

Nativity of Saint John the Baptist

Gospel Reading

24th June 2018

John the Baptist is born and all wonder what the child will be..

Luke 1: 57-66,80

Background on the Gospel Reading

The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel alternate between stories of two births. One is the annunciation and birth of John the Baptist, who was, for Luke, the last great prophet of the Old Testament and who prepared the way for someone greater than any prophet—Jesus the Messiah. The annunciation and birth of Jesus is the other story.

The story of John sets the very Jewish environment into which Jesus and John were born. Jesus' annunciation and birth begins to move the Gospel into the environment of the Roman empire.

In the verses before those read today, the birth of John the Baptist has been announced by the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, who was performing his duties as a priest in the Jerusalem Temple. Gabriel then announced the birth of Jesus to Mary in her home in Nazareth. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, are an old couple who have never had children. Mary is engaged to Joseph, but they have not yet come to live together.

We read today that Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives rejoice with her because God has shown her mercy in the birth of a son. But they are confused when she tells them that his name is to be John, which means “God has been gracious.” Zechariah has been unable to speak since Gabriel appeared, because, unlike Mary, he doubted the angel's word. But when he writes on a tablet “John is his name” all are amazed, and a great fear comes upon everyone. Fear, along with joy and praise, is

for Luke the appropriate response to God's mercy. People ask, “What, then, will this child be?” But this question has already been answered by the angel. “He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.”

Zechariah responds with praise in his famous canticle, the Benedictus. But that is not read today. Instead we jump to the last verses of the chapter, which explain that John will become strong in spirit living in the desert until it is time to show himself to the people of Israel. When John appears again at the beginning of Chapter 3, after the stories of the birth and childhood of Jesus, he will prepare those people for the ministry of Jesus by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

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