

## FIRST READING – BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Pause - and look up at the assembly

Listen to me, O coastlands,  
pay attention, you peoples from far away!  
The Lord called me before I was born,  
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.  
He made my mouth like a sharp sword,  
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;  
he made me a polished arrow,  
in his quiver he hid me away.  
And he said to me,  
"You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."  
But I said, "I have laboured in vain,  
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;  
yet surely my cause is with the Lord,  
and my reward with my God."  
And now the Lord says,  
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,  
to bring Jacob back to him,  
and that Israel might be gathered to him,  
for I am honoured in the sight of the Lord,  
and my God has become my strength.  
He says,  
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to restore the survivors of Israel;  
I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."



PAUSE for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## SECOND READING – BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

In those days, Paul said:

“God made David king of our ancestors.

In his testimony about him God said,

‘I have found David, son of Jesse,

to be a man after my heart,

who will carry out all my wishes.”

Of this man’s posterity

God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised;

before his coming

John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance

to all the people of Israel.

And as John was finishing his work, he said,

‘What do you suppose that I am?’

I am not he.

No, but one is coming after me;

I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet.’

You descendants of Abraham’s family,

and others who fear God,

to us the message of this salvation has been sent.”

PAUSE for **THREE** seconds

then look up at the people

and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## GOSPEL READING – BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

The Lord be with you.

*And with your spirit.*

A reading from the holy gospel according to Luke.

*Glory to you, O Lord.*

The time came for Elizabeth to give birth,  
and she bore a son.  
Her neighbours and relatives heard  
that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her,  
and they rejoiced with her.  
On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child,  
and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father.  
But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.”  
They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.”  
Then they began motioning to his father  
to find out what name he wanted to give him.  
He asked for a writing tablet and wrote,  
“His name is John.”  
And all of them were amazed.  
Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed,  
and he began to speak, praising God.  
Fear came over all their neighbours,  
and all these things were talked about  
throughout the entire hill country of Judea.  
All who heard them pondered them and said,  
“What then will this child become?”  
For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.  
The child grew and became strong in spirit,  
and he was in the wilderness  
until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

## SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

### Reading I: Isaiah 49:1-6

Part of this reading (49:3, 5-6) is covered on the second Sunday of the year in series A (p. 109).

The readings for this Sunday continue the theme of Jesus' servanthood and its manifestation in the baptism. This accounts for the selection of the first reading, the second of the servant songs in Second Isaiah.

When we compare the second servant song with the first, which we read last week, we note two points of difference. First, the second song states that God formed his servant "from the womb." This consciousness of predestination is characteristic of the Hebrew prophets (see Jer 1:5) and recurs in Paul (see Gal 1:15).

Such an idea of predestination must not be allowed to harden into an abstract dogma but must be allowed to remain what it is in the Bible—a doxological expression of faith in a concrete situation. It is this fact that expresses itself in the annunciation and infancy narratives of the Gospels.

The second point to notice is the enhanced emphasis on the universal scope of the servant's mission. The first song simply included the phrase "a light to the nations." The second expands on this. "It is too light a thing" for the servant's mission to be confined to Israel: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Clearly, the second servant song is here being applied to John the Baptist, whereas the servant of Isaiah is more often associated with our Lord. Evidently this is why this particular selection has been replaced in the Episcopalian and Lutheran versions of the Lectionary.

The Episcopal reading is [Isaiah 40:1-11](#) (see the second Sunday of Advent in series B, pp. 205-206).

This is the best known of the prophecies of Second Isaiah. Indeed, it is one of the best known passages of the Old Testament, if for no other reason than its use by Handel in the three opening numbers of *The Messiah*.

Of course, the unknown prophet of the Exile was not consciously thinking of the Christ-event. He had in view the restoration of Israel from the Babylonian Exile around 538 B.C. Cyrus of Persia had won his preliminary victories and the power of Babylon was waning. The prophet himself, then, is the voice crying in the wilderness. He, according to the reading of the RSV margin (anticipated by the English text of *The Messiah* and certainly to be preferred) is the bearer of good tidings:

Get you up to a high mountain,  
O herald of good tidings to Zion;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O herald of good tidings to Jerusalem.  
(RSV margin)

"Good tidings"—in the Hebrew original this is a verb that later gave us the noun "gospel" in its New Testament sense. The good tidings here is the good news of the impending divine intervention in history bringing about the return from exile.

