

Birth of John 12-17-00

Sometime between 7 and 4BC an event took place that was planned in detail before anything ever came into being. It was a moment for which all history had built up to. It was a moment like no other, for at this perfect moment God would enter his own creation. The very Word that causes all things to exist would himself exist as a tangible, vulnerable, human baby.

What would cause the Eternal God who is all-powerful and all-knowing and present throughout his creation to confine Himself so? It began in the counsels of the Trinity when they said, "Let us make man in our image." That counsel went on, I presume, to include the entire plan – for the all-knowing God sees the end from the beginning. Man would not be forced to love his Creator, he would be given a choice. It was inevitable with the fall of Lucifer – the beautiful archangel – that man would eventually succumb to the deceitfulness of such a being. In doing so man would lose the title of "prince of the world" to him. Communion with his Creator would breakdown, for sin separates man from God. And four long millenniums would pass while man dreamed of restoration.

God gave the first promise right there in the Garden that the One to crush the head (authority) of Satan would be the Seed of the woman. Generation after generation passed piling prophetic promise on prophetic promise that added to hopes and dreams. The covenant with Abraham began a special group of people through whom the Promise would come. Moses said He would be a man similar to himself – and that we must listen to Him. David received the promise that He would come from his line and inherit his throne and reign forever. Isaiah told us He would be a man of sorrows – the suffering servant, a sin offering in our place, bearing our sin. The covenant people go into captivity and hope for his coming fades. But then Daniel told how many years would pass from the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem until the Messiah the Prince would be cut off. But wait – what is this "cut off"?

What a strange conglomeration of ideas! A Savior that would defeat Lucifer, yet suffer greatly, -light to the other nations, but a man of sorrow,- Son of man and yet at the same time God with us. What could all this mean?

As the Jewish people returned from Babylon, one group came around 100 BC. They were the Netzorians – the branch people. One of those ancient promises now centuries old had promised a branch from David – an offshoot, Is. 11:2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him - the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD--³ and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;⁴ but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.⁵ Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. Isaiah 11:2-5 (NIV)

¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. Isaiah 11:10 (NIV)

And so this little group of people were descendants of David, looking for the fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah, come together to an area once inhabited but now vacant, Nazareth. A spring flows up out of the desert here in this hill country. It is not great river, but where there is water, there is life. And so the Netzorians build a small town. By around 10 BC the population is around 300. Most young girls are praying they will be the one chosen by God to give birth to Messiah, for the first promise from God told Eve the Messiah is to be the seed of the woman.

Herod the Great ruled Israel at the time. The Romans had put him in power 30 years earlier. His first act as King was to sacrifice to Jupiter in Rome, yet he claimed to be a faithful Jew. Securing his throne came at the cost of a very bloody war, and at great loss of life to the Jews. But Herod did keep the Roman General Sosius from defiling the Temple. Part of establishing his power included the execution of the majority of the Sanhedrin and confiscation of their property. During this time the king was the one who appointed the High Priest. His first appointment was a descendant of Zadok and a respected man, but his in-laws wanted someone appointed from their family. Thus began a long and complicated family feud that resulted in numerous murders and much of Herod's paranoia. The only heavy concentration of Jews was in Judea. Much of the rest of Israel was dotted with Greek cities. Herod built great Roman cities and military outposts, but he also rebuilt the Temple. The project began in 20 BC and was usable in one and a half years, but building went on until at least 26 AD. Remember the Pharisee's words, "This temple has been 46 years in building and you think you can raise it in a day?"

Strange as it may seem this was the world in which those secret counsels of God would be put into affect. In that little village in the North of Israel under the power of Herod the Great, an angel came to visit Mary and her cousin nearby, Elizabeth. But let us first look at what happened to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Zechariah is chosen by lot to enter the Temple to burn incense.

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.⁶ Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. Luke 1:5-11 (NIV)

There were about 20,000 priests in that time and daily, stones were placed in a vessel to be drawn to see if God had selected you. There were four assignments for the day, two related to burning incense. If you drew a white stone you had your once in a life opportunity to get one of the daily assignments. Zechariah picked the white stone and was assigned the burning of incense. He climbs the steps up into the Holy Place and the other priests leave him alone and the doors are closed. He arranges the coals and waits for the signal of the High Priest to lay on the incense on them, while outside the priests prayed. Surely his heart

was pounding at this once in his life experience. He may have been praying too, perhaps for the long awaited Deliverer, the Messiah.

But suddenly there before him is an angelic being, the archangel Gabriel, and he has the usual reaction when one meets a being from the heavenlies: ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Luke 1:12-17 (NIV)

It is interesting that Gabriel relates the last words of the Old Testament – the last prophet Malachai – in announcing John's birth. That 400 year old prophecy was the last recorded word of the prophets. Now it is announced that this prophecy is about to be fulfilled. The name, 'John', means the Lord is gracious. We'll skip over Gabriel dealing with Zechariah. I do have a suggestion for you, though. If an angel appears to you and tells you how the Lord is going to use you, just say "Yes sir."

I'm going to skip to the birth of John, saving Mary's story till Christmas Eve. ⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son.

⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah,⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."⁶¹ They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John."

⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God.⁶⁵ The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.

⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us--⁷² to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." Luke 1:57-79 (NIV)

This prophecy is thought to be a prophetic song. 68 – Has redeemed – as if it was done. 69-70 Those promises of the ages were finally coming to pass. This was the time history had pointed toward. 73 this was the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. 74,75 This is the time when we will be made right with God. And then he speaks of John's mission, prophet of the Most High, preparing the way for the Lord, to tell people of forgiveness of sins. 78 –79 The tender mercy of our God is the wonderful attribute that sends the rising sun from heaven – what a picture – to shine on those living in darkness and the shadow of death. That is us! We are the ones living in sin that is overshadowed by the sure sentence of death. But in the midst of that darkness light breaks through, like the sun rising at dawn causing the darkness to flee. Death no longer overshadows us. We walk in the light of that rising sun from heaven – Jesus. The angel was saying the prophecy of Isaiah was about to be fulfilled. ¹ "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. ² See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Isaiah 60:1-2 (NIV)

But still we have the last line – to guide our feet into the path of peace. What a promise! Walking in peace with God. What was lost in the Garden is to be restored. We will be guided back into that path of being right with God. The time has come – the fullness of time. ⁴ But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Gal 4:4-5 (NIV) The Messiah is coming into the world, at long last! Can you sense the climax of millenniums of anticipation?

This week I encourage you to think about that anticipation and in your own heart hear John's message. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁴ As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'⁵ Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.⁶ And all mankind will see God's salvation.'" Luke 3:3-6 (NIV)

In Matthew 17:10 The disciples asked why the teachers of the Law say that Elijah must first come. Jesus says that he did and restores all things, but they did not recognize him. When we compare that to John's mission we see view of restoration, a repentant heart, a heart prepared for Jesus. For when John came it was not the rule of Herod that was an issue, it was the religious heart of man, his many additions and distortions of God's word, the bondage of sin, the condition of man's heart. Next week we celebrate the coming of the Messiah. Is your heart ready? Are the paths made straight, the valleys filled in, mountains made low, rough roads smoothed? This week before Christmas hear the forerunner's message. He is coming! Prepare your heart.