

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 23, 2012

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 75, 60:1-4, 272, 328, 63.

Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11, Acts 13:24-33, John 1:6-34.

Sermon Text: Luke 1:57-80.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The birth of John the Baptist took place in the time of Herod, king of Judea. This is the same Herod who slaughtered many innocent boys after the birth of Jesus. The announcement of John's birth is linked to the reign of a king who is quite insignificant compared to the great Caesar in Rome. The birth of Jesus will be connected to the actions of the great world leader, Caesar Augustus, as you may remember from the first words of the Christmas gospel.

The forerunner of the Savior should come out of the holy priesthood, as Elizabeth and Zechariah were children of priests. The evangelist John plainly tells us that John the Baptist was specifically sent by God, as we read in John 1:6: "*There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.*" Today let's look at how

JOHN THE BAPTIST COMES INTO THE WORLD

1. **John's birth, circumcision and naming.**
2. **Zechariah's song of praise.**

Elizabeth obviously had kept her pregnancy pretty quiet. Now Elizabeth no longer hid herself and shut herself away from the interest of friends and neighbors. We read that "*Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.*" How different this joy is from many in the world today, who do not welcome the birth of a baby with joy. Among Christians, children are still recognized as a blessing from the Lord. The text expressly states that the Lord had shown great mercy to Elizabeth. And many rejoiced with the happy parents.

On the eighth day, those who were involved in the circumcision came together, and this would be chiefly the relatives. Circumcision was a fulfillment of the old covenant. John was the beginning of the bridge between old and new covenants. On the day of circumcision the name was usually given to the child. The general opinion at this circumcision was that the name of the boy should be Zechariah. This had not been a binding custom among the Jews, but it seemed appropriate that the only son should bear the name of his father. Those involved "*were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, 'No! He is to be called John.'*" Zechariah had obviously communicated to her the story of the wonderful appearance of the angel in the Temple, and she knew the name which the Lord had selected. To this the people promptly objected that such a name, common as it was among the Jews, was not found in the family. Elizabeth obviously had not spoken to many people at all about the name the angel had given to this child.

People today have many reasons for giving their children the names they do. Especially in the Old Testament in many cases recorded in the Bible, names had special meaning. But this is a name given by God and it signifies "God is gracious".

The people who wanted to name him after his father said that "*There is no one among your relatives who has that name.*" So they asked the father, with signs. Zechariah "*asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.'*" This was in fulfillment of the prophecy of the angel.

God's command was carried out to the letter. Zechariah could now speak! Can you imagine what a difficult nine months that had been not being able to speak? Think of how difficult it is not to speak when you have something such as laryngitis for even a day or so.

The chastisement for his lack of faith was now removed. In this way we see that God has pity on His children when they have faltered or fallen. He helps them to conquer the evil with good and unbelief with belief. And thus faith is enabled to grow all the stronger, since doubts have been conquered by the Word of God. But the assembled company wondered at this strange agreement of the parents in giving a name which was unusual in their family. It was their first clue that this child was truly exceptional. Then we read of Zechariah: ***“Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, ‘What then is this child going to be?’ For the Lord's hand was with him.”***

The neighbors were filled with awe. They recognized the Lord's hand, and wondered about the future of this child.

Two unusual things connected with the story of John have already been noted. First, we see the fact that the child was the son of parents past the age of bearing children, and secondly, the giving of a name which had not been in use in the family of Zechariah. Here is added the recovery of speech on the part of the father.

For the greater part of a year the neighbors had known him to be silent, unable to speak, and now, with the same suddenness as the calamity had come upon him, the ban is removed from his tongue, and at once he gives praise to the Lord. This had quite an effect upon the assembled people as well as upon all the inhabitants of the hill country of Judea. Reverent awe took hold upon them. Wherever the story of these events was told, the people were similarly impressed. They felt that such unusual circumstances surrounded the birth of this child that God Himself must be directly involved in his welfare, that all things pointed to an uncommon future for the boy. The usual comment was: What, then, will this child come to? If the people had only continued their watchful attitude until John began his ministry in the wilderness near the Jordan River! Of course, some probably had opportunity to see what John became. We have no time frame of when and how long John preached in the wilderness, but Jesus, about the same age as John, didn't begin his public ministry until he was about 30 years old.