The prophet envisages this return as a second Exodus, in which miracles similar to those of the first Exodus will be repeated:

Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.

One might call Second Isaiah the father of typology. Henceforth the Exodus event becomes the type of expected eschatological event and is taken up into the New Testament as the type of the Christ-event itself.

It was in this latter sense that this prophecy was applied in the text of *The Messiah*, and it is in the same sense that we read it today.

Typology is based upon the conviction, not that history repeats itself, but that Gods mighty acts in history follow a

consistent pattern because God is true to himself and his purpose.

The eschatological event is defined as the revealing of God's glory, a thought that will have profound significance in New Testament theology (see, for example, John 1:14). "Glory" becomes a word of salvation history; it is an event, the event of the active, saving presence of YHWH. YHWH "comes with might."

If the expected event becomes, in Christian interpretation, the Christ-event, so too, according to the New Testament, the prophet of the Exile foreshadows John the Baptist. He is the "voice" (John 1:23, to be read next week) that cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord" (see today's gospel). His preparatory work that will make a highway for the advent of the Messiah will be his preaching of repentance.

The Lutherans use [Malachi 3:1-4](#), for which comment is provided on February 2, the Presentation of the Lord (p. 537).

This passage is an excerpt from a section in which a series of questions is addressed to YHWH. The statement "You have wearied the Lord" is given in response to the question "How have we wearied him?" (2:17). The answer is: by denying YHWH's justice. Therefore YHWH will visit his people with judgment.

He will send a messenger (the name Malachi means "My messenger," which may be the reason for the attribution of the name to this book). The messenger will announce a covenant. Then YHWH will come to his temple and will purify his ministers and priests so that they may offer pure sacrifices in the temple.

Christian tradition finds the fulfillment of this prophecy in (1) the sending of John the Baptist (the messenger); (2) the incarnation—YHWH coming in the person of Christ to his temple; and (3) the Eucharist, identified by the early Fathers as the pure offering.

The purpose of the incarnation was seen in the establishment of the eschatological worship of God by a new, eschatological people.

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### **Responsorial Psalm: 139:1b-3, 13-14ab, 14c-15**

This psalm expresses God's concern for the individual from the moment of conception in the womb. Its classification as a psalm is disputed.

Is it a wisdom psalm? Or is it a psalm of lament? It has an intensely personal and individualistic character that puts it in a class by itself.

It is probably of a mixed type, perhaps due to combination with verses from other sources.

The psalm is structured as follows: verses 1-6: God's knowledge of the individual; verses 7-12: God's inescapable presence; verses 13-18: God's creative work, especially in conception, pregnancy, and birth.

The selection of this psalm for today's feast was probably determined by the third of these sections. If it is true of all of us as individuals that God knows us from the womb, how much more the great figures of salvation history, especially John the Baptist, than whom there is none greater born of woman!

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### **Reading II: Acts 13:22-26**

This passage is from one of the greatest kerygmatic speeches in Acts. These speeches are neither tape recordings of what was said (in this case by Paul) on the particular occasion nor Thucydidean compositions, that is, composed by the author of Luke-Acts and put into the mouths of his *dramatis personae*. The truth lies somewhere in between.

The speeches enshrine very primitive Christological formulas outlining the career of Jesus (it is from this part that our reading comes), but then expanded into a sermon of the type preached in the services of the Hellenistic and Hellenistic-Jewish communities, with adaptation by the author himself.

This particular speech features a recitation of Israel's salvation history, passing rapidly from the sojourn in Egypt to the reign of David, then skipping to the Christ-event.

A unique feature of the Christological part is that it expands the beginning of Jesus' career by a rather lengthy mention of his forerunner, John the Baptist—hence its choice for this occasion. Note that the Jesus story here begins with John the Baptist, not with Jesus' birth.

This is contrary to the way Luke designed his Gospel, a probable indication of the pre-Lucan character of this section.

