

## Nativity of St. John The Baptist, June 24th 2018

### Isaiah 49:1-6

*This reading has many features of a typical prophetic call except that the prophet addressed is most likely Israel itself.<sup>1</sup> It is the opening section of the second of the Suffering Servant Songs.<sup>4</sup>*

**1Hear me, O coastlands, listen, O distant peoples. The Lord called me from birth,** The servant is well aware that he was called by God, even from his mother's womb, like Jeremiah, and he has been charged with preaching to the pagan peoples (the coastlands) or at least to his compatriots, that is, Jews who live in other countries.<sup>2</sup> God sets some of his chosen ones like John the Baptist on the way of their vocation even before their birth.<sup>4</sup> **from my mother's womb he gave me my name.**

**2He made of me a sharp-edged sword** This refers to the effectiveness of the Word of God.<sup>2</sup> **and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. He made me a polished arrow,** The servant has been endowed with qualities that enable him to speak out, with words that find their mark like arrows.<sup>2</sup> **in his quiver he hid me.**

**3You are my servant, he said to me, Israel,** The nation, Israel, has a mission to Israel. This is a bit puzzling but the solution seems to be that the Servant is the gathering of the saintly members of the people who certainly have a mission to each sinful member of Israel.<sup>4</sup> **through whom I show my glory.**

**4Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing,** The dismal effects of sin abide and nothing seems to have been accomplished.<sup>3</sup> **uselessly, spent my strength,** In reply to this complaint from prophetic Israel, God promises to make them "a light to the nations" in verse 6.<sup>1</sup> **yet my reward is with the Lord, my recompense** This reward concerns the manner in which the divine promises will be fully accomplished.<sup>3</sup> **is with my God.** These first four verses contain things that the servant has to say about himself and verses 5 and 6 are things that God says about the servant.<sup>2</sup> The Servant honestly expresses his dejection over what seems to him a wasted ministry, "for nothing". The Servant learns to seek his only "reward" with Yahweh, not that he loses all apostolic zeal but rather that he will trust God to reveal the fruit of it in his own time. This lesson is necessary, lest the Servant gauge the effectiveness of his work by human appearance or seek the glory for himself.<sup>4</sup>

**5For now the Lord has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him; and I am made glorious in the sight of the Lord, and my God is now my strength!** God's reply is that the mission has not been cancelled but widened so as to include the Gentiles.<sup>3</sup>

**6It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.** The risen Jesus echoes verses 5 and 6 when he informs the disciples that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)<sup>1</sup>

### Acts 13:22-26

*Paul shows all the steps which lead up to Jesus Christ in this speech which he gave in the synagogue in the city of Antioch of Pisidia. It is interesting that he mentions John the Baptist without much introduction. The reason is probably that the disciples of the Baptist continued to follow him after Jesus began his own ministry (Mt 9:14-17; Mk 2:18-22; Lk 5:33-39). There is even the suggestion in the Gospel of John of rivalry between disciples of Jesus and John (4:1). John remained popular in Judea after his death (Mt 21:23; Mk 11:27-33; Lk 20:1-8). John's reputation, and perhaps groups of his disciples, traveled well beyond Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. When Paul arrives in Ephesus of Asia Minor he meets Apollos, a solid teacher who knew "only the baptism of*

*John” (Acts 18:25). In Ephesus Paul also finds other people who know the Baptism of John but have never heard of the Holy Spirit (19:1-7). John was a respected and famous man. It is likely for this reason that Paul speaks of him without much introduction. But Paul wants Jesus to enjoy the even greater reputation that he and the Church believe he deserves.<sup>1</sup>*

In those days, Paul said:

**22**“God raised up David as their king; of him he testified, *I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will carry out my every wish.* He is describing David’s obedience in contrast to Saul’s disobedience. David is the type of Jesus as well as his ancestor.<sup>4</sup>

**23**From this man’s descendants God, according to his promise, This is the promise made to David in 2 Sam 7:12 “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom forever.<sup>9</sup> *has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus.* This is the main Pauline proclamation to the Jews.<sup>4</sup>

