

The Feast of the Nativity of St. John with the Rite of Holy Baptism for Kori
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24 June, Anno Domini 2018
St. Luke 2:57-80
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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Poor Zechariah. He has spent the last nine months unable to speak about the incredibly joyous news that had been delivered to him by the angel. Nine months sitting on information that Israel had been waiting to hear, that humanity had been waiting to hear for several thousand years, since before Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden. Having a son that he had fervently prayed for was fantastic but that was small potatoes compared to these words of Gabriel "he (John) will go before Him (the Lord) ...to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." Salvation was at hand! The Messiah was finally here! And Zechariah couldn't tell anyone. He knew before Mary even showed up at their doorstep exactly what was happening. Talk about being saddled with the world's biggest secret. If God hadn't taken away his ability to speak, I don't think Zechariah could have kept his mouth closed.

But now, finally, the time had arrived for Zechariah to name his son, this little boy graciously given by God to him and Elizabeth in their old age. And upon writing the name given by the angel, the flood gates burst and the praises of God came gushing out of Zechariah's mouth in the canticle which we still sing at Matins - the Benedictus. For nine months he had been thinking about what he would say if he ever got the chance to speak again. For nine months, his heart had been filled with indescribable joy because the time of his own and the world's salvation was at hand. Finally, the time had come to deliver the good news to all!

And what is most important to Zechariah? "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for He has visited and redeemed His people!" It's not John even though he knew John was going to play a crucial role in salvation. Zechariah sings of Christ who, in fulfillment of the Father's promises would save us from the hand of our enemies - sin and death - so that we, with hearts and consciences cleansed by the Blood of Christ, might serve the Lord without any fear - no fear of death; no fear of all those who hate us and seek to harm us and make us miserable; no fear of the guilt of our sins because the sins of the whole world have been laid on the Lord Jesus; no

fear of the devil who is daily prowling around seeking to lead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice! What a blessed treasure this salvation in Jesus is! Nothing else could bring troubled and wearied consciences peace or hope.

Then, only after extolling God's promises and mighty works of salvation, Zechariah turns to his baby boy and foretells what he will be and do as the forerunner of the Christ. John is significant, as he himself will later confess, only insofar as he prepares the way for the Christ and points sinners to the only Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John, even John, is nothing when compared to the Savior. John needs the Savior just as much as you and I do. He is no more holy and no less a sinner. But by God's gracious planning, John, forever now known as the Baptist or Baptizer, is the one who reveals the Messiah in the waters of the Jordan. He saw the dove and he heard the voice. Cousin Jesus is the Son of God who bears and gives the gift of the Holy Spirit. What an honor! How special he must have been to be chosen for such an important task! Wrong. We must not confuse John with the Christ, as many would. The Baptizer gave knowledge of salvation. He didn't give salvation itself. "I am not the Christ."

The Nativity of John the Baptist is wonderful but only because it means that the Nativity of the Savior is just a short six months around the corner. The eternal comfort which God had long ago promised to the world is growing in the Virgin's womb and will soon be taking His first steps in the midst of this fallen world. Those tiny feet, having traveled near and far preaching the good news of salvation, healing the sick, driving out unclean spirits, and raising the dead would plant themselves on the cross so that the nail might be plunged through and fasten Him there where He would destroy our enemies and set us free from death. From this Lamb's pierced side would flow the life-giving waters of Holy Baptism, poured out this day over Kori, and the Blood of Holy Communion which is shed for the forgiveness of your sins.

Is there any greater reason to raise our voices with Zechariah, with the angels, and with the whole Christian Church in heaven and on earth in songs of praise and thanksgiving to our God who has remembered His promises, who has visited us poor, miserable sinners and set us free? Zechariah's joy is the joy of every sinner who longs to hear that God will be gracious to him and not judge him according to the depth of his guilt. His

song is the song of every sinner who believes that the incarnate Son of God is the fulfillment of all God's promises to save us. How could Zechariah or any of us remain stoically silent when the dark shadow of eternal judgment has been driven away by arrival of the promised Messiah and His promised forerunner? How can the high praises of God not pour forth from our hearts and lips when we have heard the gracious proclamation that Satan and his hordes lie completely vanquished under the resurrected feet of Christ, that no longer do we need to fear the anger and judgment of the unbelieving world, that not a single day will go by that our heavenly Father won't give us our daily bread and, more than that, His Holy Spirit? What indescribable joy to awake each morning as the Baptized, knowing that sin and death have no power over us, that we are children of the heavenly Father, that in every time of need we may call upon God who is our refuge and strength and He will hear and deliver us!

This was Zechariah's song and John's preaching. This is the heart and soul of all true Christian preaching. The God of our Fathers, the God who promised deliverance for the world through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has visited us, has walked among us to remove death's curse. This redemption is a redemption of comfort for those who are bound in the chains of sin, whose hearts are filled with despair and hopelessness, whose lives are crumbling around them and who taste every day the bitter sorrows of death's icy grip over all creation. This is not a salvation for those who still love their sin, who are comfortable with the world and who love its pleasures. John was not sent to preach peace to those who are comfortable with false gods and those who confess them. John was not sent to comfort those who keep God's Word at arms length so that it can't cut too deeply or affect them too much. John was sent proclaiming the judgment of God that stands against all who are self-righteous and all who make excuses for their sins and willfully remain in them. That word of judgment remains this day. We dare not imagine that the Lord simply turns a blind eye to that in us which is cold and unaffected by His Word. What hardness of heart must remain in us when we hear the commandments and are not shaken to our core because we still see such wickedness and evil remaining in our thoughts and deeds? What hardness of heart must remain when we do not hunger and thirst for the new covenant given not by the blood of bulls and goats but by the Blood of God's only Son, shed on the cross and given as true drink at altar? What hardness of heart must remain when we do not pray, when we grumble against our neighbor, when

we refuse to show mercy, when we hide the comfort of Christ from our neighbor because we are embarrassed or afraid they will judge us?

Repent. Let the preaching of the Law from the voice of Christ's servants sink deep and root out whatever sins it finds so that you may confess it and be healed by Christ's absolution. Turn away from your sins and the desires of your flesh that are contrary to God's Word. Don't justify them or hide them. They do not help you and they will not bring you happiness. They will bring you only death.

Repent and behold the Lamb of God, the Dayspring from on high, who has taken away the sins of the world for He has also taken away your sins. He has covered the Baptized in the robes of His righteousness and washed away the guilt of their sin. He has opened to you the gates of everlasting life and by His Holy Word guides your feet into the way of peace.

Let us then rightly give thanks to God for St. John the Baptist by heeding his call to repentance and beholding the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who has taken away the sins of the world. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who has visited and redeemed His people, who visits us today with salvation.

In the Name of +Jesus.