Zechariah had had about nine months to ponder his unbelief. It was kind of like being in prison, and having time to think about and to repent of one's crime and sin. Notice what he does and says? He is praising God! And he had a great deal to praise God for. He had been given a son in his old age. But more importantly, he knew, as the angel had told him, that this child ***“will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*** (Luke 1:17)

The Bible makes it clear that John the Baptist had a specific role ordained by God as forerunner or precursor of Jesus, who was the promised Messiah. And even the people in that region wondered what the Lord had in mind for this child.

2.

Zechariah, after long being unable to speak is now filled with the Holy Spirit and glorifies God. Zechariah knew what the angel had told him, and notice how he continues praising God and speaking of John's role in life.

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us – to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”

We have here another wonderful hymn of praise and prophecy, similar to other songs of praise that we find in Old Testament. The Holy Ghost Himself, speaking through the mouth of Zechariah, was its author.

Notice that all praise, honor, and glory is given to God. The entire plan and work of salvation is a monument of His grace, to the praise of His glory. He is the God of Israel, not only the original Israel, that is, Israel according to the flesh, those physically descended from Abraham but also all believers, whom we refer to as “spiritual Israel”. But since his chosen nation by and large rejected Him, the term now applies to spiritual Israel only, to His Church, the Holy Christian Church, to all believers.

God wanted to help his people, and above all, give them redemption from all their sins. He had prepared salvation for his people and was about to bring it to pass in the Messiah, the Redeemer Jesus Christ.

Zechariah speaks directly to and about the child: *“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.”*

Zechariah here speaks about the future of the son that had been born to him according to the promise of the Lord. John would be a prophet in the highest and fullest sense of the word. His life's work would consist in going before the face of the Lord as a true herald to prepare His ways before Him, just as the prophets had said. And when the proclamation of the Law would have prepared the hearts in removing all self-righteousness and imaginary holiness, then John would be able to proclaim the knowledge of salvation, which includes also the forgiveness of sins. The redemption God offers is given through the remission of sins.

Zechariah speaks of the salvation which will come through Jesus as a fact which has already been accomplished. And this before Christ is even born! We are at the very end of the Old Testament, the time of promise. With the very next verses of Luke – the Christmas gospel – we enter the New Testament, the time of fulfillment.

Zechariah praised the Lord *“because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.”* David himself said in Psalm 18 about the Lord *“He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”* (Psalm 18:2)

Now Zechariah uses the term *“a horn of salvation”* to refer to the Messiah. Jesus will come from the house of David and as the servant of the Lord will bring eternal salvation. The rescue worked by Christ will enable God’s people to serve him. The priest Zechariah had devoted his life to serving the Lord representing the people in the temple. Now will come a new era when all believers as priests will worship their Savior.

After speaking of the coming Messiah and his work, the father turns his attention to his newborn son and the task which will fall to John. His ministry will be one of preparing the way before the Lord. By his preaching he will give to people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. On those living in darkness, on those in the shadow of death, the sun is rising. And John is sent to make ready the way. His calling is to guide feet into the path of peace.

This chapter closes with the fact that the child grew and became strong in spirit. John’s growth is more than just physical growth. His spiritual fibers were toughened for the task before him. He made his home in the desert until his time of service came. It is likely that both his father and mother had died before that ministry began. But they had seen with the eyes of faith, and that was sufficient.

May we see with the eyes of faith, recognizing God’s salvation in the simple message of one preaching in the wilderness *“make straight the way for the Lord”*. (John 1:23) May we see with the eyes of faith, recognizing God’s salvation in the child to be born in a stable in Bethlehem. Amen.