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Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist
24 June 2012
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Luke 1:57-80

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Two bits of news before we get to today's text—one newer than the other. This is from a National Geographic article this past week, supposedly discovering some of the bones of the ancient baptizer:

“Among the ruins of a Bulgarian church, the [discovered] remains include six human bones: a knucklebone from the right hand, a tooth, part of a cranium, a rib, and an ulna, or forearm bone. DNA and radiocarbon testing of collagen from the knucklebone show that the remains likely belonged to a Middle Eastern man who lived in the first century A.D., *which fits with the story of John the Baptist.*”¹

And here's the next story, this one's a bit older:

“Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and justly so, as a punishment of what he did against *John, who was called the Baptist*: for Herod killed him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; not to the putting away of some sins [only], but for the purification of the person... Now [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved by hearing his words.”²

That snippet comes from a report of the Jewish historian Josephus, around the year 93ad.

What do these two stories tell us?

There's something to this John, and always has been, who's *Nativity* we remember today.

Nativity is a word we've all but lost.

If it weren't for that obnoxious Christmas song from the 70's, *Feliz Navidad*, we probably wouldn't even know what it means!

Nativity means birth.

And so, at Christmas time, we have nativity scenes—

stable and manger, animals, angels, wise men, Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus.

You see it's hard to talk about a nativity without quickly coming to Christ's nativity—Christmas! So today is 6 months before Christmas Eve; 6 months before *The Nativity of Our Lord*.

Now before Christmas there's always Advent,

and where there's Advent, there's John the Baptist, also called, *John the forerunner*, John, “**the voice crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’**”

(Mk 1:3)

In Luke's Gospel, it's always John then Jesus.

¹ Ker Than, “John the Baptist's Bones Found?” *National Geographic News*, June 19, 2012.

² Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.5.2; *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. by William Whiston, commentary by Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999): 595.

The two stories are sewn together like a tapestry—try pulling one out and the other comes too.

It starts with a priest, Zechariah, and Elizabeth his wife, both up in years; and Elizabeth is barren. The Lord had not blessed them with children, but they prayed nonetheless.

And one day, while Zechariah burned incense in the Temple, the angel Gabriel, appeared, saying:

**“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard,
and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.
And you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth,
for he will be great before the Lord.
And he must not drink wine or strong drink,
and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit,
even from his mother’s womb.
And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,
and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah,
to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,
and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,
to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”**

(Lk 1:13-17)

That’s John. He’s our Elijah, our messenger, our prophet, our gift.

John is a gift, the sign of God’s grace. That’s even what the name ‘John’ means:

Yahweh is gracious. Or you could say, “*Yahweh is gift-giving,*” that’s what John means.

And after Zechariah spent 9 months unable to speak a word on account of his disbelief, he breaks forth into song at the birth of his son, at the birth of God’s gracious gift to Israel:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people.”

(1:68)

The grace of God is seen in John.

For in John’s birth, in his *nativity*,

God visits and redeems His people,
He raises up a horn of salvation for us,
He declares freedom from our enemies,
and He shows us the mercy that He promised long ago.

With John, there’s a whole lot of Gospel going on, a whole lot of that good news of salvation.

John is the prophet of the Most High and he goes before the Lord preparing His way.

Now this is all good, but it’s the stuff of Advent. It’s all pre-Christmas stuff,
preparing us for the Nativity of Christ, and we typically wait ‘til December for that!

What good is John in the middle of summer when it’s 104 outside?

Or, what does John have to say now that Christ has come in the flesh, gone to the cross,
been crucified, died, buried, and risen again?

What can John say now that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father?

Can he still prepare His way?

Can the Church still hear his voice?

Is there anyone out in the wilderness today?

Anyone calling to us repentance and to a baptism for the forgiveness of our sins?

Yes!

John still lives. The prophet still proclaims. The horn of salvation still sounds.

There's still a voice that cries out to you—

that calls you to the desert, to the wilderness, to the baptismal waters, to repentance.

Look at your life.

Is there still a need for repentance?

Is there still sin that clings to every thought and word that you speak?

Are you still hurting?

Is your world broken, or confused, or out of control?

That's the world of John.

And he's only good for those who hurt, for those who don't have it all together.

He's no motivator, that's for sure.

He won't help you live your best life now, or give you tips to regain control.

No self-help from John, no pulling it all together.

What you get from John is Jesus.

You face up to your sin, your failure, your death—and then find that none of it is yours.

It's all Christ's. It all belongs to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

So is John any good for us in the middle of summer?

Is he any good for us some 2000 years after that first nativity?

Well, maybe not his ulna and knuckle bones, even if they were his,

but his word is certainly good for us.

For John gives us Jesus, he gives us salvation, he gives us hope and joy and life.

Zechariah sings of this in today's Gospel:

**“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins.”**

(1:76-77)

John speaks into our dark and broken and hurting world of a light.

He speaks of a salvation from our fears and enemies and our pain.

He proclaims the forgiveness of sins that comes only in Jesus.

And for that, John and his nativity are worthwhile every day.

For everyday we could use a bit of repentance.

And every day we could use the Gospel,

the word that declares us holy, free,

and that guides our feet into the way of peace.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit