

# "Call, Message, and Delivery"

Luke 1:57-80

June 24, 2012

The Nativity of St. John the Baptist

I assume you have your cards sent out, your shopping done, your tree up, and your nativity scenes assembled as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the nativity – the miraculous birth – of a child....St. John the Baptist. Although not quite as well known as the other Person whose nativity we celebrate every year, we all know who John is. John is a cousin of Jesus. Actually, their mothers – Elizabeth and Mary – were cousins (Luke 1:36). John was slightly older than Jesus. The angel Gabriel, when informing Mary that she would be the mother of the Savior, said, “Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month.” (John 1:36) That’s how we determine the date for our celebration today. If Jesus was born on the night of December 24<sup>th</sup>, then John, being six months older would be born on June 24<sup>th</sup>! Voila!

Now we know why we celebrate the birth of Jesus. He is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. But why do we remember the birth of St. John the Baptist? After all, honoring saints seems to be a bit too “Catholic”. But our Lutheran forefathers believed that saints could be honored in God-pleasing and helpful ways. Our Lutheran Confessions state, “It is also taught among us that saints should be kept in remembrance so that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith. Moreover, their good works are to be an example for us, each of us in his own calling.” (AC XXI) How does St. John the Baptist strengthen our faith and provide an example for us in good works? It is in his call, his message, and his delivery.

The call of St. John the Baptist is the perfect place to see the grace he received from God. John never volunteered to be the one who would prepare the way for the coming Messiah nor did he earn in some sort of try out. John was called by God’s grace. He was called even before he was born. The Old Testament lesson for today prophesies the coming of a voice crying in the desert to

prepare the way of the Lord. When John came calling in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord!", the Gospel writers saw that as a fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah.

He was called again right before his conception when the angel Gabriel appeared to John's father, the priest Zechariah, in the temple to announce the birth of a son to Zechariah and Elizabeth whom they were to name John. John would be great and would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. The news seemed so hard to believe that Zechariah didn't and his ability to speak was taken from him for that.

Finally, John's call took effect at his birth. He was named John (as the angel had commanded), despite the protests of family and friends who thought he should be named Zechariah after his father. When Zechariah was able to speak again, he spoke in detail of John's call. He said, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way." This was an astounding call for a new born baby and it was all by God's grace.

Our faith is strengthened by this when we see the grace John received because it reminds us that we have received the same grace. Each of you has been called by God by His grace. You did not choose God or qualify for His blessings by your behavior. In fact, each of us deserves only God's rejection, anger, and punishment for being sinners by nature and by action. Yet, we are beneficiaries of God's grace even before we were born. As Paul writes to the Ephesians, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will." (Eph. 1:4-6)

Your call took effect, not when you were born, but when you were born again in Holy Baptism. In your baptism, your sins were washed away and you were welcomed into the family of God. You were named, not only with your given name, but you were named as sons and daughters of the King. Each of us has been called to proclaim the Word of God within our vocation as pastor, teacher, doctor, insurance salesman, and so on to those whom we encounter in our vocations. In many ways,

this is just like St. John the Baptist, except without the miraculous birth. We rejoice and find strength for our faith in the undeserved calling of God.

The message of St. John the Baptist is the same as his calling. It was given to him by God's grace. It is not a message he made up, nor was it a message by which he personally would gain popularity for himself and others. He was, as his father proclaimed at birth, "to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins."

But, that's not where his message started. As a doctor does not start off with the cure, but first diagnoses the disease, John's message did not start with the cure, but with the disease: sin. As Isaiah prophesied, he was to prepare the way of the Lord. Why did the Lord's way need preparing? Sin had corrupted everything as the symbolic language of Isaiah points out. The crooked road needed to become straight. The valleys needed to be lifted up. The mountains needed to be made low. The uneven ground need to become level. And the rough places need to become smooth.

John came, preaching the wrath of God because of the sin of the people, surprisingly not to the pagans and unbelievers, but to the people of God. The people of God had become comfortable in their sin and felt that their outward connection to Israel would make them right with God. John declared, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matt 3:2) In other words, it is time to turn from sin and death and turn to forgiveness and life.

John then offered them what our second lesson calls "a baptism of repentance." After repenting, through baptism, they would be cleansed of their sins and receive the forgiveness which the Messiah would earn for them by His suffering and death on the cross. Then John could preach freely and joyfully about the salvation which was theirs through the forgiveness of their sins.

