

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
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**Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 24, 2017**

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

Hymns: 75, 134:1-2, 272, 328, 63.

Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-31, Acts 13:13-26, Luke 1:5-25.

Sermon Text: Luke 1:11-17.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

John, also called John the Baptist, was a special prophet sent to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus Christ.

John prepared people for the immediate coming the Savior by preaching a message of repentance for the remission of sins. He made it clear that he was not the Messiah. He told some of his followers, when he saw Jesus coming toward him: **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”** John 1:29 (NIV)

Although Jesus Christ is really the important one, the Word of God has much to say about

**THE FORERUNNER WHO IS COMING TO PREPARE THE WAY OF THE SAVIOR**

1. **The promise of John’s birth.**
2. **His mission is laid out by his father.**

Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind about John is that he was a rather strange character baptizing people in the wilderness, preaching a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But today let’s look at events much earlier in his life. As you heard in our gospel lesson, a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, both descendants of Aaron, were childless and **“they were both well along in years.”** Zechariah was one who was called to serve God in the temple at Jerusalem. His calling was to serve as a priest at the temple, and at this time he was burning incense in the temple.

**“Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.”** Luke 1:6-7 (NIV) They wanted children, and Zechariah had prayed for a son. Among the Jews to be barren was felt to be a disgrace, as if the Lord had not blessed them or not looked on them with his favor. Married couples wanted children, not only for the joy that children bring, but also so that their children could take care of them later in life. When scripture says they were blameless, we know that does not mean they were sinless, **“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”** Romans 3:23 (NIV) But they were no doubt model citizens, and looked upon as “good people”. But we will see that among the sins of Zechariah was his unwillingness to believe what God told him through an angel.

We read that when Zechariah’s group of priests was on duty in the temple, and when he was to burn incense, he had a terrifying vision. We are told that an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. This appearance of the angel startled him and he was filled with fear. Humans just don’t often see angels.

The angel gave him a strange message: **“The angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.’** The message is very specific. This is not just “a baby” who is to be born, it will be a son. The angel even tells Zechariah the name of that son: John. In the Old Testament, Scripture often gives names that are very meaningful. The name John means “Jehovah has been gracious”.

The child will be a joy and delight to Zechariah, and also to his wife, and many will rejoice because of his birth. Of course, we read later ***“When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.”*** Luke 1:57-58 (NIV) Certainly her friends, neighbors, and relatives would rejoice that she had delivered a child. But, as you shall see, there would be greater cause for rejoicing than just the birth of this child. Because of his mission in life, many would be pointed to the Savior of all mankind.

But at the time the angel gave Zechariah the message of a son to be born to him and Elizabeth, something unusual happens to Zechariah. He doesn't believe the angel. He doubted. ***“Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.’*** Luke 1:18 (NIV) But the angel has the answer for him, and a chastisement because of his unbelief. ***“The angel answered, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.’”*** Luke 1:19-20 The angel rebukes him for not believing what God told him.

While this was happening, we read that ***“the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.”*** Luke 1:21-22. Somehow the signs that the mute Zechariah made convinced the people that he had seen a vision while he was in the temple.

He continued to do his appointed work at the temple, and ***“When his time of service was completed, he returned home.”*** Luke 1:23 (NIV) Scripture then tells us that his wife became pregnant. She then secluded herself for five months. Scripture does not say why, but it is easy to imagine that perhaps she really didn't know what to make of this, and perhaps was wondering if she would have a healthy child. We do know that she rejoiced in what the Lord had done for her and her husband. Scripture tells us: ***“The Lord has done this for me,’ she said. ‘In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.’”*** She was overjoyed that she was to bear a child, and gave the Lord credit for showing his goodness to her and taking away her disgrace among her fellow Israelites. But Zechariah was still mute, unable to say anything. He had been this way since the angel had given him the message, so this may have been for at least nine months. This must have been a difficult time for both of them, with him probably only communicating in writing to his wife.

Even before his birth, John honored Christ. When Mary, the mother of the Lord, came to visit Elizabeth, we read ***“When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!’”*** Luke 1:41-45 (NIV)

After John was born, we read ***“On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, ‘No! He is to be called John.’ They said to her, ‘There is no one among your relatives who has that name.’ Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, ‘His name is John.’ 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.”*** Luke 1:59-65 Zechariah had been humbled and learned this lesson. He dare not contradict what God says. The name that the angel Gabriel gave for his son was given to him at John's circumcision, despite the fact that no one was named John among the relatives. Here we see the tradition of giving meaningful names, often names of ancestors or relatives, to children.

And immediately Zechariah was able to speak – and what does he say first? He began praising God! ***“Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, ‘What then is this child going to be?’ For the Lord's hand was with him. His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ‘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. 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.”* Luke 1:66-80 (NIV)

His father speaks of the special calling this son had, and the special gifts that would be given to him by God, to prepare the way for the Lord to begin his work on earth. It is not often that parents know for sure what a child will do when that child is born and grows up. But God had spoken to Zechariah and given him this message.

It may seem strange that a man whose calling included burning incense in the temple now had the ability to speak so eloquently about God’s messages for mankind. But isn’t that the way God works? His ways are not our ways. He called a shepherd boy to become the great King David. He chose a stable to be the birthplace of his Son, the Savior. And he continues to use those who believe in him. How do you know what God has in mind for you? There is much to be done in the kingdom of God. When Jesus was speaking to his disciples of the work to be done in giving the Gospel away, he said **“I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”** John 4:35 (NIV)

Zechariah was in his comfort zone going about his daily work when God spoke to him through an angel. And after his son John was born, he boldly praised the Lord God. He pointed out how God had not forgotten his people, but he **“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).”** That picture makes us think of the “horn of plenty”, the cornucopia which is often seen at Thanksgiving, overflowing with the blessings God has provided to us.

Then his father speaks of the calling and work of his son John: **“you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High.”** He is to **“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.”** This is all **“because of the tender mercy of our God.”**

John would lead a strange life in the desert, but people came out to hear his message. **“John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.”** Matthew 3:4-6 (NIV) He would preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He would plainly point to Jesus Christ, God’s Son, who was only a few months younger than him, as the only Savior of all mankind.

Just as God showed mercy, love, and kindness to an old couple who wanted a child, so he continues to show his grace to us today. We still have the Word of God. We still have fellow confessors of Christ who, like us, are striving to keep that Word of God taught and lived in its truth and purity.

May we recognize God’s work among us. May we offer ourselves in any way God can use us. And may we continue to strive to share the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.