

Nativity of John the Baptist, June 24th 2018
St. John's Lutheran Church, Summit, NJ
Luke 1:57-80

Grace be to you and peace from God our Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giving Spirit. Amen.

Today is the feast day on which we celebrate the Nativity of John the Baptist who was undoubtedly one of the stranger characters in the New Testament. Every Sunday for us Christians is a feast day because every Sunday we celebrate our Lord's resurrection in Word and Sacrament.

Easter is our principal festival but there are other biggies like Christmas, Epiphany, and Pentecost.

Most of the time we don't celebrate the "Lesser Festivals" unless they fall on a Sunday; and even then, we have the option of celebrating them or of using the lessons appointed for "ordinary or green time". Lesser festivals commemorate events in the life of Christ or Christ's presence in the lives of the saints and observing them is a way of reclaiming and upholding what we mean when we say in the Creed: "We believe in the communion of saints."

So today we celebrate the Nativity of John the Baptist. John is probably one of the most memorable people in the Bible, in part because of what he ate and what he wore. His diet of locusts and wild honey is not something most of us would eat, and his clothing made of camel's hair and the leather belt that he wore around his waist would not be what my father would have called, "a picture of sartorial splendor". But John had at least two things going for him. His parents were devout and beloved Jews, and he was the older cousin of Jesus.

John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth were both from priestly orders and they had wanted children for a long time but they were unable to conceive. There was no such thing as invitro fertilization in their day and no possibility for surrogates to bear them a child. All they had were fervent prayers that seemingly went unanswered for a very long time. But their prayers didn't go

unanswered forever because the angel Gabriel had appeared to Zechariah in a dream and told him that Elizabeth was going to conceive and bear a son and that his name was to be John. “Right”, thought Zechariah. “I don’t think so. Not in our old age.”

As Gabriel promised though, Elizabeth *did* conceive and bear a child; and on the day he was to be circumcised and named, she and Zechariah did exactly what Gabriel had told them to do --- they named him John.

The scene in the temple must have been somewhat amusing. Here are these two senior citizens presenting their child for ritual ceremonies with all the neighbors present. When it’s time to name the baby, Elizabeth says that his name is John. Most of the time, a son would have been named after his father, so the neighbors protested. “What’s wrong with you? None of your relatives has this name.” And they began motioning to Zechariah, who, if you recall, had been struck mute because he didn’t believe Gabriel’s prophecy. When they started waving him over, Zechariah pointed to a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” All of the neighbors were amazed. They were probably even more astounded when, after writing John’s name, Zechariah was suddenly able to speak again and immediately started praising God.

Needless to say, the neighbors wondered about these strange things and were afraid of what they meant. But they talked about them throughout the Judean countryside and asked, “What then will this child become? For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.” Today’s text ends with these words: “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.”

John the Baptist was a forerunner of Jesus; God’s public service announcement in the flesh. He was sent to get people ready for the Messiah, to get them ready for the one whom God was

going to send to mend this messed up and broken world then and now. When John began his ministry, he went into the desert, into the wilderness to preach so he could get away from all the insanity and noise of the city. And he was just weird enough that people followed him out to the desert to hear what he had to say.

John's message to the people was very clear. "I'm not the one; I'm not the Messiah, he's coming after me. In fact, I'm not even worthy enough to untie the strap on his sandals. But if you want to get ready to meet him you've got to turn your hearts back to God, you've got to repent, live right, and trust that God can still forgive and redeem this world and the people in it, including you."

Well, the people actually started believing what John was preaching. And I think they did so in part because he preached with passion; he preached with a righteous anger and he literally lost his head to the Herod regime because he had the audacity to speak truth to power. John was courageous enough to confront the governor and the government of his day about the immorality in which they were living and the despair that they were causing!

How fitting and how sad that on the day in which we give thanks for John's life and witness that we too should have to voice our righteous indignation about the immoral way that thousands of migrant families, and especially their children are being treated because they've come to this country seeking a better life.

Politicians are worried that their chances for reelection might be damaged this fall, but aren't equally as concerned, if not more so, for the irreparable damage that our country is doing to undocumented children who are being treated as criminals and ripped apart from their families. As disgusted as they may be about what's going on, they have yet mustered the power or the will to change this immoral policy. Yes, our immigration system is severely broken; but it will not be fixed

by putting infants and toddlers in “tender-age shelter” or kids and teenagers in cages and tent cities that look more like internment camps than places where children can thrive. Or shuffling them to shelters throughout the country under the cloak of darkness. We are damaging children for generations to come.

And it can't possibility escape our notice that these are little brown children, little brown babies and toddlers, and children who are being taken from their parents – pawns in a game called “chicken” to see who will cave on this immigration debacle.

John came to help people prepare for the Messiah, for Jesus. He came to announce the very One who knew what it was like to be an undocumented immigrant. Jesus was an accompanied minor when he and his parents had to flee to Egypt to escape the violent gangs of the Herod regime. He knew what it was like to be arrested and detained because he stood against the policies of the Roman empire and the Jewish religious leaders who were in collusion with them that kept people subjugated and poor.

Jesus knew what it was like to be mocked and scorned; and he took all of that with him to the cross for the sake of bringing the Gospel --- of bringing God's good news to those who lived under repressive and bad news every day. Jesus knew and knows the plight of our immigrant brothers and sisters and others who live in the throes of poverty and the shadow of death. He preached about this in Matthew 25, when he said, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.’

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, or thirsty, or naked or a stranger and welcomed you? And the king will answer them, 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' "As you did it to one of the least". That's the measure by which we in this country need to gauge our policies; whether it's health care or immigration or how we care for our disabled and elderly citizens...

Theologian Krister Stendhal once said that people come to church for bread, not a recipe; and that's true. We all want to be fed at church so we can in turn feed the world. But maybe today we need both the Bread of Life that we will receive at the Lord's Supper, and a recipe for how to feed the world.

It's been heartening to hear the word "Lutheran" so often in the news this past week, and we've heard it because our church has been present on the southern border of our country for years, caring for migrant children. We've been there through programs like AMMPARO, *Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities*, caring for the most vulnerable among us. Our presiding bishop and other church leaders have been there in Texas standing with the poor. She was at the Elizabeth detention center earlier this year along with Pastor Ramon Collazo who is there every Sunday, and with others in our synod who are doing what Jesus said --- visiting the prisoners and those who are captive.

We have been and we continue to be deeply involved in this struggle for justice on behalf of our immigrant brother and sisters. And we do so simply because it is right; because it is what God wants us to do; because we follow in the footsteps of saints like John the Baptist who spoke truth to power and prepared the way of our Lord. Let us give thanks today for the gift of our brother John and pledge ourselves anew to work for the coming of the compassionate and just kingdom of God in our time, and in every place in which God sends us to serve. Amen. (Rev. Gladys G. Moore)