Here is where John becomes an example for us. We have been given a message to proclaim, just as he was. We are not free to make up our own message, or to proclaim a message which gains popularity for our church or for ourselves. We are to copy John and proclaim the law of God in all of its sternness. We are to proclaim the anger of God at sin, whether it is politically correct to do so or

not. We are to proclaim the guilt of sin even if it makes us feel bad and destroys our self esteem. And we are to begin proclaiming that, not to the evil world out there, but to the people of God in here. Start that proclamation by looking in the mirror. Like Israel of old, we, the people of God, have become comfortable in our sin. We think that, because of some outward connection to the people of God – being confirmed or having our name on a church roster, we are free to ignore God’s Word, refuse His gifts of preaching and the sacrament, and live our lives however we want. We are to call people, beginning with ourselves, to repentance – to turn away from sin and the way which leads to death and to turn to forgiveness and the way to life.

To those who repent, we are to proclaim good news, like John did: the forgiveness of sins. God is merciful. He forgives all sins for the sake of His Son, Jesus, who made full atonement for all sins on the cross. We are to declare that forgiveness in the message we proclaim. We are to give that forgiveness in Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Holy Supper. Then we can declare salvation through that forgiveness of sin. We are “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

We see the grace John was given in the message to proclaim and our faith is strengthened because we have received the same message. John’s proclamation of that message is an example for us, not only in the content (as I have already said), but in the delivery of that message, as well. Often times, people will deliver a message in a way which will gain positive feedback. We want people to like us and to accept our message. So we often draw attention to ourselves by the way we deliver a message. Not so for John the Baptist.

When John came preaching in the desert, many people were astonished by his message and though he might be the Messiah. How easy it would have been for John’s head to swell up a bit and for him to enjoy the attention. When people asked him who he was, Scripture says, “He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, ‘I am not the Christ.’” (John 1:20) He denied being Elijah or any other special Prophet, despite being badgered to say that he was. He simply said that He was one

preparing the way for and pointing to the Savior. He did not consider himself at all important in this process. In speaking of Jesus, John said, “the thongs of [His] sandals I am not worthy to untie.” (John 1:27). When people stopped following John and began following Jesus, John did not get upset. He was fine with that. He said, “He must become greater; I must become less.” (John 1:30)

John remained faithful in His calling to proclaim the Law and Gospel in His vocation. It didn't make him rich, but kept him poor. He lived in the desert alone on a meager diet and a plain wardrobe. It didn't make him popular, but got him in trouble. For condemning King Herod's adultery and refusing to compromise or kowtow, John was arrested. He didn't see the fulfillment of all which he was proclaiming, but he kept proclaiming anyway. He died before Jesus' ministry was completed. And that brings us to the last point in his delivery. His faithfulness didn't bring him a better life, but it caused him a premature death. His head was served up on a platter at the request of the woman who committed adultery with Herod and was too uncomfortable at John's proclamation of the Law.

Despite all of the opposition, John never lightened up. He never changed his message. He never compromised His proclamation. He preached the Law to all who were comfortable in their sin or in denial of their guilt. He preached the Gospel to those who repented and were uncomfortable in their guilt.

Oh that we were like John in our delivery of God's Word. Our proclamation is to be all about Christ and not about ourselves. We are to point to Christ and His work for us on the cross and in the empty tomb and not to our personal testimony, our church, or even our faith. It is all about Him and not about us. When I first got here and people would say, “Good sermon!” and I would respond, “Thank the Lord”, some people didn't understand and some were miffed. It is my way of reminding that that message is all about Him and His work and not about me and my proclamation of it. I would encourage the same for you. When you want to talk about Christ to others, make it all about him and not about you. Don't draw attention to yourself by your personal testimony or to our church and all of its wonderful programs. Proclaim Christ and Him crucified only!

And be faithful as John was. Let nothing stop you. Let nothing alter your message as many Christians and churches are tempted to do so that people will like them and join them. Do not expect acceptance and be surprised by rejection. Expect rejection and be surprised by acceptance. You may not see the fulfillment of that which you proclaim, either in the lives of those you are talking to or even in final outcome in this world. Your heads may end up on platters, too. I was talking to one Lutheran pastor recently who said (in all seriousness), "I expect to be jailed in my lifetime for being faithful to Christ." Be encouraged by the grace shown to St. John the Baptist and follow His example of faithfulness.

We celebrate the nativity (birth) of Jesus because it is the start of God's plan of salvation through His perfect life which gives us His holiness; His sacrificial death which gives us His forgiveness; and His triumphant resurrection which gives us His life for all eternity. We celebrate the nativity (birth) of St. John the Baptist because it is the start of the proclamation of Christ – His identity as Messiah and His work as Savior. Jesus completed the plan of salvation when He cried out, "It is finished!" and died. He ratified it by rising from the dead and ascending into heaven. But the proclamation of that still goes on until He comes again. Rejoice in being called by God's grace and given a message to proclaim just like St. John the Baptist. Continue proclaiming the message of Law and Gospel, sin and grace, death and life with all humility and with all faithfulness just like St. John the Baptist. This day marks a wonderful privilege and an important task. Maybe we SHOULD set up trees, send out cards, and buy gifts. Amen.