

"The Circumcision of John the Baptist"

Luke 1:56-80

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Midweek - Advent 3

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

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"What kind of child will this be?"

It's the question they keep asking at the baby's circumcision. He's only eight days out of the womb, but this kid has had some story from the very start. There's his mother, Elizabeth the aged, unable to conceive throughout her fertile years. It's been a source of shame for her, the topic of discreet conversation behind her back; but now, in her old age, she has given Zacharias a son. There's also the actions of the unborn: Three months before his birth, John is jumping for joy in the womb when the Savior comes to His house! Then there's Zacharias, proud papa. He's been literally the dumb priest for the last nine months, ever since the angel in the temple told him that a son would soon be on the way. Zacharias doubted the Lord's Word, so the angel declared that Zacharias wouldn't have words of his own until the day of his boy's circumcision.

Then there's the baby's name, John. There's no "John" among the relatives and ancestors, so those attending are quite surprised when Elizabeth wants to name him John. They appeal to the still-silent father, who writes, "His name is John" on a tablet. So the boy gets a name that popular opinion says he shouldn't have. Still, it's a good name, because the name "John" means, "The Lord is faithful." He's been faithful to Elizabeth and given her a son in her old age. He's been faithful to Zacharias and has kept His Word that the man would speak again when John got his name. Zacharias is talking plenty now; in fact, it looks like he might be getting ready to sing.

"What kind of child will this be?" There are too many strange things going on, and the hand of the Lord is with this little boy. What kind of child will this be?

Zacharias tells them what kind of child John will be. He's had nine months of silent meditation—a lot of time to think on the words that Gabriel spoke to him and to Elizabeth's cousin, Mary. As part of the prophecy he utters that day, he says of his infant son:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:76-79)

That's what kind of child he will be.

He will be called the prophet of the Highest. The Old Testament is full of prophets, a thread of men through history who declared God's Word and the news of the coming Savior. John the Baptist is the final one of them: Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah got to say, "Keep waiting! The Savior is

coming." John will get to say, "The wait is over-the Savior is here, and there He is!" So great will John be that, he is not only a prophet, but the fulfillment of prophecy-he will be The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD!" (Is. 40:3) as foretold by Isaiah. Zacharias speaks of this: He says that John will be called the prophet of the Highest because he will go before the Lord to prepare His ways.

How will John prepare the way? Zacharias says, "To give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins." He'll prepare by preaching about sins and God's plan for forgiveness. He'll declare that God, in His tender mercy, has sent His Son-the Dayspring from on high-to visit His people. The Savior will deliver from the darkness of sin. He'll set people free from the shadow of death. He'll guide them from sinful enmity to peace with God.

That's what kind of a child this will be: He will point always to the Savior who saves from sin and gives eternal life. The one named John will declare, "The Lord is faithful, and here He is for you!"

And so it plays out when John is grown. By the banks of the Jordan River, he preaches unflinching law, telling soldiers and tax collectors and Pharisees how they must repent of their sin. He makes no effort to accommodate people because of their position: His job is not to make them feel good, but to prepare them from the coming of the Savior. And, one day, the Savior comes. He stands in the crowd, listening to John; and it is John's privilege to point to Jesus and say, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29) He always, always, always points to Jesus. By the grace of God, that's what kind of child he is.

So John will continue boldly to point to the Savior; and so he will suffer martyrdom at the hands of Herod the king. He does not die because he's a troublemaker; he dies because he faithfully points to the King of kings, and Herod doesn't like that very much. But, by the grace of God, that's what kind of child he is.

When John is imprisoned and death is only a matter of time, this is what the Lord Himself has to say of him: "Among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Lk. 7:28). "No greater prophet," says Jesus of John; because throughout his life, from his leap in Elizabeth's womb until his death in prison, John never ceases to point to the faithfulness of the Lord-the Lord Jesus, the least in the kingdom because He took on the sins of the world and went to the cross.

And there's a lesson in this for you and me, for John the Baptist is greater than we are: And if John the Baptist was not one to point away from Christ or point to his own goodness, then who are we to do so?

Because the question we pose now is this: What kind of child are you?

