

INTRODUCTION:

1. [Image] What will this child be? That is the question most parents have from the first moment they discover they are having a baby. Even choosing a name feels challenging. Because every single name has a thousand possibilities. Do we name them after a family member hoping they will have some of those qualities? Do we name them after some of our favorite people in history hoping they will live up to that Legacy? And after they are born as they grow we continue to dream and to wonder; what will this child be? We look at the toys that they choose to play with to see if it gives us a hint of their future passion. If they like to sing to themselves we dream and wonder if they will be a singer or a rockstar. Calvin loves to do flips all over the house, so now we wonder, will he want to be a gymnast or an acrobat? Even when you have your own grandchildren, you wonder what they will be. And we cannot help but wonder even about strangers are all the other children that we see.
2. [Subject] Our passage this morning in Luke 1 has the birth of another child, named John the Baptist. The central question of this text is what then will this child be? The crowd gathers to wonder who John will be like. So as we walk through the text this morning I want us also to ask ourselves that question.
3. [Need] This seems like a strange place to be the week before Christmas. But, Luke believes understanding John's identity is the key to understanding Christ's birth. Because the story of Jesus and John ping pong back and forth throughout the first two chapters of Luke. They parallel each other. They do similar things. So we will look at the birth of John the Baptist this morning, knowing that he will help us understand Jesus better.
4. [Text] Luke 1:57-80
5. [Pray]

Point number 1 in your bulletin. **John will be an unusual prophet (v. 57-66). John will be an unusual prophet (v. 57-66).**

The key verse of this first section is verse 66, **"And all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him."**

Now what would make the crowd wonder and ask this question?

Let's back up.

Remember how the book of Luke opens.

Rob told us the story of the Angel Gabriel coming to visit the priest Zechariah.

And Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth was going to give birth to a son.

Even though she had never had children and her childbearing years were behind her.

But unlike Mary, Zechariah did not believe the angel.

As a consequence, he has been able to speak.

Now let's turn to verse 57.

"Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son."

God has kept His promises and the child is born alive and healthy.

Verse 58, **"and her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her."**

Her neighbors seem to have not known she was pregnant.

It comes as a surprise to them.

Or if they knew, they were nervous about the pregnancy.

At her age, it would be quite a risk.

Few people would believe she could give birth to a healthy child.

Especially since she had never done it before.

But nothing is impossible for God.

They see the mercy God has shown and they rejoice.

What a party it must have been.

Can you imagine the excitement?

Picture someone in our church who had been trying to have a baby and despite our prayers, it hadn't happened.

Then one Sunday they showed up with a new child and we didn't even know they were pregnant.

They would lead to lots of rejoicing.

Verse 59, **"And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father,"**

They have waited 8 days to name the baby.

Which is not unusual in Jewish culture.

But everyone already has an opinion or guess of what they should name their son.

Some things never change do they?

That is usually the first question you ask someone when they tell you they are pregnant.

"What are you going to name them?"

And when they tell you, most people give their opinion on the name.

I always struggled with this.

I don't like telling people before our kids were born.

Because people give you all sorts of unhelpful opinions,
as if it is their child or their business.

And the crowd has an unhelpful opinion as well.

For eight days they have probably bothered Elizabeth with endless questions of what she will name their son.

And now the public ceremony comes.

Everyone gathers to hear the name of the miracle child proclaimed.

They all think she will name him "Zechariah."

It's a family name.

Her husband is an important priest.

He deserves honor because God has done this miracle for him.

Verse 60, **"but his mother answer, "No; he shall be called John."**

Elizabeth tells them they will name him what Gabriel said.

But the crowd protests and doesn't like it.

Verse 61, **"and they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name."**

John is not an uncommon name.

It's something they had heard before.

But they cannot understand why they wouldn't choose a family name.

Because they already have not just the name, but expectations for him.

Most likely, the crowd has formulated ideas about John's profession.

They believe he will be a priest like his father.

So, the name John signifies already that John will be different.

Verse 62 **"And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called."**

There is some patriarchal undertones here.

They seem to believe that Elizabeth is taking advantage of Zechariah.

They think this must be happening behind his back.

So they ask him themselves.

And you notice that they have to use sign language to speak to him.

It seems like Zechariah is not only mute but is also deaf.

Verse 63, **"And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered."**

Zechariah gets something to write with and gives his reply.

They all gather around waiting.

I am sure the crowd believed he would set the record straight.

He would give this boy a proper family name.
But instead, he says, "His name is John."

He doesn't say, "I want to name him John."
He declares, "His name is John."
Not because he is backing up his wife like a good husband, though he is.
But because the angel already named him.

This is a statement of faith.
When the moment comes.
Even when the crowd pressures him to name the child after himself.
He resists the temptation and the pressure.
He is willing to give up all the dreams he probably had for his children.
Zechariah submits to God's word.

And the crowd can't believe it.
But what happens in verse 64 really shocks them.

Verse 64, **"And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him."**

A miracle occurs.
His mouth opens and praises flow out of it.
And fear overcomes them because they recognize that they have seen a miracle.

And word goes all through the town, the county, and the state.
Word of the barren old woman who gave birth,
of the miracle that happened to her husband.
And the strange name they gave him.

The people know.
God is doing something different.
But they do not know what.

But we do.
You see God has not sent a prophet in a long time.

This time in Israel's history is usually called "the 400 years of silence."
Because they have been no prophets.
There has been suffering and persecution.
There has been activity and even a few miracles.
But no one is able to speak for God.

Until now.
Because in the same way Zechariah's silence ends,
God's silence will end as well.
Because His prophet has been born and named.

And John will not be like other prophets.
Most prophets don't have extraordinary birth stories.
The only other prophet with special circumstances around their birth is
Moses.

So, in this birth, God is signaling that not only is John a prophet, but he
will be an unusual prophet.

[Transition] So John will be unusual, but how? In order to understand the
difference we need to look at the older prophets.

Point number 2 **The old prophets made promises about the Messiah (v. 67-75). The old prophets made promises about the Messiah (v. 67-75).**

Because part of their work was prophesying about who the Savior would
be.

Verse 67, **"And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying"**

Just like Elizabeth in verse 41, Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit.
And like Mary he has a song of praise of his own.
You may have heard it referred to as the "Benedictus"

And this hymn of praise has two parts.
The first part in verses 67-75 is about the previous prophets and the promises they made.
The second part in 76-79 is about who John will be.
But let's take a closer look.

Verse 68, **"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David."**

The primary promise of the prophets was about the Messiah.
It was the promise that He would visit them.
He would redeem them.
He would save them.

And Zechariah praises God.
Because he knows the promises of the prophets is at hand.
He knows that Jesus is almost here.
And he knows John has a part to play.
John is not the horn of salvation,
But he is something significant.
That is why he blesses God.

Verse 70, **"as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,"**

He explicitly mentions these prophets.

Because the primary function of a prophet is to be God's mouthpiece.
It is to say what God wants to say.
They do not give their own opinion.
They should only repeat God's words.

And Zechariah then reminds the people of the promises of the prophets.

Verse 71, **"That we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us;"**

You will notice this song contains a lot of references to the past.
This is because Zechariah is using something in greek called the aorist tense.
To be more accurate, he is using the prophetic aorist.

But what does that mean?

Well in English we have the past, present, and future.
Greek gets more complicated and doesn't have a simple past tense.
The aorist is a more general way of thinking about an event.
And the specific way Zechariah wants you to think about it like a prophet.

Because Jesus has not fulfilled these promises yet.
But He is about it.

Or if that is too complicated, then think about it this way.
God has already fulfilled these promises in small ways in the past.
But now God will fulfill these promises in Jesus.
And Zechariah is talking about it like a prophet who has already seen it come to pass.

The first promise from the prophets, in verse 71, is that the Messiah will save them.
He will save them from their enemies.
He will save them from all who hate them.

That hasn't happened yet.
They would be thinking about the Romans.
Longing for God to save them.
To come and bring justice and judgement against the pagans.

Those who have blasphemed against God.
Those who do not follow God's ways.
Those who follow all kinds of debauchery and evil.
Those who lead people astray and worship idols.
They long for the Messiah to come and save them from this evil world.

