

March 5, 2014
The Life of John the Baptist

John's Birth
Luke 1:57-66

Opening words: Lent is the Christian season of preparation prior to Easter. Excluding Sundays, it lasts for 40 days. The number forty is one of those sacred numbers in the Bible. It rained for 40 days and nights in Noah's story. The Hebrews wandered for 40 years before entering into the Promised Land. Jesus fasted 40 days before being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. The resurrected Jesus walked the face of this world for 40 days before ascending into heaven. This year, Easter is April 20, so Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, is March 5.

Lent is the time to examine yourself and discover what is holding you back for a closer walk with God. How easy it is to see the imperfections in others and be blind to our own. We look good next to the cast of characters on the evening news wearing the orange jump suits. However, comparing ourselves to Jesus is another story. Our imperfections are suddenly clear. The Wesleyan tradition has always encouraged us to strive toward perfection. We should never be satisfied with our present state, because none of us will ever be perfect.

We are going to spend the season of Lent looking at the life of John the Baptist. The reason is really quite simple. John's life can be summed up in one word, REPENT. Repentance is not just saying, "I'm sorry." Repentance means much more. It means running away from your present state and running toward God. We begin our journey with John this evening at the beginning of his life. May God give you ears to hear this evening's Gospel lesson, Luke 1:57-66. Let me call this message *John's Birth*.

Luke 1:57-66 ⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

⁶¹ They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.

⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

Carl Sandburg once wrote, "*Babies are God's opinion that the world should go on.*" At the very heart of this evening's scripture lesson is a baby. Let's look at the text together.

We begin our Lenten pilgrimage in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. I always love the Gospel of Luke, because I like a good story. There is nothing better than a good story, and nothing more valued than a good story teller. Luke wrote his gospel to tell the world about the story of Jesus. He is the main character and everyone else has a secondary role. In the scripture lesson, the name of Jesus is never mentioned. The reason is simple. These words are describing what was happening prior to his birth. This evening's story is about two secondary characters in Jesus' story. Let's look at those two characters.

The first is Zechariah. The second is his wife, Elizabeth. According to the scripture prior to our reading, they were both from the priestly line of Aaron. (Luke 1:5) Neither of them was perfect. However, they were sincere in keeping God's ordinances. (Luke 1:6) In a world that valued many happy children, Zechariah and Elizabeth had none. Each day, they played the part of Abraham and Sarah, rocking an empty cradle. They longed to have children, but they had none. Then, with all hope gone for a happy child, Zechariah is told by the angel Gabriel that a little bundle of joy is on the way. (Luke 1:11-18) The news is too wonderful to be true. Zechariah questions this announcement, and has his voice muted for his lack of belief. (Luke 1:20) The Gospel lesson for this evening reminds us that God keeps his promises. Zechariah and Elizabeth welcomed this miracle baby into the world and named him John. (Luke 1:60) Zechariah's voice was restored to speak that name for the first time. (Luke 1:63-64) In time, the infant John would grow up to become the forerunner of the long awaited Messiah, just as Zechariah had been told in the temple. (Luke 1:17) If you haven't heard, the Messiah's name was and is *Jesus*.

The birth of John is one of the great stories in the Bible. Luke does a masterful job of telling the story. You wouldn't want to change a single word. However, I wish the next scene would have been included. You know the scene. It is that scene when everyone goes home and it is just the nuclear family of Zechariah, Elizabeth and John. After a lifetime of unanswered prayer, they were holding their baby. First, Elizabeth held the baby. Then, Zechariah held the baby. At first, they were filled with positive emotions. How could this little miracle happen to us? Then, they were filled with emotional fear. They were first-time parents. Do you think he is breathing normally? Do you think he is eating normally? Do you think he is sleeping too much? Zechariah and Elizabeth must have been filled with fear, afraid this miracle might be taken from them. They must have thought about God's great promise about this child, and wondered what the future held for him.

This evening, I want to ask you three questions. This is the first. Have you ever wondered what your parents thought the first time they held you? Physically, they studied all your details. You had ten fingers and ten toes.

