

The Birth of John

WORD & WAY FORMATIONS COMMENTARY
December 15, 2019 Scripture: Luke 1:57-64; 67-80



Michael K. Olmsted

What a wonder it would be to witness the celebration in that Judean hill country village when Elizabeth gave birth to John. And, the elderly Zechariah broke from his nine month silence with a song of joy: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets of old ... he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and he has remembered his holy covenant” (vv. 68-72). This hymn/poem has been called the *Benedictus* (from the first word in its Latin translation), celebrating the birth of the baby who would become the long “promised Savior from God.”

Take careful note of this story’s beginning, when the old priest Zechariah was serving before the altar of incense at the Jerusalem temple. God’s angel Gabriel appeared to him to announce that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a son who would be the “forerunner ... in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17).

The promise of God’s Savior coming into this lost world was as old as Abraham. Now, in the desperation of God’s own people and the deepening spiritual darkness, the time has come. The key figures are playing their part. The great theologian and Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, explains: “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony born at the proper time” (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

Can you imagine the joy in the

hearts of those new parents who normally would have been celebrating the birth of a grandson? I remember vividly when my daughter and son were born, the wonder and joy, as I continued to pray that God would bless and use them both to share his love with others.

Because we have already read the whole book, we know that John was a firebrand preacher whose appearance and preaching were radically different from the ruling Jewish officials. Nothing about this promised Savior would fit the religious mold crafted by popular theology. People would flock to John, be baptized by him in preparation for the coming Messiah, but John would be silenced by a petty selfish puppet king (Matthew 14:1-12).

What greater privilege could a person know than to be the voice that first called people to the hope of Christ? Jesus said about John: “I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John” (Luke 7:28). As people who have found the real purpose and hope of life in the Savior, we should see Advent as an opportune time to share Christ. What is Christmas about? God’s greatest gift!

Sadly, this text reminds me how easily the modern church misses the message of God’s grace to focus on liturgical power struggles, denominational structures, theological nitpicking, and aberrant teachings in the place of God’s grace. No, I am not dismissing the importance of organization and planning in the church world. Instead, I am concerned that we too often act like we “own” Christ instead of our being saved by his love and grace.

We criticize the first century Jews for not believing Jesus and for complicity in his death. But if you read today’s focal text carefully, it is obvious that Jesus came to turn

our attention to God’s purpose, recorded from the beginning of the Bible. What has been the recurring theme from Abraham to the coming of Jesus? Look at the wording of the text: Jesus is the “mighty Savior for us in the house of his servant David” ... “has remembered his holy covenant” ... “the oath he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ... that we might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days” ... “to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins” ... “the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us” ... “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (vv. 69-79).

There is no mention in that text of God giving us power, elevating us to be lords of this world, promising us wealth and comfort as his privileged people. There is an insidious danger when we who claim to be God’s chosen people see ourselves as deserving, as a master race, as those who decide which doctrines are most important, when morality is shaped by personal preference.

The infant John became the voice crying in the wilderness: “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Enjoy Christmas, share special moments with family and friends, take advantage of the beautiful musical programs, give gifts, and plan fun times for the children.

But do not neglect to take time to study the beautiful hope-filled words of Scripture as they reveal God’s love. Spend time in prayer for individuals and our nation. Get involved in helping those who live in loneliness and poverty. And, ask God to open an opportunity to tell someone the true story of this season, the story of John the baptizer and the Jesus whom John introduced to a lost and hurting world.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.