



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, June 24, 2012

The Nativity of Saint John the Baptist

Festal Eucharist

11am

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector

on

Isaiah 40:1-11, Acts 14b-26 and Saint Luke 1:57-80

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THE WANTED BUT UNEXPECTED SON

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

John the Baptist was a large figure in Jesus' lifetime and in the days of the early Church. You can see this in today's second lesson, from Acts, where the Apostle Paul is preaching in a synagogue during his first missionary journey into Asia Minor (modern Turkey). He gives an historical run-up to the coming of Christ. Paul touches on Israel's patriarchs, the time in Egypt, the Exodus and years in the wilderness, the entry into the Promised Land, after Joshua the times of the judges until Samuel the prophet; then King Saul (rejected) and King David (beloved), and then from David's posterity comes Jesus the Savior. But then: "Before his coming, John had preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel."

Saint Luke tells us, in the passages leading up to today's Gospel reading, that John the Baptist and Jesus were kin, cousins on their mothers' side. There is quite a bit of material about their conceptions and births in Luke. We think we are familiar with the Christmas story as far as Jesus, Mary and Joseph are concerned, but this is not really so – the Nativity of John the Baptist, which we observe today, shows there is much more to Christmas than is usually portrayed, and it involves Jesus' forerunner and cousin John. The angel Gabriel was involved both times. Though our Lord was conceived without the agency of a human father by the power of the Holy Spirit and the consent of the young Virgin Mary, John the Baptist was conceived, wondrously, of older and hitherto childless parents, Elizabeth (who was called barren) and Zechariah (a priest in the temple).¹

John's father Zechariah didn't believe it when the angel Gabriel told him he and Elizabeth were going to have a son, so the angel silenced the priest for the nine months before the child's birth. Imagine a priest silenced for that length of time – it was quite a retreat! At last, as today's Gospel tells, the baby is wondrously born and the time comes for his circumcision and naming eight days later. All the family, friends and neighbors assumed the child would be named Zechariah after his father. But

¹ This sort of wonder, where a great figure is born to old or barren (or old and barren) parents, or to parents in irregular circumstances, is notable in biblical history. An interesting detail is that both John's parents were of priestly families. (Lk 1:5) Since Mary and Elizabeth were cousins it is possible that Jesus had priestly blood on his mother's side while he was of royal descent on his adoptive father Joseph's side. Prophet, Priest, and King: Our Lord is the Prophet of all prophets, the great High Priest who has passed into the heavens, and the King of kings. All these roles are presaged in his conception and birth by virtue of the Holy Spirit and the cooperation of Mary and Joseph.

the angel had given the name John to both the parents even before the child was conceived. Not so; his name is John, said Elizabeth. The crowd objected. Zechariah asked for a writing tablet; “His name is John,” he wrote, and everyone marveled. It was the beginning of a life of marvels. The first happened as Zechariah obeyed the angel and wrote down the true name for the son he had not believed he could have: his retreat was over, his tongue was loosed, and he prophesied.

The Song of Zechariah, nicknamed in the Book of Common Prayer the *Benedictus Dominus Deus* after its Latin title in the monastic offices, is one of three canticles in Luke’s Gospel which have been fixtures of Christian worship from the earliest times. The other two are the Song of Mary, the *Magnificat*, and the Song of Simeon, the *Nunc Dimittis*, which are the beloved canticles of Evensong inspiring some of the great sacred music of history right up to the present moment. Zechariah’s *Benedictus* is the pre-eminent morning canticle, used at Mattins (Morning Prayer) in the Prayer Book. It prepares the way of the Lord.

When Zechariah could speak again, he blessed God for raising up a mighty salvation for us, out of the house of his servant David, as spoken of old by the prophets. Referring to his newborn son John, he sang, “and thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the highest, for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways.”

Preparing the way is a spiritual matter. When the Prophet Isaiah in our first lesson says, make straight in the desert a highway for our God, he means the desert of our barren souls, so thirsty and hungry for the water of life and the food of heaven. When the prophet says, every valley shall be exalted, he means that the deficits and the depressions and the losses of our lives, often self-inflicted, will be filled in, repaired and restored. When he says that the mountains will be laid low, this means that the obstructions we cause by our pride, greed, lust, and anger (among other vices) will be leveled so that we can find a way back to our original and true happiness. When he says the crooked will be made straight and the rough places a plain – well we get the point. With God, all shall be well. The question is, are we ready for this?

Repentance means turning back, turning again, to the source of life. It means removing the garbage and clutter and putting the house in order to receive the guest of all guests, our Lord Jesus Christ. At least means being open to having things restored, healed, blessed and even put in good order – for that is exactly what God will do for us and in us when he shows up and we let him in. John the Baptist’s role is to give us fair warning that this is what is coming and what God, out of his love, wants for all of us. Love being love, it can’t be coerced, which is why we need fair warning to give free will a chance to say yes.

So John the Baptist is not merely an historical figure, an important prophet related to Jesus. He is not merely the last of the prophets of Israel, with one foot in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. John the Baptist is a permanent representative *Persona* in the lives of all who would receive and follow Christ. His message is a salutary alarm calling us to attention. We could give a series of sermons on his Nativity, his Ministry, and his Martyrdom. But there isn’t time. For now it is enough to honor his wondrous birth and to take its relevance to heart. One good way to do this is embrace and hold fast the Song his father sang.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.