They looked at the hair on your head. They longed to see the color of your eyes. They gave you a name and they wondered about your future. Maybe you would grow up to become president of the United States? Maybe you would grow up and cure some disease? Maybe you would grow up and write a great novel? I hope that everyone here was born into a family that only knew love. You are no longer a baby. Your life is moving along. I have to ask this question. **Are your parents still proud of you?** If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

When I was in college, I had a good friend by the name of Jim. He dated a girl by the name of Carol. She believed their relationship was heading toward marriage. She was collecting things for their future home. She even flew to Lexington, Kentucky to see him graduate from graduate school. As they drove back to northeast Ohio, they talked. When they got as far as Columbus, she heard words she couldn't believe. He was breaking up with her. He told me the story later. I asked him why he did it. I liked Carol. She was a sweet girl. He said, "I realized I was a good catch. I can do better." I asked him if he had any regrets. He said, "Only one. I should have waited until Akron to break up with her. That way I wouldn't have had to hear her cry for so long." How we feel about ourselves is very important.

This is my second question for you this evening. **How do you feel about yourself?** This is Ash Wednesday. On this day, we begin the Christian season of Lent. It is a season of self-examination. Spiritually, it is a season to discover what is holding you back from a closer walk with God. However, it is also a time to examine your life and fix the things you don't like about yourself. How do you feel about yourself? If you don't like something in your life, then take steps to improve it. Let me ask you this series of questions.

Is everyone here happy with the way you look? If you need to shed a few pounds, then go for a walk and eat a salad.

Is everyone here happy with your financial state? If you need to get out of debt, then stop writing your name on the line, or get another job. You may consider selling that thing you really don't need.

Is everyone here happy with all the relationships in your life? If you haven't talked to your brother in years, then pick up the phone. Do everything possible to fix that relationship and push all the responsibility to their side. Don't be guilty of doing nothing.

Is everyone here free of addictions? If you want to stop drinking, then join AA.

Is anyone here dealing with disappointments? Just move forward, because there is very little you can do about the past. It is called the present because it is a great gift. Don't miss out.

Is anyone here dealing with a void in their lives? If you want to get an education, then go back to school. If you don't have any friends, then stop talking about yourself and listen. Do I have to go on? I know those are simplistic answers, but you have to do something. Pills don't solve everything. They just mask the problem. Sometimes, you just have to deal with life.

The baby Zechariah and Elizabeth held in their arms did not stay a baby. He did what all babies do. He grew up. We remember him as a man of God. He became the forerunner of the Messiah. John not only found the purpose for his life, but he grew to become comfortable in his own skin. In other words, he liked himself. Do you like yourself? If not, then change what you hate. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" (By the way, Jim is still single.)

John the Baptist understood that his life was not about himself. His life was about Jesus. John died before the crucifixion. He never saw how the story ended. However, we know how the story ended. It is hard to say 2,000 years later. Jesus was executed and they placed his lifeless body in a tomb. The week that began with such great promise ended with such tragedy. The longest day of the week must have been Saturday; nothing happened because it was over. However, it wasn't over. On Sunday, the last mourners found out Jesus had been raised from the dead. It seemed incredible, but it was true. The resurrection of Jesus changed everything. The early church understood the significance of the resurrection. Take a few moments and memorize Roman 10:9. It says that, "*If you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that Jesus was raised from the dead, you will be saved.*" Many believe that verse was the first verse in the church. The early church understood the significance of the resurrection.

This is the problem. Our generation fails to see the significance of the resurrection. In our time, it is just a story. Our generation believes we don't need the resurrection. Many believe they can earn their salvation. That is called "works righteousness". In our time, many ignore the resurrection and believe God is a great genie, who should grant all our wishes. Have you ever met anybody who is mad at God? God gave us his very best, Jesus! The problem is, many just don't care. This is the third question for you this evening. **How frustrated is God with you?** Do you appreciate everything that God has done to save your soul? Or, do you think you can save yourself? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

This evening I asked you three questions:

Are your parents still proud of you?

How do you feel about yourself?

How frustrated is God with you?

How you answered those questions explains a great deal about you.

Will you pray with me?