

Sermon: 4th Sunday AF. Pent. – The Nativity of St. John the Baptist

Text: Luke 1:57-80

Theme: John the Baptist and Jesus

Goal: God accomplishes His plans through His chosen ones.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: John the Baptist was born exactly six months before Jesus. (Today we have exactly six months to go till Christmas) From the very beginning of his story, God revealed His plans about John. The angel Gabriel, when he announced the birth of John to the old priest Zechariah, said: “He will go on before the Lord” (Luke 1:17). And Zechariah sang when his son was born: “He will go on forward the Lord to prepare the way for Him”. He is called “*the forerunner of Jesus*”, because this was his task: to prepare people for the coming Messiah. We know his story, we follow his life in the Bible as he began to preach and to baptize along the Jordan River, when he baptized Jesus, and how he was killed by Herod the King.

Today we will focus this message on the song his father sang on the day the boy was circumcised.

I – God's mission and Jesus

Filled with the Holy Spirit, his father Zechariah prophesied first about the coming Messiah, and then about his son, the baby John. It seems that Zechariah was ignoring his son, putting him to the second place focusing on the Messiah and on God's promises first.

A) Zechariah praised the Lord, God of Israel, because “He has come... to His people”. The Messiah was still in the womb of Mary, but Zechariah was sure about His coming to His people. This was the faith and the hope of the people of the Old Testament, that once God would come to visit His people. And the time has come.

B) All prophecies pointed to this visit of God to His people. Zechariah recalls: “as He (God) said through His holy prophets of long ago.” Two main details are mentioned by Zechariah: 1st) The Messiah would come from the house of David, from the royal line. Joseph and Mary were descendant of King David; and Jesus was called as “the son of David”. This points to the Kingdom of Jesus, mentioned by Jesus several times in His teachings and preaching. The disciples were waiting for this Kingdom, and Jesus established His church when He sent His Holy Spirit on Pentecost Day. - 2nd) Zechariah also mentioned God's “holy covenant and the oath He swore to our father Abraham”. This links Jesus to the entire Old Testament. We call this “*the red wire*” that goes through the Bible from the beginning to the end, binding all prophecies and events together in Jesus. Without this, the Bible is just a story book. But with the link to Jesus, the Bible is the Book of God's Story and how He intervenes to help and to save humankind.

C) The work of the Messiah and the goal of God's promises are clearly exposed by Zechariah in his song: “He has come and has redeemed His people. He has raised a horn of salvation to us... salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us...to rescue us from the hand of our enemies.” The big enemy is Satan, and he works through his agents: sin, the world, and our own flesh, the enemies of God's people. They always try to grab us and take us out from the gracious hands of God. By His death and resurrection, Jesus got victory over the enemies. Zechariah says that this happens “because of the tender mercy of our God... and to show mercy to our fathers”. He gives us His victory free, by grace and by faith, out of mercy and love! When we believe in Him and look for refuge in Him only, He is our Redeemer and Saviour!

D) God saved us for eternal life, and with a purpose for this life: “To enable us to serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days”. Luther expressed the same thought in his explanation of the 2nd Article of the Creed: “*Jesus Christ...has redeemed me... that I may be His own and live under Him in His Kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness...*”

II – God's Mission and John the Baptist

After praising God for what He did and does for His people, Zachariah now speaks about his son John: But even then the focus is not John, but the Saviour again!

In a very tender way Zechariah said, looking to the little baby in his arms: “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most high.” - We read in Luke 7:24-28: “Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: What did you go out into the desert to see? ..A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet...I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John!” John is considered the last of the prophets, linking the Old Testament to the New Testament.

As a prophet, John had the privilege to see what the other prophets didn't see. The others had prophesied for four hundreds years and more before Christ. John was contemporary to Jesus; he not only prophesied about but **saw** the Messiah! He even baptized the Messiah and witnessed the Holy Spirit coming upon Him and he heard the voice of the Father, proclaiming about Jesus: “You are my Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22).

His task as a prophet was: “to go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him”, according to the prophesy of the Old Testament about him, as Jesus mentioned: “This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way before you.” (Luke 7:22). How did he prepare the way to the Saviour? Giving “His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God”. John called people to repentance and faith, and he baptized them for forgiveness of their sins. And he always said that someone more powerful was to come (Luke 3:16): The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

Zechariah speaks in a very poetic way about Jesus, echoing some prophecies of the Old Testament: “The rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine

on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.” Isaiah had prophesied: “The people living in darkness have seen a great light; and those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16).

The goal of the ministry of John and of Jesus can be summarized in this short verse at the end of Zechariah's song: “To guide our feet into the paths of peace.” Peace with God through the forgiveness of sins, and peace among us by the love of God pours out into our hearts. Peace is all we need! It is ours by the mercy of our God!

III – God's mission and us now

What do we have in common with that great prophet John the Baptist? God does His work through His chosen ones, even now. Peter wrote about us: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you **may declare** the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10). Like Zechariah, who praised the faithfulness of God sending His Son, like John, who prepared the people to receive the Messiah, we were chosen, called and saved to serve and praise our God and Saviour, and to proclaim His works to everyone. The examples of God's servants in the Bible are like “a great cloud of witnesses” surrounding us (Hebrew 12:1) and going forward with us, shining the light of God into this world as a testimony of God's mercy and love to all. May God, in His mercy, be with us always and bless our testimony as He did with His prophets and apostles. Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle
Cape Town, 24 June 2012 (Reading Service).