Sermon for the Nativity of John the Baptist, June 24, 2018

Luke 1:57-80 (esp. v. 76)

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In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our sermon text for this morning is from Luke 1: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” Thus far the text.

It might seem strange that we’re talking about John the Baptist at this time of year. Usually this would be an Advent reading—something we’d hear in December. It seems out-of-place in the middle of the summer. It’s time for shorts, not sweaters. It’s time for green, not white (both with the grass and the paraments). It’s time to hear about Jesus’ teaching, not John the Baptist’s birth. It seems out-of-place and out-of-season, and *that’s the point*. It is unexpected and refreshing. That’s what it’s like for us, and that’s what it was like for Zechariah and Elizabeth.

They had not expected to give birth to a son. They were old, and they were barren. But about nine months earlier, the angel Gabriel showed up to Zechariah and told him the good news: he and his wife would conceive, and their son would be the forerunner of the Christ—he would prepare the way for the long-expected Messiah!

This was unexpected and wonderful news, on two levels. Sure, the old, barren couple would miraculously have a child, and that’s life-changing in and of itself. But even more so, the Lord was finally keeping his promise to send the Messiah. God’s people had been waiting for millennia for this promise to come true.

Back in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve listened to the serpent rather than the Lord, and so they fell into sin. God cursed them and banished them from the Garden, but he did not utterly forsake them like they deserved. No, he promised them that they would have a child who would crush the serpent’s head.

Naturally, they expected that this promise would come true right away. And so when they have their first child, they name him Cain saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord—God has kept his promise to us!” But, as they tragically found out, this was not the case. Not only was Cain not the promised Messiah, he actually murdered his brother! This was completely out-of-place. This is not the son they had expected God to give them.

Fast forward a few generations, and the world is just full of wickedness. Things keep getting worse and worse. And in the midst of the chaos, some guy starts building a boat. Now, it’s never rained on the earth; no one has any idea why Noah is putting together this floating box. But then all of a sudden, one day it starts raining. And raining. And raining. Out of nowhere, God drowns his creation and begins anew with Noah and his family and the animals they had saved. God’s judgment and salvation are swift and unexpected.

Fast forward a few generations more, and God promises a 90-year-old Abraham that he and his barren wife will have a whole boat-load of kids—more than the grains of sand on the seashore. That’s ridiculous enough, but then God goes and waits another 10 years before making it happen. This is completely out-of-season in the human life cycle, but this is how God works.

Fast forward again a couple thousand years, and God’s people are in exile in Babylon—they are prisoners in a foreign land. The Lord promises to bring them back, and he again promises to send the Messiah. He brings them back to the Promised Land, and so they figure that he’ll send the Messiah right away. But they wait. And wait. And still no Messiah. In fact, God doesn’t even send any *prophets* for a few hundred years as his people wait, and watch, and pray, while God is silent.

Well, after a few hundred years of silence, the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and we get to today’s story. The Lord keeps his promises—surely and truly—but he does so in ways that are unexpected and refreshing.

Zechariah recognizes who his son is going to be. He knows that John will announce the Messiah—that the long-expected Christ is just around the corner! Finally, after all these years, after all these generations, after all these centuries, the Lord was going to fulfill his promise to Adam and Eve, and Abraham, and so many others. And Zechariah’s son, of all people, would get to be part of it: “And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” After waiting for so long and so many false starts, the Lord’s salvation is out-of-season. It is unexpected and refreshing.

John the Baptist’s preaching was *unexpected*: he called even the holiest priests to turn from their wickedness—and if priests aren’t right with God, then what chance do the rest of us have? John’s preaching was *refreshing*: he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins—turn from your wicked ways and live, for the Lord is almost here!

But when Jesus finally comes on the scene, John isn’t so sure about him. Jesus doesn’t bring the fire and brimstone that John expected; he has left his winnowing fork at home, it seems. Jesus proclaims freedom for the captives, but this doesn’t do much good for John when he’s wasting away in prison. In fact, John doesn’t even live to see the Day of the Lord; he’s decapitated at the reluctant command of the incestuous King Herod.

And then things just get worse. Jesus’ own people reject him. They want nothing to do with this so-called Son of God. This same Herod, along with Pontius Pilate, puts Jesus on trial and finds him innocent, but then they kill him anyway.

But then comes an unexpected turn of events: Jesus rises from the dead. He sits up and walks out of his tomb. He crushes the serpent’s head. He condemns all sin in his own flesh, and then he is rid of it as he rises to new life.

Jesus’ death and resurrection are *unexpected*. No one thought the Son of God would die, and no one thought the man Jesus would rise again.

Jesus’ death and resurrection are *refreshing*. Death has no more dominion over us; it cannot hold us for long, because it could not hold Jesus. What joyous news!

Jesus’ return will likewise be unexpected and refreshing. Just before God sent the Flood to cover the earth, people were going about their everyday business without a care in the world. They didn’t know God, and they couldn’t care less. They mocked Noah for spending all this time and effort building a big wooden box claiming that he was on a mission from God. But then the Lord acted swiftly in judgment and mercy.

This is how it will be when Jesus comes back. People will not see it coming; they’ll keep going about their regular business thinking the Church is strange and out-of-place. They think we’re preparing for something that will never happen. But one day soon, the Lord will once more act swiftly in judgment and mercy. The Day of the Lord will be unexpected and refreshing.

The Church’s proclamation seems out-of-place in this broken world. We are out-of-season—we need to “get with the times,” they say. To which we reply, we *are* out-of-place, and that’s the point. We’re not like you. We look different, and we act different. We have one foot in this world and one in the next.

We have the promises of God which are soon to be finally and fully fulfilled when Jesus comes back. We have the Word of God which is a lamp for our feet in this darkened world. We have the full, unconditional forgiveness of Christ Jesus, the Lamb who was slain.

Our message is not like anything else you will find in this world. We unrelentingly condemn sin, yet we unconditionally show mercy. We love our enemies, and we pray for those who persecute us. We pray that the Lord would once and for all condemn sin—and in so doing, we pray that he would kill our very own sinful nature. We admit to God the full depth of how terrible we are, and we trust that he loves us anyway. We ask that God would keep us and our loved ones in this faith, because we believe that, on our own, we cannot believe.

Dear friends in Christ, we are different. Like the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord; like the promise of a child in your old age; like the Son of God hanging on a cross for *our* sin, only to rise again… the Lord keeps his promises in ways that are unexpected and refreshing.

The Good News that we believe and proclaim is completely out-of-place in this broken world, and that’s the point. Jesus has come *from outside* our broken world. He has invaded it and entered it as one of us. In so doing, he has brought divine goodness and mercy which could not naturally arise here. He has invaded our hearts, our minds, and our lives with his unconditional forgiveness. He has forever transformed us with his other-worldly, out-of-season, out-of-place love. We are now and forever different, and that’s the point. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.