

Summer Nativity Joy

I remember as a kid hearing my pastor preach a fiery sermon on how “Christmas in July” was a terrible gimmick that only cheapened the true joy of the Christmas nativity. It was bad enough that the Christmas season was already associated with commercial materialism, but now that same commercial materialism was trespassing into the summer months in the form of blockbuster sales and deals. *Sound familiar?* And yet...if you’ve read your bulletin for this morning, we’re celebrating a nativity today...in late June...in 90-some degree heat and sweltering humidity. It all seems so out-of-place...*almost wrong*. Keep Christ in Christmas, and keep Christmas when/where it belongs, right?!

Well...before you break out the torches and pitchforks, keep in mind that the word “nativity” simply means “the birth of.” Today we, like our Christian forefathers for centuries and centuries before us, celebrate the nativity of John the Baptist. *Settle down: No one is trying to steal Jesus’ birthday!* Now, even with this knowledge, it still seems a bit wrong and out-of-place, right? Why would we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist? I can understand honoring the memory of and giving thanks to God for the life and service of a faithful person. This happens all year long. The Church calendar is filled with feast days celebrating the likes of St. Matthew, Sts. Timothy and Titus, St. Mary Magdalene, etc. There’s nothing wrong at all about this. We don’t pray to these saints, but we do give thanks to God for the life and ministry of these saints. But...celebrating the nativity of John the Baptist? That seems a bit too much. This almost seems like we’re elevating John to Christ’s holy status, and even John was quick to confess, *“I am not Him. I am not fit to untie His sandals.”*

Well...why should we give thanks to God for the birth of John the Baptist? *Why today?* For starters, today is June 24th—exactly six months before Christmas; before the birth of Jesus. We know from Luke’s Gospel account that Elizabeth was six months along in her pregnancy when Mary conceived. For you math majors and biology majors, that means that John was six months older than Jesus. June 24th is the day we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist. This year it happens to fall on a Sunday, which is why celebrate it today.

Yes, it is a bit out of place. Normally, this would be the 4th Sunday after Trinity. Our readings would’ve been on God’s mercy shown through Joseph to his wicked brothers, and how Jesus commands that we should be merciful just like our heavenly Father, not judging or condemning others, not taking the place of God, but rather forgiving and loving, just as we’ve been loved and forgiven by Him. Today, however, breaks into this cycle, almost *interrupting* the steady and predictable flow of the Trinity season.

But you know what? That's *precisely* what/why we celebrate this day. Our heavenly Father keeps His promises. Beginning in the Garden of Eden, He promised a Savior. He also promised that one would be sent before that Savior to prepare the way; to call sinners to repentance, to baptize, and to speak comfort to all those dwelling in darkness and call them into the marvelous light. God kept His Word. He sent John the Baptist to be this preparatory prophet and evangelist. His birth is proof that God keeps His Word, as surprising and unexpected as His ways may be.

And looking over the life and circumstances of John, God clearly worked in *surprising and unexpected ways, from beginning to end*. I know we're all familiar with the events leading up to John's conception and birth. Even before John was conceived, God was bringing His plan of salvation to fruition in very odd and unexpected ways. John was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth, two people who would've made Abraham and Sarah look like *spring chickens*. We're all familiar with Elizabeth's faith and Zechariah's doubt, which resulted in nine months of muted silence. We're also familiar with Zechariah's *bold confession of faith and praise* upon the birth of his son. Zechariah was brought to faith in God's promise. Zechariah knew and believed that God had big plans for John. Even before that birth, though, John was already doing what God had sent him to do. Already in the womb John was pointing others to Christ. When John, still in the womb, is brought into the presence of his God and Lord, he leaps for joy, that leap letting both mom and Mary know that they are in the presence of their Lord and Savior. *Not exactly your run-of-the-mill second trimester, is it?*

I know everyone here is familiar with John's adult ministry: the camel hair, the honey, the wilderness living, far away from society and culture. All of this flew in the face of "normal." If you wanted to be taken seriously as a man of God, you had to be *educated and refined*, things you would learn while living in the capital city and cultural center of Jerusalem. Only crazy people chose the hostile wilderness for a home. If you wanted to be a "successful man of God," you went to where the people were; not out to the barren wilderness. And yet...John *boldly and unapologetically* proclaimed the full Truth of God's Word—full Law and full Gospel—right where God called him to serve! Word spread and people came to him to hear this Word; to repent of their sin; to be baptized with a baptism of forgiveness.

