

The Lord is Gracious

In the name of him who is the revealed glory of the Lord, dear friends in Christ: The Holy Scriptures record the birth of many of the human figures who played important roles in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation: that of Isaac, Jacob, the twelve patriarchs of the tribes of Israel, Moses, and several others. But only two of these births are recognized by a special day on the Church's calendar: that of our Lord Jesus, which we celebrate at Christmas, and exactly six months before that, the birth of his forerunner and herald, John the Baptizer, which we celebrate today.

Luke's Gospel gives us the details. As is often the case in the biblical storyline, it's an account in which the names of the characters are significant. They help tell the story. We begin with Zechariah, John's father. His name means "The Lord remembers". What does the Lord remember? Well we're told later, "He remembers his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father, Abraham". That's the promise to send the Savior into the world who would come from the descendants of Abraham. It's the covenant that runs throughout the whole Old Testament. The Lord remembers it. It's always on his mind.

The trouble is that Zechariah has all but forgotten it; or if he remembers, he's all but given up hope in it. Recall that he was an elderly priest. It happened one day while his division was on duty at the temple in Jerusalem that he was chosen by lot to be the one who would enter the Holy Place, offer incense on the Altar, and pray the prayers of the nation before the Lord. It was a rare honor. And Zechariah knew that at his advanced age he wouldn't have it many more times. He took the duty seriously; but gone were the youthful idealism and hope that he once had. Decades before when he began his career, he had an optimistic expectation that the Lord would act during his lifetime, that he would see something toward the promise being fulfilled while he was on watch. It had been 400 years since the last legitimate prophet spoke an oracle of the Lord. Surely the time must be right. Along with countless others he often prayed, "When, O Lord? How long will you delay? When will you come to the aid of your people?" The answer, it seemed, was always "not yet". As he approached the end of his career it's safe to say that a certain cynicism had descended upon. He no longer expected to see any part of the promise fulfilled in his lifetime.

And that wasn't the only deep disappointment that afflicted him. When he began his career all those years ago he had a lovely young bride named Elizabeth whom he loved dearly and with whom he hoped to raise a large family. It never happened. Elizabeth never showed any sign of having conceived. Each and every month for twenty years and more he'd seen the pain on her face and the sad shake of her head that told him, "No. Not this time." And now when most of the men of his generation were happily bouncing grandchildren on their knees, Zechariah felt that gnawing emptiness even more keenly.

So many years of frustration both professionally and personally had taken their toll on him. So now when Zechariah stood at the Altar of Incense and prayed – prayed that old, familiar prayer "Rend the heavens, O Lord, and come down; come to the aid of your people. Send forth the Savior you promised so long ago" – he did so mechanically, by rote, without any real confidence in what he was saying.

An angel of the Lord suddenly appears at his side, frightening him. The angel says, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard. And what’s more, your wife Elizabeth will soon bear you a son. You are to give him the name John. He will be great before the Lord. You will be filled with joy and many will rejoice at his birth, for he is the one whom the prophets foretold will go before the Lord to prepare his way.”

An amazing announcement, one Zechariah that would have been overjoyed to hear in his youth; but now he didn’t believe it. “How shall I know this?” he asked the angel. “I’m an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.” He demanded a sign as proof – as if having an angel appear beside you in the temple to deliver a message straight from the mouth of God wasn’t sign enough. The angel was not pleased with Zechariah’s lack of faith. “You don’t believe my words. You don’t believe the words you speak when you pray. So, you won’t speak at all until these things are fulfilled.” And so it was. Zechariah left the temple and stood before the people who were waiting for him to pronounce the benediction to conclude the service. He couldn’t do it – almost as if he had forgotten the words. The Lord remembers his word, but Zechariah – “the Lord remembers” – didn’t. He did remember, however, what the angel told him. And shortly thereafter, when his division had completed its rotation at the temple, he returned to his home in the hill country of Judea.

