



SERMON 944

Nativity of John the Baptist

Tuesday, June 23, 2015

1,003rd Week as Priest

830th Week at St Dunstan's

95th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

FORERUNNERS, DISCIPLES, AND MISSIONARIES

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Today is the Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist. I wanted to use the traditional language of Rite One and the Revised Standard Version of the Bible because the Song of Zechariah deserves it. There is a very contemporary message contained in the ancient words of John's father, and that message is about the different lives that people live in Christ—our calling in life, if you will, and the roles that some of us have as forerunners, disciples, and missionaries.

John was a relative of Jesus, born to Mary's older cousin Elizabeth. Not only that, Mary went to stay with Elizabeth when she discovered that she was going to give birth to the Holy Child. Elizabeth was her safe harbor, a port in a storm, the only person she could trust to take

care of her and her child, without judging or condemning her. And of course, this is precisely how Elizabeth responded to Mary, with loving-kindness and with maternal care.

And now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth to her own child. In the recurring theme of barrenness, Elizabeth had been unable to conceive a child. (You will recall this was the case with Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—and many others.) She had called on God to bless her, and she had promised to dedicate the child to God, as a Nazarite (just as Samuel was dedicated by his mother Hannah). But God can do all things, and so Elizabeth gave birth to a son.

I hope that you are able to see the narrative art of this sacred story, and for many of these stories in the Holy Scriptures. In an economy of words, Luke portrays the eagerness and anticipation of birth; the fullness of time leading up to John's naming; and the prophecy of John's call as forerunner to the Messiah.

The Song of Zechariah, known by its Latin name, the *Benedictus*, is Canticle 16 in the service of Morning Prayer. It is a song, a poem, and a prophecy all in one.

Zechariah, who has been unable to speak until the eighth day, now says these beautiful words of blessing and fulfillment. His son John will be the forerunner of the Messiah, who will come and set his people free. The Messiah is a mighty savior born of the house of David. This is the prophecy first made by Micah, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. And now it is fulfilled in the baptism of John and the arrival of the Anointed One. Such beauty. Such depth of meaning. Such hope and grace. Such is the way of the sacred stories. They show us the way of peace.

Some of us are called to be *forerunners*, those who prepare a way, or prepare a place. We set the table. We carry the water. We set up and clean up. But we all point the way to the Anointed One. Some of us are *disciples*, supporting actors who sit at the table and take part in the liturgy of bread and wine, Body and Blood. We bring others to join us. We remember the words spoken and written. By our participation, we make known the presence of the Anointed One. And some of us are *missionaries*. We have heard the prophecies and we believe them. We have witnessed the power and grace of God's Anointed One in the liturgy of bread and wine. Now it is our calling to bring others to this table, so that they too will know the new life in Christ. AMEN.