Here's how the Bible answers: You are a child of God. Not by your own reason or strength or merit, but because of Jesus, to whom John relentlessly pointed. The Baby born to Mary has grown up and gone to the cross for you, died and risen again for you. When He was baptized, God the Father declared, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." At your baptism, for the sake of Jesus, God the Father declared the same about you. Because of Jesus, to whom John pointed, you're a child of God and an heir of heaven. That's what kind of child you are.

Of course, sin is at work to get you to leave the family of God, to get you to run away from home and back into the darkness of sin.

There's always the tool of reproach: Sin likes to use reproach and what-might-have-been's to make God look like less than a faithful, loving Father. This could well have been a temptation for Elizabeth, left childless for so many years: In her shoes and plagued by sin, how easy it would be to fault God for her barrenness, rather than trust that He was working all things for good. How easy it is for you and me to look at what might have been and conclude, "Because this has not happened, God is not so faithful. Perhaps it's best that I no longer be His child." I do not make light of this temptation, for there are times when we would clearly be happier with achievements, companions or other blessings; and it is a bitter row to hoe when the Lord says "no" or, at least, "not yet." The reproach that we feel is hard to bear.

Doubt is a popular weapon: Sin seeks to turn your God-given common sense against your membership in the family of God; so it worked on Zacharias. When the man heard that he would be the father of John in his own age, he simply didn't believe that it would happen. So your old Adam will try to make your common sense a master over Scripture instead of a servant to it, and do so in a variety of ways: It may seek to persuade you that the Virgin birth is an irrational fable, or that the Resurrection is an unproveable lie. It may softly seduce you to doubt that God's Law still condemns sin, and that you have little need for forgiveness. God's Law and Gospel are matters of certainty, that you might be sure of His will and grace for you; thus sin seeks to lead you to doubt at every turn.

And, of course, there's suffering. John the Baptist was the prophet of the Most High; and for his faithfulness, he was imprisoned and executed. Sin is a bully that wants to make you suffer for your faith. Your belief in ethics and morals may deprive you of promotions and friendships at times. Your commitment to the pure Word may lead to painful disagreements within your family. Sin has no problem in taking those things that you treasure most in this world and using them as leverage against your faith.

Reproach, doubt and suffering—three of the Old Adam's favorite blades. With each one, he seeks to pierce your heart with one of two messages: Either, "You might be a child of God, but if you've got problems like this, He's obviously a lousy Father." Or, "If you've got problems like this, then you're probably not God's child at all." When you ask, "What kind of a child am I?", sin wants the answer to be a lonely, despairing silence.

But sin is both a bully and a liar, seeking to blame God for the pain it inflicts upon you. It is not the Lord who authors your reproach—far from it! He has borne your reproach to the cross and suffered your shame, so that it can do you no lasting harm. At times on Christmas Day, a parent must tell a crying child, "I didn't get such-and-such as a gift for you, for your own good." So the Lord will assure us at times, "I have not given you what you desire—not now, anyway. But I have shed My blood to make you Mine. Though you feel bitterness at times for what-might-have-been, you can be certain that the void is not punishment from My Father—the nailprints in My hands are testimony of His love, that He works all things for your good."

God is not the author of doubt. Even as John the Baptist was named and He was still in the womb, Jesus was trusting His Father—implicitly and perfectly. His perfect trust led Him to pray in Gethsemane, "Not My will, but Yours be done," and the Father's will led Him to the cross the following day—for you! So the Lord calls out, "It is not I who haunt you with doubt, seeking to keep

you on edge about your salvation. It is certain that I have died for you, and it is certain that I have risen again. It is certain that I made you Mine in baptism, and it is certain that I consider you My forgiven child now. And where you doubt, I have believed so that My perfect faith can cover your doubts and you can be forgiven."

Nor is God the author of your suffering: Rather, again, Christ has suffered instead of you-in your place-to make you a child of God. He declares, "My Father has no punishment left to inflict upon you, because He put it all on Me! Therefore, do not let suffering lead you from the God of all comfort! Draw near to Him, and rejoice that His grace is sufficient for you!"

That's the good news for Elizabeth and Zacharias and John and you: The Lord Jesus Christ has borne your reproach, trusted perfectly and suffered your sentence for sin. This is the message that John the Baptist did not fail to prophesy: He always pointed to Christ, because in Christ you are an heir of eternal life.

An heir of eternal life...that's what kind of child you are: One who is forgiven, holy, delivered, loved, provided for both now and forever. That's what kind of child you are, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen