

24 June 2018  
Nativity of St. John the Baptist

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“A New Page, A New Name, A New Life”  
Text: Luke 1:57-80

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sometimes our names tell people what we do. Kids know what Bob the Builder does. Adults know what to call Len the Plumber for. And John the Baptist . . . yeah, he baptizes.

He wasn't always called John *the Baptist*, though. First he was just John. John, the son of Zechariah. And if his “baptist” name was surprising, his “John” name was surprising first. *Why in the world would you name your child that?* the people wondered. They wouldn't listen to Elizabeth when she said that was her son's name. They heard what she said and then went to Zechariah, for surely, the pangs of birth in an old woman had affected her mind! Surely, he would be called Zechariah after his father. Not John. Not this name that isn't even in the family.

But this was the name given to him by God. John, from the Hebrew *Jochanan*, which means “the Lord has shown favor.” For yes, the Lord had shown favor to old Zechariah and Elizabeth in giving them a child, but even more He had shown favor to Israel, and really to all the world. For this child would prepare the way for the Son of God, the Saviour of the world.

John would not have the name of his father, for he was not following in the footsteps of his father. He would follow in the footsteps of another from Israel's history - Elijah. He would not be a priest like his father, but a prophet. He would not serve in the Temple, but in the wilderness. He would not burn incense like his father, but with scorching rhetoric he would call sinners to repentance. And then this: he wouldn't just baptize the people of Israel and of all that region who came to him at the Jordan, he would do this, too - baptize Jesus into His ministry. John would fulfill his name by baptizing the Son of God in human flesh as He began His work of salvation. Yes, the Lord has shown favor, for He has sent His Son.

So with the coming of John the Baptist, the page turns from the Old Testament to the New. From prophecy to fulfillment. From *He's coming*, to *He's here*! So John's birth is a big deal. Which is why it's the only other birth we commemorate in the church besides Jesus.

And so Zechariah, as we heard today, after his lips were opened and he could speak again, talks about this fulfillment, that the Old Testament is now being fulfilled. The words of

Isaiah, the words of Malachi, the words of all the prophets, are happening, now. For John's miraculous birth means another miraculous birth. Not in an old lady and to her old husband, but in a virgin named Mary. When John was born, she was three months into her pregnancy - perhaps just beginning to show, we might say today. Soon enough, John would point to the son of Mary and say: not just son of Mary, but *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29)!

Many parents wonder what their children will be when they grow up, but Zechariah and Elizabeth knew. But being old when he was born, they probably didn't get to see their son in action - by that time, they had already received the fulfillment of their faith. But they would not have to wait long to see their son again; for their son to join them, as his life was cut short before he reached a ripe old age . . . by a vengeful wife using her seductive daughter to trick a lustful king into lopping his head off. Silencing the voice of the forerunner of the Messiah.

But the word was already out. John had done his job. It was time for him to go, and time for Jesus to do His work. And Jesus' work was this, as Zechariah put it:

***[B]ecause of the tender mercy of our God,  
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.***

So John's birth was the signal that *the tender mercy of God* has visited us and is now here. That light has arisen in the darkness of sin and death. And that there will be peace - not in the world, but between God and man.

For so had God promised! as Zechariah said, through the years, through the prophets. His promise to Abraham, David, and more. To deliver us and save us from the hand of our enemies. But not the enemy then named Rome, or nowadays the Taliban, or Isis, or Political Correctness. Much worse enemies than any of those. Enemies named sin, death, and hell. The people of this world, the things of this world, really aren't our enemies (Ephesians 6:12). You know that. Someone who is your enemy today might be your friend tomorrow, or vice versa. But sin, death, and hell - they will always be our enemies, seeking to consume us; seeking to separate us from our heavenly Father.

And they would! They *would* . . . were it not for the one God would send. The one Abraham believed in. The true Son of David who would die for David's sin. The one John the Baptist would point to. The one who would take our sin and atone for it with His own blood. The one who would lay down His life, allowing our death to slay Him, so that He could slay our death. And the one who, rising from death would storm the gates of hell so that they can no longer hold those who are in Him. In the one eternally begotten of the Father before all worlds, and then born of the virgin Mary in time. Our brother Jesus.

So we're not just celebrating a birth or remembering history today, but a birth and a history that has changed our lives and given us hope and a future. For to continue with what Zechariah said:

***[T]hat we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.***

That we might have a new life, in other words. Or maybe say it this way: a return to the life God always intended us to have; our original life, before sin. For ***holiness and righteousness*** were Adam and Eve before the Fall. ***Fear*** was Adam and Eve after the Fall. But Jesus has come that we might again serve God ***without fear***, and be ***holy and righteous*** again, in the forgiveness of our sins. For when your sins are forgiven, you are holy. When your sins are forgiven, you are righteous. When your sins are forgiven, you are delivered from the hand of your enemies and can live without fear.

So John the Baptist baptized. He baptized Jesus, the Deliverer. And Jesus baptized you, the delivered.

And I think that's a good word to use: *deliver*. Because we use that word - delivered, or delivery - when talking about birth. Hospitals have *Delivery Rooms*.

John the baptist worked in God's Delivery Room, and that's what the Church still is: God's Delivery Room. For this is the place where children of God are delivered, baptized, born through water and the Word. The place where the Lamb of God is delivering us from our enemies by cleansing us with His blood.

So to be ***delivered from the hand of your enemies*** is to have received life in the divine Delivery Room; a new life, set free from our captivity to sin, which leads to death, which leads to hell. A new life of forgiveness, which raises to life, which leads to heaven. It starts here with our new birth. Continues here as we are fed with the same Body and Blood of the Lamb of God born for us and given for us. And usually it ends here, too, when we bid farewell to saints who have died in the faith.

John's life didn't end at a ripe old age, though, but in prison. Yours might, too. Persecutions are increasing. Christians are following in the way of John in other countries. But on the other hand, John's life also didn't end in prison. Because he received a life that not even death can end. The life of Christ. And that is the life into which you too have been *delivered*.

And so a remembrance of the nativity of John the Baptist is not only a remembrance of his nativity here in this world and life, but also a remembrance of his birth into the next life; his

eternal birthday. And so, too, for you. You have a **birth certificate** for your life that will one day end, when you were delivered into this world. But you also have a **baptism certificate** for your new life, when you were delivered in Christ to a life that will never end. And one day there will be a **death certificate** with your name on it, that will mark not really your death, but your real birthday and delivery - your delivery *from* this world to the kingdom which will have no end.

For just as when a child was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth they said: His name is John, a name given by God, so too when you were born you received a name given by God. Your earthly parents gave you a name, but so did your heavenly Father. He gave you *His* name when He made you part of His family. He said: his name, her name, shall be Christian. That's what happened when you were *delivered* here, in baptism.

And because of that - that promise, that assurance, that name, that life already given to us here and now - we really can serve God without fear, just like John. Without fear of what others may think. Without fear of persecution or death. Without fear of messing up. Without fear of anything this world and life, or the people of this world, the high or the low, the kings or governments, might dish up for you.

For perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18). Not that your love is perfect - far from it! But God's love for you is. He who created you perfectly, redeemed you perfectly, and in the end will raise you perfectly. In His perfect love and with His name we can live without fear. And walk in the footsteps of John. Walking in the way of peace. Peace with God.

For the Lord has shown favor to you. And He won't stop. Even when the page turns for us. The page from this life to the next - whether you reach a ripe old age or not. The page when all is fulfilled - when *He's coming* becomes *He's here* for us. When we join Zechariah, Elizabeth, John, and all the saints. All who bear the name of the Father, who live in the Son, and who have been given the Holy Spirit. For into this name, into this life, you have been *delivered*. A new life, to live now; a new life to live forever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.