That right there is considered *abnormal* by many today (maybe even by you). John didn't pull punches. Full Law and full Gospel. Even when certain people were coming out to him to be baptized, John knew they were putting on a show, lighting them up, calling them "broods of vipers." *Not exactly the "normal/typical" way one goes about growing a church, is it?* You just don't do that! You might hurt their feelings! Jesus Himself would later say, "*You say he*

has a demon!” That’s how strange and outside the norm this guy was. This is how God worked His plan of salvation.

And let’s not forget the fact that this same boldness and faithfulness to God’s Truth wasn’t without **consequence**. John wound up sitting on death row for speaking the Truth. John struggled in his faith during this brief time. This is quite normal. The Messiah is supposed to bring freedom and life, and yet John is sitting in chains and getting ready to lose his life. “*Are you the One who is to come, or should we be looking for another?*” Jesus sends Word back to John, pointing to all the Scripture-fulfilling things He was doing; things **ONLY** the Messiah could/would do; e.g., the blind receive sight, the deaf hear, lepers are cleansed, the dead are being raised, and the Good News is being proclaimed to the poor. This Word of comfort and promise works. John is given peace, ***even as he languishes***. John loses his life in the sure and certain comfort/peace of saving faith. This, too, was all part of God’s good plan of salvation for John, for even from death row John was pointing to trust in Christ alone for peace, comfort, and everlasting life. ***Faithful in his calling; faithful to God to the very end.***

My friends: This is why we give thanks to God for the birth, life, and death of John the Baptist. This man was parts of God’s divine plan for our peace, our comfort, our everlasting life in the flesh. This is also why we still celebrate today. God continues to work in ***very strange and unexpected and wonderful ways***. He still sends those to proclaim His Word in order to prepare us for the coming of our Lord, both now and not yet. “*Take and eat; take and drink; I am with you always till the end of the age.*” “*And He will come again in all glory to judge both the living and the dead.*” Our Lord comes to us now, and He will come again. Through the simple hearing of Law/Gospel proclamation, our Lord prepares us to see, to hear, to receive and hold fast to this blessed Christ-centered reality.

Through His Word rightly taught and His sacraments rightly administered, He continues to give ***knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of our sin***. We are brought to knowledge of our sin. Through faith, we understand the reality of our ***deadly condition***, which is why we repent and cry out to God (and God alone) for mercy and forgiveness. We also hear and hold fast to the ***blessed Gospel Truth*** that because of Christ Jesus and His all-redeeming death and resurrection, we are completely forgiven. We have been washed and made clean in the blood of the Lamb, that washing taking place in the waters of Holy Baptism; the baptism of repentance and forgiveness; the baptism into His death and resurrection. Through God-given baptismal faith, we rejoice and render the sacrifice of thanksgiving as our Lord comes to us to feed us and nourish us with His body and blood. “*Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” Just look around! He continues to shine the light of Christ and give light to all of us who dwell in the darkness and death of this fallen and sinful world. So strange. So abnormal. So mysterious...***and yet, it’s not.*** All of this is right where God tells us to look. God

is right where He promises to be. Through faith, there's nothing mysterious or strange at all, is there? "*Lord, to whom shall we go?*" It's all so simple, so beautiful, so powerful.

And none of this powerful blessedness is restricted to a certain time of the year or one particular day, is it? God doesn't give His peace and comfort only on Christmas or Easter. We don't have to wait until December to celebrate the arrival of our salvation. We don't have to wait until Easter Sunday to give thanks for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (although many Christians believe and practice this very thing, having no idea what the church looks like without poinsettias or lilies). Folks: By virtue of your baptism into Christ—into His birth, His death and His resurrection—you can have this joy *every* day. In fact, you **SHOULD** have this joy, in all times and all places...even at the end of June in 90-plus degree heat and sweltering humidity.

You know...when all this undeserved mercy and grace of God is rightly recognized and understood, you can't help but rejoice, and the words of Zechariah sum it up best: "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, ...that we might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.*" May Zechariah's praise for the reality of God's plan of salvation be your praise—your joyous reality—all your remaining days and into all eternity.

In Christ's holy name...**AMEN**