

The Nativity of St. John the Baptist
June 24, 2007

Rev. David A. Kind
University Lutheran Chapel
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

INTO THE WILDERNESS

Isaiah 40:1-5; Luke 1:57-80

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Not since the days of the patriarchs had such a miraculous birth taken place. The parents, the priest Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth, were among the faithful in Israel. St. Luke says: "They were both righteous bore God walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." In other words they had faith in God's promises. They believed in the Messiah their Savior, who was yet to come, and trusted in Him for salvation; a trust based on God's Word through His holy prophets. But the words that came to Zacharias as he served in the temple at the altar of incense were harder for him to believe. The angel Gabriel appeared to him telling him that his prayers had at last been answered; and that he, an old priest, and his wife, who also was old and had been barren her whole life, would have a son. Everything he knew about the way things worked in this life told him that this could not be true. Even though he knew the story of Abraham and Sarah, how they had been told that they would have a son in old age, and how God miraculously fulfilled that promise by giving them Isaac, he found it difficult to believe. He knew his own body, that he was an old man; and he knew his wife's body too, that she was both old and barren. Perhaps God worked out such things in the past, he must have thought, but that was a long time ago; the time of prophecy was long since past, for there had not been a real prophet in Judah since the days of Malachi some 400 years past.

And so he says to the angel: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." And so the angel offers him a little bit of proof. He strikes him dumb and tells him that he will remain without speech until the promise is fulfilled. And why this kind of proof that seems more like a curse? Because, as Gabriel said, "you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time." Though Zacharias believed the Scriptures to be true, and trusted God's messianic promises, there was still within him some vestiges of unbelief, the old Adam striving against faith. Not all of Zacharias' heart was God's garden, there was still some dry desert there too.

And it is easy to see why Zacharias had difficulty believing the angel's words to him. God was not sending angels to people on a regular basis anymore. As I said before there had not been a genuine prophet in Israel for a very long time. But there was a promise that another prophet would come, the promise spoken of by Isaiah which we heard read today and by that last prophet of old, Malachi, who said: "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts. There would be one more prophet and then the Messiah Himself, God in the flesh, would come to His people.

By the time the child is born to Zacharias and Elizabeth, the old priest has long since given up his objections to the angelic message, for not only has he been mute the entire time, but he has seen proof of the promise's fulfillment as he watched his wife's belly grow large. Moreover Zacharias was probably not unaware that his wife's niece, Mary, a young virgin, was also miraculously pregnant, for Mary had come to see Elizabeth and at her greeting the unborn prophet leapt for joy in Elizabeth's womb. And Zacharias and his wife knew that the words of the prophets were being fulfilled.

And so when his son is at last born, Zecharias indicates that his name should be called "John" according to the angel's words to him. And at once his voice returns. Unbelief concerning his own condition has given way to faith in what God has said to him. And Zecharias, the old priest, is filled with the Holy Spirit and begins to confess what he now believes and to preach concerning the destiny of his son.

We know this little sermon as the Benedictus, one of the canticles of the New Testament that is chanted in the church's daily prayers, which begins with the venerable words that begin so many ancient Hebrew prayers: "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel..." And what does the old priest bless God for doing? Not so much for giving him a child as for sending the Messiah, whose way his own son would prepare: "for He has visited and redeemed His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David." Zechariah's canticle is about Christ, and whatever is said about John is said in relation to his task as the forerunner of Christ. "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercies of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

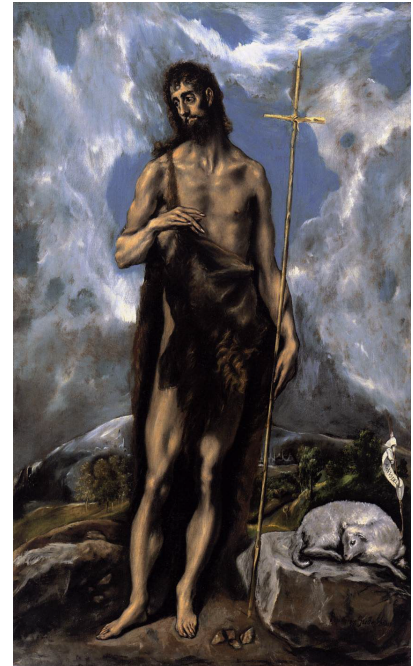
And so John's task is laid before us. He will go before the Lord to prepare His way. And how will He prepare the way of the Lord? He will do it through preaching. He will proclaim that Christ is come and that all should repent of their sins and believe on Him. He will prepare the way of Christ by proclaiming Christ's own Word and by testifying that His promises to Israel are now being fulfilled. What Gabriel was sent to do for his father, John will now do for all Israel. And with this preaching and the baptism that accompanied it, John will give knowledge of salvation and forgiveness of sins to all who hear and believe.