Verse 72, **"To show the mercy promised to our fathers"**

Because when the Messiah comes they will need His mercy.
The Messiah will punish the wicked.
And they realize their own wickedness.
Mercy is the only thing that will save them.

But the good news is the Messiah promises mercy.
Their ancestors heard the promise and repeated it to them.
Over and over the prophets declared,
"Yes Israel you are sinful, but there is mercy for you."
Any sinner who repents and turns back from their sin will find mercy.

The prophets promised the Messiah would show mercy.

And verse 72, **"and to remember His holy covenant, the oath that He swore to our father Abraham to grant us."**

The prophets promised that the Messiah will remember.
Remembrance throughout the Scriptures is not something that happens in God's mind.

Remembrance is about God causing things to happen on earth because of His memory.

The Messiah will remember the covenant.

He will remember God's oath to Abraham in Genesis 15.

He will grant everything God promised.

Nothing will be undone.

Verse 74, **"that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear."**

Their hope of deliverance is not only for justice.

It is not bloodthirsty.

They hope that they will be able to serve God.

To serve God without fear that the Roman government might stand in their way.

Without fear that empires will come and destroy their temple.

Without fear that their faith will be illegal.

Without the fear that they have to navigate a culture that demands fealty to their emperor above all.

But they want freedom from the nations.

Verse 75, **"In holiness and righteousness before him all our days."**

They want to be able to worship God in holiness and righteousness.

They want to be a holy nation again.

They want to worship without fear of God's judgment.

Throughout their history, the prophets told them that God will punish them if they do not repent.

They don't want to have to wonder if they are holy enough anymore.

They don't want to worry if enough of their people are still righteous.

And the promise of the Messiah is that He will make them righteous.
He will make them holy.
Because they haven't been able to do it on their own.

But the prophets kept promising he would come.
These prophets were their superheroes.
They would have grown up hearing stories of Moses and Elijah.
They would know the stories of the Red Sea and the fire from heaven.

But the prophets are long gone.
And the days of the prophets were over.

[transition] But the days of the prophet are not over yet. Because one last prophet has been born. But he will not simply remind them of God's promises. He will do something new.

Point number 3 **The prophet John will pave the way for Jesus (v. 76-80).
John is the Messiah's prophet (v. 76-80).**

The other prophets made promises about the Messiah.
They kept saying, "He is coming, He is coming."
But John has to get them ready.
Because John already knows that the Messiah is here.

Verse 76, **"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.**

Zechariah turns his attention in the prophetic song to his son.
And he prophesies that John will be a prophet.
Not a priest like his father.
Not a priest like his people the Levites.
He will be a prophet.

The first prophet in a long time.

And he will not just be another prophet.
He **"will be called THE prophet of the Most High."**
He is going to be the Messiah's prophet.

Because Israel has also been waiting for the Elijah to return.
They have been wondering when the forerunner,
The prophet of the Messiah will appear.
And now he is here.

And John's role is **"to go before the Lord to prepare his ways."**
John will begin his public ministry before Jesus.
He will chronologically go before Jesus.
But he does so to pave the way for Jesus.

And his most significant role here will be to shape their expectations.
Because they have heard all the promises of God.
They knew the prophecies of the Messiah.
And the Messiah is going to keep His promises.

But He will not do things the way that they think.
So John comes to adjust their expectations.

Verse 77, **"To give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins."**

The primary focus of people is on the physical promises of the Messiah.
They picture military victory when they hear words like salvation and deliverance.
They picture the last Roman soldier leaving their country forever.
Later in Luke, we will see that Jesus' own disciples struggle to understand this.

But John comes to pave their hearts.
He wants them to see that the Messiah comes for spiritual salvation.

Physical salvation is coming too, but their primary need is spiritual.

They need to know what Jesus is going to teach them about salvation.
And the salvation that Jesus brings is the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus is going to have the ability to declare to people "Your sins are forgiven."

Why?

Because He is God.

And because He comes to forgive sinners.

And their Messiah is coming to die.

