

Well, it's the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. Many of you have joined me in this celebration before. But for some of you, this is your first time. So let me explain.

If you haven't noticed, our whole Church Year revolves around the life of Jesus. Come December—*not January* like our calendar year, but December—the Church Year begins. We call that Advent, and it's when we rush to get everything ready for the new baby, Jesus. Then when that tiny bundle of joy does arrive, we get the twelve days of Christmas. Next, on January 6, the wise men swing by to drop off gifts for the little bouncing, baby boy—and that's called Epiphany. Epiphany's all about shedding light on just who this Jesus is, and just what He's come to do. When that's over, we spend forty days called Lent, following Jesus through His passion—to the cross and into the tomb. Then, with Easter, we follow Him out again, and then back where He came from as He ascends into heaven. Until, finally, at Pentecost, we celebrate the birth of the Church. And now, as we continue this season of Pentecost, we discover all kinds of ways Jesus is still at work here with us, blessing His people.

That's how we come to a day like today, the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. Like everything else on the Church's calendar, it's all about Jesus—we call it one of the Principal Feasts of Christ. But, if you're still scratching your head, wondering, "How can that be?" I don't blame you. After all, what does the birth of the Baptizer have to do with Jesus? And when it comes to John anyway—who was quite a character—it's easy to get distracted.

How could you not, what with his scraggly, bedraggled appearance and all? Like his choice of cut—his long, crazy, wild hair and scruffy beard? Or his choice of wardrobe—his closet full of camel's hair? Or his choice of entrée—his diet of locust and wild honey? Or his choice of home—his reclusive lifestyle off in the wilderness? But maybe most of all, his choice of words—his gruff, no-nonsense, cut right to the chase kinda preaching? What with a personality like that, how could you *not* focus on him?

But quite honestly, all that was John . . . was also Jesus. John was a prophet, sure, but as Jesus once put it, "He is *more* than a prophet." Like Jesus, John's the *only* prophet who was prophesied about. Like Jesus is the great high priest, John could trace his priestly lineage all the way back to Aaron. Like Jesus' conception, John was also miraculously conceived, God causing Elizabeth to become pregnant when she otherwise couldn't be. Like Jesus' name, which means "The Lord saves," John's name means "The Lord is gracious," which says more about the grace of God in Jesus than it does about John. Also like Jesus, John relied solely on God for his daily bread—dressing modestly, living simply, eating plainly. And we can even see how John's beheading foreshadows the crucifixion of Christ. Maybe by now we're starting to see how anything about John is really about Jesus.

And if we're making that connection, then the Gospel today tells us we're right on the money. After all, Zechariah in his prophesy this morning—what we in the Church call the Benedictus—has this to say about John.

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to His people
in the forgiveness of their sins."

John is to be the last of the Old Testament prophets, getting everyone ready for the New Testament. He's to be the forerunner of the Messiah, to prepare the way for the Lord. Who he is, and what he's come to do is only to point to Jesus. If you've ever been to an art gallery or looked at the pictures in a religious store, then you know that whenever you see one of John the Baptist, he's always grabbing our attention, gesturing with an arm outstretched, his finger pointing us right to the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Like John, you and I, by Baptism, also have a name that points to our Lord—we bear the name Christian. Our whole lives—everything we think, everything we say, everything we do—is to point everyone to Christ. Our one purpose on this earth, like John's, is to be a big flashing arrow showing the way to Jesus, preparing all people to meet their Lord.

How's that going?

Are our fingers pointed at all times in our Lord's direction? If not, then where? My guess is, our fingers aren't so much pointing *to* anyone, as they are pointing *at* everyone.

Somewhere inside each of us, is that faint memory of the Garden. After disobeying God, and eating the forbidden fruit, the time came for Adam and Eve to own up to their mistakes. But, is that what they did? Adam pointed the finger at Eve—"It was her, *she* made me do it!" Then Eve pointed her finger at the serpent—"Don't look at me, the devil made me do it!" One of the earliest conversations ever recorded in history, was our first parents playing the blame game.

Likewise, we carry on this human family tradition. Look at our society, our culture of victimization, and you can't miss it. Nothing's ever anyone's fault; it's always the other guy. So, who do you blame for your lot in life? What excuses do you make for the things you do? Is it true that you really can't change your situation, change yourself, change your life? Or is it just more convenient to point the finger at others?

If you find your fingers pointed at anyone, then let me bring you back to today's celebration of John the Baptist. Look instead again to his finger. Follow it once more to your Savior. Two thousand years later, John still points to the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. It's here at this altar that John's finger points today, where Jesus, the Lamb of God, comes to you again in His very body and blood, to take away *your* sin. And as you come up in a few moments, go ahead and touch that body, touch that blood, give Jesus your sins—all of them, hold nothing back. There's no need to blame anyone else, no need even to blame yourself anymore, because Jesus has come to bear the blame Himself. So, deliberately pause here, take a moment and picture yourself taking the burden off your shoulders, and giving it all to Jesus. "Cast your anxieties on Him, for He cares for you." Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of you!

But don't just stop there. Look at Christ—for example, look up here! Follow *His* fingers. Where do they point? They're pointed to *you*, aren't they? Now, they're not pointed *at* you, but pointed *to* you. In childhood, Jesus put out His little hands, pointed His tiny fingers, to Mary and Joseph, to the shepherds, and to the wise men in tender affection. In adulthood, Jesus reached out to the lepers and the diseased; laid His hands on the blind and the lame, the poor and the demon-possessed, the sinners and the dead in compassionate healing. In death, Jesus stretched His hands out to the world on a cross, sharing His love and mercy. And in new resurrection life, Jesus gestured to His disciples with peace. Well, just look at any picture of Jesus—look up here—and you'll always see His fingers reaching out with blessing, pointed to you.

With that, we come to find out that today really isn't about John. But it's not even really about Jesus. It's really about *you*. John may be the forerunner of Christ, but Christ is the forerunner of you—He is *your* forerunner. John may point to Jesus, but Jesus points to you. John may've gotten mention in *one* Old Testament prophesy, but *all* of the promises Jesus makes in the Bible are about you—think about that!

John may've said of Jesus, "I must decrease, so that He might increase", but Jesus says that "I must decrease, so that *you* might increase." John may've been unworthy to untie the straps of Jesus' sandals, but Jesus humbled Himself—even washing the feet of His disciples—becoming unworthy to untie even the laces of *your* shoes. John may've given his life for Jesus' sake, but Jesus willingly laid down His life for *your* sake.

See, John prepared the way of the Lord, but the Lord prepares the way for you. Jesus clears a path for you, makes ready His kingdom for you, goes to prepare a place in His Father's house *for you*. Everything Jesus thinks, says, and does; His

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The Nativity of St. John the Baptist

Luke 1:57-80

Rev. David V. Miller

Lutheran Church of the Ascension

Atlanta, GA

whole purpose in life; who He is and what He's come for is only *for you*. Follow His outstretched hands, see where He's pointing, and you'll find them full of blessing *for you*.

So, make it an annual celebration from now on. Every year, mark The Nativity of St. John the Baptist on your calendar. After all, it's a day not just to celebrate John, and not just to celebrate Jesus . . . but to celebrate *you!* St. John the Baptist . . . well, he was just the beginning.