**24**John (The Baptist) *heralded his coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel;* John, the first capital P Prophet the nation had seen for four hundred years, had the job of summoning every man, woman and child to prepare for the Coming One. He hugely impressed the common people with his wild appearance and hellfire sermons on the banks of the Jordan River.<sup>6</sup> He lived in solitude in the desert, clothed in camel’s hair with a leather girdle about his loins. His food consisted of locusts and wild honey. The heart of his message to soldiers, public officials, farmers, and anyone else who would listen was “Repent.” The Sadducees must lay aside their worldliness, the Pharisees their hypocrisy and self-righteousness; all who come to Christ must repent. In all countries, when the head of a government wishes to visit another government, he sends messengers “before his face.” So, John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way of Christ, to announce the conditions of his reign and government. The chief symbol used by John for the washing away of sin was a cleansing by water. He baptized in the Jordan River as a token of repentance, but he knew that his baptism did not regenerate or quicken the dead soul.<sup>5</sup>

**25**and as John was completing his course, This refers to the end of the period of Israel that came with John the Baptist; it is the first stage of Luke’s view of salvation history. John’s course gave way to Jesus’ “way”.<sup>4</sup> *he would say, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me;* Jesus, the “One who is coming” was announced by John.<sup>4</sup> *I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.’*

**26**My brothers, children of the family of Abraham, These are fellow Israelites.<sup>4</sup> *and those others among you who are God-fearing,* The “fearers of God” professed faith in one God and attended the synagogue but did not become full members of the Jewish community.<sup>4</sup> *to us this word of salvation has been sent.”*

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

*Some 20,000 priests, descendants of Aaron and Levi, were eligible to offer incense on the golden altar of the sanctuary in the Temple in Jerusalem. Each one, chosen by lot, could do so just once in all his life. When Zechariah was chosen for this highest honor that life could bring to an ordinary Israelite of the priestly tribe, he was offering the incense wholly alone before God, when the angel Gabriel appeared to him.<sup>7</sup> Among other things, Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child and that he would call him John. The literal meaning of this name is “Yahweh has shown favor.” The child’s name describes the source and character of the gift he is. Zechariah responded to the strange predictions and promises with the question, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” Gabriel struck Zechariah dumb “until the day these things take place.” It is not until John’s circumcision eight days after his birth that Zechariah, upon writing John’s name, is made able to speak.<sup>1</sup>*

57When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son.

58Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her.

59When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, Jewish parents customarily name their male children on the day of their circumcision, the eighth day after birth. These were events of great importance, signaling the beginning of the child's covenant membership in Israel.<sup>8</sup>

60but his mother said in reply, "No. He will be called John."

61But they answered her, "There is no one among your relatives who has this name."

62So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called.

63He asked for a tablet and wrote, "John is his name," and all were amazed.

64Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God. Following nine months of silence, Zechariah experiences a dramatic recovery and accepts with joy the arrival of the child.<sup>8</sup>

65Then fear came upon all their neighbors, These people have witnessed the manifestation of supernatural power.<sup>1</sup> Their fear is not terror, but awesome reverence in the face of God's wonderful deeds. They are not simply shocked but show their awareness of deeper meaning in the events.<sup>10</sup> and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea.

66All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, "What, then, will this child be?" For surely the hand of the Lord was with him.

80The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel. The general view of commentators is that John's parents died when he was young and that it was as a child that he chose the desert rather the priesthood to which, as his father's son, he was entitled. The whole Jewish priesthood had been a mighty thing, but now that the Reality it foreshadowed was itself in the world, John had a duty mightier still.<sup>11</sup> John's next appearance in the story is some thirty years later.<sup>10</sup>

*Some of the information for this commentary was taken from: (1) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2007" by James L. Weaver; (2) "The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets," (3) "Old Testament Reading Guide: The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66" by Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., (4) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (5) "Life Of Christ" by Fulton J. Sheen, (6) "The Story Of Stories" by Karen Lee Thorp, (7) "The Founding Of Christendom" by Warren H. Carroll, (8) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of LUKE" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch (9) "The Acts of the Apostles" by Luke Timothy Johnson, (10) "Luke" by Jerome Kodell, O.S.B., and (10) "To Know Christ Jesus" by Frank Sheed.*

*In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.*