John the Baptist is here portrayed as the precursor of the Christ-event, a Christian interpretation. As we pursue the “quest of the historical Baptist,” we find that the historical John probably spoke more generally of the Coming One, who could have been an apocalyptic Son of man type of figure or YHWH himself.

In any event, John the Baptist's expectations were clearly apocalyptic in character, a framework of thought that he passed on to Jesus and his disciples, and to the early post-Easter community.

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### **Gospel: Luke 1:57-66, 80**

This reading consists of the birth, circumcision, naming, and public presentation of John the Baptist. The Lutheran and Episcopalian readings extend to the *Benedictus*, the Song of Zechariah, which is commented on separately below.

Luke is here resuming his Baptist source, having inserted the pre-birth part of his Jesus material (the annunciation to Mary and the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth).

In the account of the birth of the Baptist, there are two causes for joy—one private, the other public. The first cause is the removal of the stigma of Elizabeth's barrenness. The public cause is the dawning of the messianic salvation.

Here is a double manifestation of God's “mercy,” his steadfast covenant-love.

The circumcision of the child signifies his incorporation into the Jewish covenant community. This is theologically important, for it enables Luke to show that the Christian movement emerges out of Judaism, and is indeed an authentic development of it.

As a consequence, Luke can present Christianity to Theophilus and to his Greco-Roman audience in general as a *religio licita*, a religion entitled to come under the same umbrella of Roman toleration as the parent Judaism.

The naming of the child is also theologically important. In the abandonment of the priestly name Zechariah, the priestly succession is broken by the dawn of messianic salvation.

There are some puzzling features to the story. Naming was not normally associated with circumcision. The custom of patronymy (using the father's name for the son) was unusual, whereas ponymy

(using the grandfather's name) was normal.

Then, too, how did Elizabeth get to know that the child's name was to be John? How did Zechariah communicate with her, when he was suffering from temporary aphasia?

Probably Luke does not mean us to ask these kinds of questions but wants us to concentrate on the theological message that the story is meant to express.

Verse 80, which tells us that John the Baptist spent his whole life in the desert until the beginning of his public ministry, offers plausible evidence that he was brought up at Qumran.

The counterargument that the whole of verse 80, because of the first part, which is modeled on the story of Samuel, is clearly Lucan redactional composition is not conclusive, since the second part of the verse could come from Baptist tradition.

### **The Benedictus: [Luke 1:68-79](#) (Lutheran and Episcopalian)**

The Song of Zechariah has the style of the psalms. We know that at Qumran the practice of psalm composition and singing was continued, and passed thence to the early Christian community of *'anawim*, whence all the Lucan canticles appear to be derived.

It was widely thought for a time that the *Benedictus* was taken over by Luke from his Baptist source, but more recently it has come to be regarded as more probable that it came from the same Christian source as the other Lucan canticles (R. Brown, 5. Fitzmyer). This is mainly because of the Davidic character of the messianic salvation that it celebrates.

Like the other canticles, too, the Song of Zechariah is separable from its immediate context, and, like them, it looks as though it could have been inserted in a better place, namely, after verse 64, where we are told that Zechariah blessed God, but are not told the words he used.

This is thought to be a sign that Luke added the *Benedictus*, as he did the other canticles, after composing the infancy narratives as a whole—another argument against his having derived them from a Baptist source.

The hymn is a cento of phrases from the Old Testament psalms. It falls into two parts: verses 68-73, which celebrate the messianic salvation, and verses 76-79, which speak of the role of John the Baptist in connection with that messianic salvation. The second part looks as though it has been added to an original *'anawim* hymn in order to adapt it to the context of the Baptist's birth.

It is further noteworthy that the verbs in the first part are all in the aorist tense. This means that they are celebrating a messianic salvation that has already come—in other words, it is a hymn of the post-Easter community. The verbs in the second part, however, are in the future tense.

Could it after all be the case that the second part of the hymn comes from the Baptist community, which believed that John the Baptist had heralded the messianic salvation but that it had not yet occurred? At this stage this was their point of difference with the Christians; later they may have gnostified John the Baptist as the revealer of gnosis.

Put together in this way, the canticle is admirable for use on this day, as well as during Advent and in the daily office of Morning Prayer.

Reginald H. Fuller