come in a future time. But John not only preached Christ by saying that no one can be saved except through the forgiveness of sins and the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world, but also pointed with his own finger to the Lamb declaring, Behold the Lamb of God.

6 Formerly, before John came pointing with his finger, no Jew dreamed that this Lamb would bear the sin of the world, and that this Jesus, the son of Mary, would be the Lamb of God. They could not have come to the conclusion by themselves, that he would be the one, although he had already come into their midst, and was standing, walking, and living in their midst. But when John came, he declared, This is he, the one who shall do it. Zacharias says the very same thing in his Benedictus: John would be a prophet of the Most High, who would walk before the Lord to prepare his way, and teach the people the way of salvation, that is, the forgiveness of their sins; in other words, God in heaven would entrust to this preacher the task of pointing out the Lamb of God, through whom the people would obtain pardon for their sins and be saved.

7 So let us observe this day of John the Baptist with joy, not because we adore John himself, a thing which he would not expect of us or even want, but rather because we acknowledge his office and are glad that he pointed to the Lamb of God, so that we might learn to follow him to whom he pointed. For John took no honor upon himself, but gave it to him who

deserved it. “Whose shoe latchet,” he said, “I am not worthy to unloose” (John 1:27); and “I am not the Christ, but I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice” (John 3:29-29). The pope has given honor and worship to John, and ignored the Lamb of God. He has done the same with respect to the other saints. He has honored and worshiped the virgin mother of God, and ignored the infant Jesus in her lap. John would not tolerate that; instead, he turned all away from himself and pointed to the Lamb alone. “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire” (Matt. 3:11). In other words, I am only a tool of God’s; I preach and baptize in order to bring you to the Lamb of God. I am not the Lamb; but he is the Lamb, who bears the sin of the world. Therefore, do not look to me, but to the Lamb.

8 We must understand this before we rightly perceive and know the Lamb. Then, if we know the love and grace which God has shown in him, giving us the Lamb, through whom we have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, it will follow that we will also demonstrate this love to our neighbor, doing good to him, being gracious to him, and forgiving his sins if we suffer injury or hurt at his hands, just as God has forgiven our sins. If we do this, we shall be true Christians and pleasing to God. Let these few words about the beloved John, whose birth and preaching we rejoice in, suffice for the present and let us thank God for them.

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Pastor Jeff Hemmer
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