

The Festival of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist
St. Luke 1:57-80
June 24th, 2018
Sts. Peter & Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, UAC
Simpsonville, SC
Pastor Jerald Dulas

His Name Is John

In Nomine Iesu!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:

O Lord, send out Thy Light and Thy Truth, let them lead us. O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth may show forth Thy praise. O Lord, graciously preserve me, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

If I was to ask you what the biggest festival in the Church's year was, what would be your answer? I would hope that you would say that it was Easter. Of course, that would include all of the days leading up to Easter, too. I would hope the same is true if I asked you what the highest point of the Divine Service is you would answer the Words of Institution. The very words of Christ which offer us His Body and Blood in bread and wine. But, the second highest point of the Divine Service is just as important—the sermon. For, we have to remember that in the Divine Service we are being led somewhere. Where are we being led? Every Sunday and Feast and Festival Day we celebrate the Divine Service we are being led to the gates of Heaven, and then given a meal—a feast—to enjoy with our Lord and Savior. It is a foretaste of the great things to come in Heaven.

Easter, and the days leading up to it, also bring us to the gates of Heaven, where the doors are flung wide and us poor, miserable sinners are ushered in to enjoy the comfort and peace that comes from our sins having been forgiven by our Lord's death on the cross. However, the second greatest feast in the Church's year, also prepares us to meet our Lord. The second greatest feast is Christmas.

Today we celebrate the Festival of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. A name which does denote what his religion was, but what he did to prepare people to receive the Messiah. He baptized all those who came to him in repentance in the Jordan River, so that they might receive forgiveness. But, as much as St. John is his own person with his own works that he did to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, his festival is really a festival that prepares us for Christmas.

That brings us to the point I am trying to make. Easter may be the high point of the Church's year, but its significance for us is only made aware to us during the Easter/Ascension season. Christmas, however, has festivals throughout the year that draw us to that event in time. Three months ago, the Christmas cycle began when we celebrated the Annunciation of our Lord. On that day the Blessed Virgin Mary received the word that she, a virgin, was going to bear the Savior of the whole world. It was nine months before Christmas, March 25. Our Savior took on our flesh at conception after the announcement by the angel Gabriel and was born nine months later on Christmas Day.

Today, six months before our Lord's birth, our Lord's cousin is born and named. His name is John. The name John means, "The Lord is a gracious giver." In their old age, and even though Elizabeth

was barren, the Lord granted the childless couple the grace to be parents. The child was a gracious gift to Zacharias and Elizabeth. But, he is also a gracious gift to the Church, for he went before the Lord and prepared His way. He preached repentance, that is, he called people to turn away from their sins. But, he also preached the purpose of repentance, to receive forgiveness from your sins. That is what we do when we repent of our sins, we turn to the Lord + Jesus Christ. We turn to the One Who took our sins upon Himself and paid for those sins with His very own life. When we are burdened by our sins we turn to the One Who has already paid for those sins. We turn to the cross, for it is on the tree of the holy cross that our Lord took those sins from us and carried them into His grave, so that we do not have to worry about them anymore. When we sin, we turn to the Christ, the One Who St. John the Baptist pointed to and prepared the hearts of Israel to receive.

What we do not do is turn inside of ourselves to seek some hidden power or strength to undo our sins or stop our sinning. You are not going to find the power or strength to stop sinning inside yourself. Your entire nature is corrupt. Your Old Adam fights to live, which is why we drown him daily in the remembrance of our Holy Baptism. This is what it means to live in one's Holy Baptism: to daily repent of our sins, that is, daily drown the Old Adam, and the Holy Ghost raises us as New Creations, sinless and holy before Him. You are not going to stop sinning, or get past the daily sins that we continuously do, by trying harder. You are going to get past your sin by giving up; by turning to the Lord + Jesus on the cross and remembering that your sins were paid for on that cross. You are going to get past your sins by remembering that you were baptized, and that all that was unholy within you that you inherited from Adam, and all that you have added thereto, has been drowned in the Font. Your sins are buried in the tomb of the Lord and in the tomb of the Font. Leave them there, do not pick them back up. They do you no good.

St. John the Baptist was a gracious gift to his parents Zacharias and Elizabeth. But, he was also a gracious gift to the world. For his message was the same message that I just shared with you. There is One Among you whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; that none of us are worthy to untie. Our Lord + Jesus stands in our midst. He is here in His Word. He is here in the constant reminders of our Holy Baptism throughout the Divine Service. He is here in His offering of Absolution to those who confess and repent of their sins. He is here in His Body and Blood given in bread and wine. He is here as the Body of Christ—the gathering of us all as fellow believers on Him, as He promised He would be wherever two or three were gathered in His Name. He stands among us whenever we gather for worship. He is here to grant us forgiveness, by reminding us that He paid for all of our sins on the tree of the holy cross.

This is something that we get to enjoy whenever we come together as a parish and receive His gifts and enjoy being with Him. This is something we enjoy throughout the year; every Sunday. Every Lord's Day is a reflection of Easter. This is why it is the most important holy day of the year. But, the second greatest holy day of the year—the Lord's birth—is also celebrated throughout the year whenever we have a festival of the Lord.

The cycle began, as I mentioned before, with the Annunciation. It continues with the birth of St. John the Baptist. In eight days, at his circumcision, we will be reminded of the Blessed Virgin Mary's visit to Elizabeth, even though the day comes around the time when she was returning home, and the text is when she first arrives three months ago. The cycle will continue with our Lord's birth, and then His circumcision, and with the worship of the magi and His escape to Egypt. He will also be presented at the Temple on His fortieth day.

During this annual re-living of Lord's birth and life, we are also drawn into the major events of His ministry on Earth. We see Him as a boy in front of the religious leaders asking and answering questions. We see Him being baptized by John in the Jordan River. We see Him enduring the temptations of the devil, just as we do every day. We see His Transfiguration before Sts. Peter, James

and John, and Elijah and Moses on the mountain. We re-live His trial, suffering, and death every year. And we celebrate His resurrection from the dead, when He opened up our graves and the graves of all those who believe on Him. He opened the gates of Heaven at His ascension, and He poured out His Holy Ghost on Pentecost. You see, we get to re-live every moment of our Lord's life throughout the year.

And in re-living our Lord's life every year, we learn to place our sins on Him. When our Lord is always put before us; when we are always hearing what our Lord has done and continues to do for us, we find the comfort that we so desperately seek in this life. For we live in a world with valleys and mountains and hills, and crooked and rough places; a world that is full of trouble in all situations. We are surrounded by sin, both our own and the consequences of sin in the world. However, there is comfort here in this holy house. For it is here, when we gather for the Divine Service, that our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ is comforting us with His promises that He won for us by His death on the cross. He has brought our war with sin to an end. It has no power over us. Our iniquity has been pardoned, we are no longer guilty. Even though we deserved God's eternal wrath and displeasure, our Lord has given us a double portion of His grace.

Therefore, my dear friends, let us continue live every day of our lives remembering the events of our Lord's life. For everything that He did in His life was for the benefit of your life. He even sent His forerunner John as a gracious gift to prepare His way. And He has sent to you a preacher as well to prepare your way into Heaven. So then, hear the message that St. John the Baptist preached and that the Ministers of Christ continue to preach: turn to the One Who stands in your midst as the Redeemer of the world, the Lord + Jesus Christ, for in Him is the comfort you seek. In the Name of our Lord + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:

Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy Name give glory! I will extol Thee, O Lord, and I will praise Thy Name forever and ever. Amen.

The Votum:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!