

## Homily for the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist

June 24, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Isaiah 40:1–11; Psalm 85:7–13; Luke 1:57–80*

I can usually tell when I've read a passage in a commentary by the pencil marks I tend to make as I read. Last Thursday, when the appointed gospel from the Sermon on the Mount included the Lord's Prayer, words by Professor Ulrich Luz about this prayer have been on mind. He wrote, "It is the openness of the Lord's Prayer that is its real strength. Countless human beings have been able to find a home in the Lord's Prayer for their own hopes and petitions and to enter into that home."<sup>1</sup>

Luz's words, "the openness of the Lord's Prayer," caught me out, as it were. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* entry "hermeneutics"—from the Greek word verb "to interpret"—is the theoretical approach one uses to understand the ambiguities, complexities, contradictions, and the meaning of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> Growing up in the world of a conservative Southern Baptist Virginia congregation, in my own

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 314.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Hermeneutics," 641.

revolt against fundamentalism, I tend to go first to literal meaning of a biblical text, when many narratives, like the story of the birth of John the Baptist, are invitations to wonder—w-o-n-d-e-r—not Lewis Carroll’s “wonderland.” But the place in our lives where we meet God’s Spirit and part of us is aware of God’s relationship to us.

After Luke’s introductory words to Theophilus, his narrative of God’s work begins with the annunciation to Zechariah, a priest. He’s in the temple to offer incense. Luke writes, “And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense . . . [And] the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechari’ah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.’ ”<sup>3</sup> As with the next annunciation, the same angel, Gabriel, will say to Mary, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.”<sup>4</sup>

It was just last year that I realized that the annunciation to Mary was, in fact, an announcement to Mary of God’s decision, not a question: “you will

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:10, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:30–31.

conceive . . . and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> Gabriel’s words to Zechariah were also an announcement.

Both Matthew and Luke quote the words of Mark’s Jesus in their gospels, “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”<sup>6</sup> The gift of faith invites us not to fear, not to be anxious.

Luke tells us there is joy when Elizabeth’s child is born. Commentator François Bovon tells us, “In Hebrew, John’s name means ‘[The LORD] is gracious.’”<sup>7</sup> John’s birth is not just an event for Elizabeth and Zechariah. To paraphrase Professor Bovon, salvation history is marching forward.<sup>8</sup>

In earlier Prayer Books, the Song of Zechariah, if used at Morning Prayer, always followed the second lesson. The present book makes it possible for it to be used in the morning in the way that the Song of Mary is used at Evening Prayer, “as a link between the Old and

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:31.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 10:15.

<sup>7</sup> François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 71.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

New Testaments.”<sup>9</sup> Zechariah and Mary’s songs are both before the birth of Jesus.

When Zechariah speaks, Mary has already visited Elizabeth and Zechariah, and she has greeted Mary with the words, “Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”<sup>10</sup> Let me conclude by drawing our attention to the beginning of the Song of Zechariah:

“Blessed”—that is “praised”—“be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David.”<sup>11</sup> God is not absent from the world which he made nor absent from all of his children, all people.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 1:43.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 1:68–69. NRSV