

The Nativity of St. John the Baptist, A^xD 2010
Luke 1:57-80

Portions adapted from a sermon by Pr. David Petersen

In the name of the Father and of the ^x Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Birthdays are not the way of the Church. She celebrates two days in the lives of her children: their rebirthdays and their heavenly birthdays. That is, she celebrates the day of their baptisms, the day when they are reborn into the family of God, and their death days, the days when they are delivered from this life of suffering and tears. But no birthdays, except for a couple.' John is born of an old woman who is barren; Christ is born of a young woman who is a virgin. That John will be born is not believed, and his father is struck dumb; that Christ will be born is believed, and he is conceived by faith" (Augustine). So today the Church throughout the world marks that Christmas Eve is a mere six months away, as she celebrates the birthday of St. John the Baptist.

2 John's birth is indeed miraculous and a foreshadowing of the even more miraculous birth of the Christ. John straddles the time between the old and the new. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament preachers. He is the one of whom Jesus declared, "Among those born of women, none is greater."

3 John's message sounds harsh to our modern ears even as it did to ancient ears. It is harsh because he will not waste your time. He will not coddle you. He has not come to try and "make a point" but he gets right to the point. He won't tell cute little moral stories or show you shiny objects. He is not trying to "make you think." He is not being clever or poetic. He will not manipulate your emotions or "set the mood." He is not a reed blown about in the wind of human opinion. He is not interested in being interesting or engaging. He'd fail a preaching class at the seminary. But on the Jordan's bank stands a man obsessed. He cares only for the wrath and judgment to come, doing the work he has been given to do before the night comes when no man can work. So he gets right to it. He wags that boney finger in your face, stands too close, breathes his locust breath upon you, fixes his steely gaze, eyeball to eyeball, and says, "Repent! Repent now, before it is too late. Turn from yourself and your worries. Cease your self-obsession, your concern for your rights and honor. Be filled with the Spirit, die and rise again with Christ, hear the Father's adopting words. Be baptized and live!"

4 John doesn't care about himself. He cares only about his hearers and their salvation. His message is brazen as he preaches the full fury of the Law of God. Like it or not, the Law is God's Word. It is His revealed will for man but man cannot obtain it. False law, unlike that which John preached, is actually quite nice. False Law takes many forms, but at its most popular it is a guide for good living or secret hints on how we might please God, earn His favor, and get ahead. The real Law is the Law preached by John. It is damning. It hurts because it kills. It drives us to our knees. But it is it is good. It needs to be preached. Not for its sake, but for the sake of opening eyes to the reality of how helpless we are. (Petersen)

5 That's not the end of John's message. His father, lips sealed for nine months because he asked for a sign from God to prove His promises, breaking forth with his first words in 3/4ths of a year, had prophesied about his son: "You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." The goal of the Law, with its fury, its violence, its ability to cauterize and to excise, to crush and kill, is to prepare you for the Gospel. So John, with his fierce, unrelenting proclamation of the Law, is to prepare you for Jesus.

6 Once the Law has done its work, once you have only despair in your ability to save yourself, once you see only sin and filth when you look at yourself, then hear the word of John the Baptist again. When Jesus was coming toward John, he proclaimed to the crowd gathered, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

7 The tender mercy of our God is not in removing the Law, but in fulfilling it. It accuses and cuts us low. It drives us to the edge of despair. With Isaiah we cry out, "Woe to me for I am a man of unclean lips." With Peter we beg, "Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man." We acknowledge the goodness and rightness, the holiness of the Law and our abject failure regarding it. But then, at the Word of Christ, the Law, which hounded us, departs. It is satisfied in the perfect life and death that Jesus lived and died in our place. Suddenly, there is no one to accuse you. The Lord helps you up, embraces and kisses you, and bids you come and be a guest at His Table, to sit down next to John. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; your sins are removed. Your past, your shame, your guilt are no more. He wipes away your tears and fills those places left empty and abandoned by your sins inside you with Himself. His hair, His skin, His bones, that Body pierced, dead and buried, back to life, God satisfied, is placed into those once unclean lips and they are cleansed. You are healed. You are whole. The Blood of the Lamb is poured down your throat and into your heart. You are clean. You are one with Him. You abide in Him and He in you. You are His. You enjoy a Holy and perfect Communion.

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

Soli Deo Gloria

Pastor Jeff Hemmer