But the human heart does not easily believe. The human heart is a wasteland in terms of its knowledge and grasp of the Divine. It was not always so. In Eden our first parents dwelt in God's own garden, and their hearts were, so to speak, gardens where God deigned to dwell. They knew God because they received God's Word to them and looked to Him for all good. They found their sustenance, their being, their righteousness, in His giving and looked to no other. They believed and trusted God.

But that pure and simple faith came to an end with the fall into sin. Satan lured them away from trusting God's Word and received God's gifts, lured them into doubting God's truthfulness and into an attempt to grasp for themselves that which could only be had through God's giving. And thus what was once a garden became a barren wilderness. Where God dwelt within them before, now sin dwelt and ruined everything. And thus the man and his wife were thrust out of the Garden into the wilderness. They had pushed God out, and now were themselves thrust out from God.

And so Luke tells us: “So the child”, John, “grew and became strong in the spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.” Why did John go out into the desert? Why not go and preach in the streets of Jerusalem? John goes into the desert because the desert is realm of sin, the realm of the devil. “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Going out into the desert is an attack on the devil, an attack on sin, an attack on unbelief. The Word of the Lord must be proclaimed in the wilderness that the wilderness might become again a garden.

Of course John’s being in the wilderness was a sign that the Word of the Lord be proclaimed into the wilderness of the human heart. And so he did not preach to the dust or to the brambles, but to people. And when the Word He preached was believed, He baptized them into Christ. He was, through the proclamation of the Word of Christ, preparing the way for the Word made flesh. He was cultivating gardens in the wilderness where faith could take root, grow and flourish. As Isaiah prophesied concerning the coming of Christ and His Gospel: “Behold, your God... will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water...” And that is what the Word of the Lord does. It is life-giving, like water to a parched land. It makes a garden of life where there had only been death and desert.



Our hearts are the deserts where the Word of Christ now comes. As John went out into the wilderness to prepare a way for Christ to come, so now the Word of the Lord goes forth to us to prepare in us an abode for God. But our hearts are naturally dried, dead, places. The corruption that was accomplished in the ancient garden through the serpent’s cunning and man’s sin has thoroughly corrupted our nature, so that we are born with hearts that are dead toward God and hate God, hearts that are inhospitable to His presence like deserts. Oh we think we want to know God, people claim to be searching for him, claim to want to be spiritual; but when they actually encounter Him they recoil in unbelief. God is cannot be grasped, you see, on your own terms. He must be received as He is and as He gives Himself. He does not care about your homespun “spirituality” any more than He honored Adam and Eve’s attempts to gain a greater and more active spiritual life through their rebellion against Him. And your works and your righteousnesses apart from Christ earn you nothing with God, for done apart from faith that trusts in Him alone, they are done in unbelief and rebellion.

So what is the answer? How do the deserts of our hearts become alive again? And once they have been made alive by God how are tended and kept? The answer to both questions is through the Word of Christ and trust in His salvation. We cannot grasp God, so God comes to us. With His Word He begins to clear the wilderness by exposing it for what it is. His Law, which we do not keep, cuts through our false spiritualities and through our unbelief to show us that the hearts which we thought healthy and in no need of God’s presence or grace, are actually places of sin and

death. You know your sins if you but look at yourself and your way of life. You can see reflected in God's demands your failures to live in righteousness. But you are shown this not to leave you there in sin and death, but to draw us to repentance that you might find life again.

And repentance means not only turning away from your wilderness and desert ways, but looking again to Him for your good and for your goodness. And He comes to you not only with Words that expose your need, but with the Word that answers that need. He says to you.: I wish to make my abode in your heart. I have taken away your sinfulness and all that makes you a desert place by going into the desert for you, by defeating Satan on the cross and by paying for all of your sins in my death. And now I send my Spirit to you through My Word and preaching that you may believe and have life. I give you living waters in Baptism and in my Gospel that give life to your soul. I give you food that does not perish in my Word and Supper. Be not unbelieving, He calls, but believing.

And when Christ begins to dwell in you by His Word, He calls your sinful heart His garden and makes it so. Yes, your heart is now God's garden in which to dwell, though you still feel it to be a wilderness. You are righteous, even though you don't feel righteous. You are saved even though you know yourself to be a sinner. Why do I say this to you? Because God says so. He has declared it to be so, and therefore it is true. And so like Zacharias and Elizabeth who were declared to be righteous by God and yet struggled against unbelief, God has declared you to be righteous and sends you His Word as He sent it to them, that you may also believe that His gift of salvation is your own.

And now Zacharias' song at the birth of St. John can be your song. Now through His Word God has visited and redeemed you. He has raised up a horn of salvation for you in Christ. He has fulfilled His promises made through the prophets for you, has saved you from your enemies, has performed His mercy and remembered His holy covenant for you. And now you are delivered from your enemies. And now he has visited your dark and shadowy, wilderness, desert, heart and brought light and peace through Christ Jesus whose way John prepared; to Him, our Lord, be all honor and glory now and forever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