Which brings us to Elizabeth, his wife, waiting for him at home. I regret that the Scriptures don’t record for us how that homecoming played out. I’ll bet it was one interesting “conversation” as the mute priest tried to explain what had happened and the news the angel had delivered. We do know that shortly thereafter Elizabeth conceived the son of which the angel had spoken; so one way or another, she got the message. Her name means “God is my Sabbath”. And Sabbath is a theologically loaded term. In Hebrew it means rest. It also means oath or covenant. And it is the number seven, which is biblically associated with Gospel themes like forgiveness and the ministry of the Church. So all of that is packed into her name: God is my rest: he does the work; I rest in him. God is my covenant: he himself is the promised One who comes to save us. God is my forgiveness: he takes my sin away.

And so he does. It’s what the ministry of Jesus was all about. And while Elizabeth didn’t likely live to see it fulfilled, she did see its beginning. Recall that when she was six months along carrying the future baptizer, she had a visitor: the Virgin Mary who had only recently conceived the Christ child. Without being told by any human agent, Elizabeth knew that. When she first saw Mary, she exclaimed “Why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” What’s even more interesting is that yet the unborn John knew it too. Speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit Elizabeth said to Mary, “As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”

Mary attended Elizabeth during her third trimester, and was almost certainly present when the baby came. In fact St. Luke, who recorded these events, probably got the story straight from her. What’s nice about this, then, is we’ve got Mary, the mother of our Lord, also providing some rest to Elizabeth. Caring for an infant is hard work. And it doesn’t get any easier when you’re “over the hill” like Elizabeth was.

And speaking of that infant, we come at last to John. His name means “the Lord is gracious”. That’s what today’s text is all about. It shows the Lord’s grace – that is, his unmerited favor – to an elderly couple whose lives were filled with joy when they were blessed with a son. It shows the Lord’s grace to his people in beginning to unfold his plan of salvation in sending the forerunner of Jesus, the one who would prepare his way. And that’s why the name is significant. The family and friends of Zechariah and Elizabeth all naturally assume that the

child will be named after his father. You see, for them, it's "business as usual". The Lord remembers (and remembers and remembers and remembers generation after generation – but he never does anything about it). But no, this is something different. The time has come. The arm of the Lord is being revealed. The Lord is gracious. He has come to the aid of his people. He has lifted up a horn of salvation in the house of his servant David – which is a reference to the Christ child in Mary who is at this point only beginning her second trimester.

Zechariah doesn't have to see it to believe it. What he formerly doubted, now he knows for certain. And when he writes upon the tablet, "His name is John" the curse he incurred for his lack of faith is lifted. His tongue loosed, immediately he launches into a hymn of praise to the Lord for his grace to his people. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited his people and redeemed them."

And then halfway through his song, he changes the subject. He now addresses his infant son, prophesying what his ministry shall be: one of God's grace to his people. "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way." How? "To give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

It's funny, we usually think of John as all hellfire and brimstone, a preacher of nothing but pure Law. But that's a misread on his ministry. It's true that he proclaimed the coming wrath of God in all of its frightful fury; but he did so to bring sinners to repentance, so they would see their need for forgiveness and salvation. To those who repented, John proclaimed the Gospel. He baptized them for the forgiveness of their sins. And he pointed them to the One coming after him whose sandals, John said, he was unworthy to untie.

John didn't preach about himself; he preached the Christ. He preached the Lord's grace through faith in him. And he had the honor of revealing the Christ to his disciples when he pointed at Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." That guy, right there. The Lord is gracious. You're looking at the proof of it.

And properly understood this ministry of John to proclaim the Lord's grace continues in the Church today. We see it so clearly in Holy Baptism. What could be more gracious than the Lord taking a child (or an adult, for that matter) conceived and born in sin, subject to his wrath and under the curse, and with a few words and a couple of handfuls of water announcing that's all changed. Now this person belongs to Christ. Their sin is washed away. They've been given the gift of the Holy Spirit who now indwells them. They've been made a child of God and an heir of everlasting life.

We see this grace being outpoured when we confess our sins and receive the absolution: the proclamation of God's forgiveness in Christ. We hear this grace revealed in the preaching of the Gospel. And we see again this grace most clearly in the Supper when, after the words of institution the celebrant lifts the elements, proclaims the peace of the Lord, and the congregation responds with the words of John, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." We're looking at him who comes to us in his body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

The Lord is gracious indeed. He is gracious to us. And he is even now graciously preparing us to receive the Lord Jesus when he comes again in glory to judge all humankind. May he keep us by his grace, and use us to extend it to others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!