He will be brutally murdered on a cross.

Not as a failure, or defeat.

His death will be what their every sacrifice has pointed towards.

And they need John to help them be ready.

Verse 78, **"because of the tender mercy of our God,"**

Why is their forgiveness for sinners?

Not because we deserve it.

Not because God owes it to us.

But because God is merciful.

And His mercy is not cold.

It is not out of compulsion or obligation.

He does not give a deep sigh and then show mercy.

His mercy is tender.

God's mercy is full of love and compassion towards sinners like you are me.

God will forgive you of your sins if you confess because He loves you.

When God looks at you, He sees someone He loves.
He sees someone He would die for.
Yes He knows all your sins.
Yes, He knows all the darkness in your heart.

And yes He is holy and righteous.
Not a single sin can be in His presence.
No sinner could enter His home without bursting into flame.

So what does God do?
He comes to our place.
He displays His tender loving mercy to us.

This is a simple truth.
We teach our children songs like "Jesus loves me."
But then we grow up and forget.
I have often forgotten the greatness of God's love.

It has been one of my struggles with Calvinism and reformed theology.
Although, I believe in both of those things.
If you don't know what those mean don't worry.
But I often heard the preachers I love talk about the gospel as if God
didn't love us.

Or they talked about it like they were afraid.
If they talked too much about God's love we might not understand it.
So they preached like the gospel like you have to understand how terrible
and awful you are.

Understanding that you a sinner is an important part of the gospel.
But so is understanding that God loves you.
And God's love is tender and kind.
It is not cold or out of obligation.
John is not afraid of God's tender love and mercy.

And we don't need to be either.

And God shows His tender mercy by sending John.
John comes like a set of training wheels to get us ready.
Because the perfect love of God is almost too much to believe.

He then uses this beautiful picture of a sunrise that echoes the promises of the prophet Isaiah.

"Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The coming of the Messiah will be the sunrise.
And John will be the one waking you up for it.
He will be like an alarm clock telling you the sun is coming.

I don't like waking up for the sunrise.
One time when we were in Florida Brianna woke me up to see the sun.
We had to wake up super early.
I don't know what time it was, but it felt like 3 in the morning.
And we drove about 30 minutes in the dark to Paynes Prairie to wait for the sunrise.
It used to be a lake, but most of the year it is just a prairie.

I'm sure I grumbled and complained.
But there on that morning,
And across that plain with its grass and water,
we watched as the sun rose.
And it was one of the most beautiful sunrises I have ever seen.

But the coming of Jesus is better than any sunrise you have ever seen.
The Son of God comes down to visit you on high.
And He comes to bring light.

Some of you might feel like you are sitting in darkness.
Like everything around you is falling apart.
Your struggling and cannot see the way out.

Or maybe you feel like you are sitting in the shadow of death.
You feel it pulling on you.
You see it stalking out of the corners of your eyes.
And you wonder when it will take another person you love.

To you, the light is going to dawn.
John comes to get you ready.
Because Jesus is coming.

And Jesus will guide our feet.
He will shine His light so we don't have to stumble in the dark.
He will lead us in peace.

Verse 80, **"and the child grew and become strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel."**

John grew.
And as he got older people could tell that the Holy Spirit was in him.

And like Jesus in Luke 4, John heads to the wilderness before ministry begins.
We don't know when he goes.
Since he parents are older, probably after they die.
Or he leaves when he comes of age.

And then he stays there until it is time to start announcing the dawning of the light.

Has John paved the way for Jesus in your heart?
Has the light of dawn penetrated you?

Maybe you aren't a Christian and feel stuck in darkness.
Come into the light.

Maybe you are a Christian but you are overwhelmed by the darkness you see.

Come into the light.

Because John came to get us ready for Jesus.

And Jesus and the light are here.

Behold the Sun of God who is our sun and light.

CONCLUSION:

1. [Summary] John will be an unusual prophet. The old prophets made promises about the Messiah. John will pave the way for Jesus.
2. [Challenge] This Christmas remember John's message. The light has shown in the darkness. Jesus is here. Step into the light and find the forgiveness for all your sins.