

PENTECOST: IN FAITH WE RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Nativity of St. John the Baptist

June 24, 2007

Malachi 3:1-4

Psalm 141

Acts 13:13-26

Luke 1:57-68 [68-80]

The Last “Old Testament” Prophet

*On Jordan's banks the Baptist's cry
Announces that the Lord is nigh.
(Charles Coffin, 1676 - 1749)*

The words from this hymn invoke those biblical images of John the Baptist as the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness” called to “prepare the way of the Lord” (Mark 1:3, *NRSV*). In quoting from Isaiah 40:3 with its reference to the exiled Israelites’ journey home from Babylon, the gospel writer portrays John as one who is called to herald a new “exodus” with the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Further, drawing upon Malachi 3:1, the opening lines of Mark’s Gospel introduce us to John as the Lord’s messenger.

Because John warned people of God’s impending judgment (Luke 3:7-9) and announced the coming of the promised Messiah (Luke 3:15-17), he is also referred to as the last “Old Testament prophet.” In the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and John, we first meet John in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But, it is only in Luke’s Gospel that we learn of the circumstances surrounding his birth.

John’s birth is foretold by means of an angelic revelation (1:8-17) to the aged priest, Zechariah, whose wife, Elizabeth, was barren and beyond child-bearing age (1:7). At that time, barrenness was regarded as a source of shame; hence, Elizabeth’s pregnancy demonstrates God’s favor toward her and the means by which God took away her disgrace (1:25). And John’s birth is a sign of God’s mercy and power to those who trust in the Lord’s promises (Luke 1.58, 80).

The nativity of John is reminiscent of the Old Testament accounts of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7), Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), and Elkanah and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-2, 9-18). Just as Sarah was beyond the age of child bearing, so, too, was Elizabeth; and like Isaac [and Rebekah] and Hannah [and Elkanah], Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed for a child (Luke 1:13).

Luke’s account of the annunciation and birth of John testify to the unexpected and surprising ways in which God’s redemptive plan unfolds. The angel prophesied that Zechariah and Elizabeth’s child would “go ahead” and “get people ready for the Lord”

(Luke 1:17, *CEV*) and that their child would be a great servant filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The angel Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah ends with Zechariah being struck mute because he failed to believe the angel's words. But eight days after John's birth, Zechariah's silence is miraculously broken when he obediently writes down the child's name and, filled with the Holy Spirit, praises God and speaks a prophecy about his newborn son (Luke 1:76-79).

While John may be "the last Old Testament prophet," he is also a forerunner of what would be new – announcing that "the kingdom of heaven will soon be here" (Matthew 3:2, *CEV*) and that one more powerful than he would be coming to baptize with "the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16).

The nativity of John the Baptist reminds us that "nothing is impossible for God" (Luke 1:37, *CEV*). The despair of an aged couple gave way to hope, and those who wait upon the Lord are able, like Elizabeth, to exclaim with joy "what the Lord has done" (Luke 1:24, *CEV*).

The Reflection for the Nativity of St. John the Baptist was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This day we remember to pray: Almighty God, you called John the Baptist to pave the way and prepare people for the Lord's coming. Like John, help us to be faithful witnesses and open and prepare our hearts to welcome and receive the Lord. Amen.

Activity Corner: "Messages of Hope"

Supplies needed: Bible; Bible Concordance; 8-1/2" x 11" construction paper; markers; pens or pencils; scissors; glue or paste; old magazines or greeting cards.

Read Luke 1: 67-80. What is hopeful in this passage? What promises are mentioned (verses 68-75)? What does Zechariah prophesy about his son (verses 76-79)?

Look up the word "hope" in a Bible Concordance and select a Bible verse that includes the word "hope." Fold a sheet of construction paper in half and, on the front, affix a picture from a magazine or a greeting card that is keyed to the selected Bible verse. Copy the Bible verse on the inside and write a short message of hope for someone you know who is in need of encouragement. Make several cards and deliver these "messages of hope" to a local hospital, convalescent home, other community organizations, or to homebound neighbors.