

So it's John the Baptist time of year again. We only see him at this time of year. Much better known than his beginnings is his gruesome death – but these texts are the only place where we can learn about John The Baptist's conception, and his birth. His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were old – seriously old as one of the youth called me when he found out my age. They were old and childless. They'd learned to live with the shame but then that rascal of an angel Gabriel appeared. He tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will become pregnant and give birth. Zechariah expresses doubt which insults Gabriel so he uses his angelic powers to strike Zechariah mute.

Gabriel's word was good and 9 months later Elizabeth delivers a healthy baby boy. She announces that she intends to call him John. This was scandalous – children were always named after a relative, often the father. Who the heck is John? Perhaps thinking Zechariah's muteness has emboldened Elizabeth – the townspeople bring Zechariah in, Zechariah, do something! And he does, he takes a writing tablet upon which he writes: His name is John – and immediately Zechariah's

voice is restored and he begins praising God. His first words are the ones of the Psalm this morning. He praises God and sings with joy about the Messiah to come. And then reveals this baby's mission: he will be the one to prepare the world for the coming Messiah. To help God's tender mercy break upon us like the dawn – bringing light and guiding our feet toward peace.

Wow! They wanted a baby, but now it seems they have something more; they have a person, a person God has plans for, a person God needs. What must that moment have been like for Elizabeth and Zechariah, knowing the tiny baby they held in their arms was not just the answer to their prayers but was chosen by God to help answer the prayers of many.

That is the last we see of John until today's Gospel reading, around 26AD. We know the date because Luke has provided many markers in the form of the world leaders of the time. Referring to the emperor Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, rulers of neighboring lands all lends credibility to John's words and his role. Luke enjoys the contrast of the high and mighty with John.

These men of earthly power and privilege, if anyone is going to spot the Messiah, they know it will be one of them. You couldn't get them to believe for a minute that John the Baptist, an ascetic living in the desert, a nobody, had any role to play. And frankly, you wouldn't have much luck with the general population either. As in Zechariah's song, this Messiah is from the house of David, King David.

This Messiah has been long awaited – through occupation, and captivity, through famine and poverty, through oppression and tyranny – the hope of a coming Messiah has sustained the Israelites. At each catastrophe, each humiliation, the people think “maybe this is the time. At each new way men discover to control and exploit each other, the people can be heard pleading: please come now. Restore our humanity. Give us justice. GIVE US PEACE. The one who will deliver the people from all of this that is the one John is to make way for. That is the one the people are longing for.

And that is the one the high and mighty, the Tiberius', the Pilates, the Herods, are waiting for as well, but their waiting is tinged more with

trepidation than eagerness. Will this Messiah be like King David – powerful and regal? Will this Messiah lead Israel to greater stature? Will this Messiah need our ‘help’ or will he turn on us? Everyone was awaiting a Messiah, but no one was expecting John the Baptist, no one was expecting Jesus.

I haven’t really understood this longing for a Messiah until recently. Every time we celebrate Communion I say words about Christ coming again. When I do, I am aware that I am unclear what I’m really saying. I’ve struggled with it –do I believe these words, do I understand them? But recently I’ve stopped trying to figure it out and I’ve just accepted it. Christ tells us he will come again. Once you accept that, you begin to yearn for it, to wonder what he’s waiting for. San Bernadino, Paris, Syria, Newtown, Somalia, Haiti, Fukushima, Ferguson, Ukraine, Charleston, Winchester. What will it take for Him, or maybe Her, to come and save us from ourselves? Where is OUR John the Baptist?

And yet, I hear John’s words and wonder. All flesh shall see the salvation of God.

And Christ came,
and all flesh saw salvation,
all humanity has been saved,
we are saved.

It's done. We are saved, rescued. We are beloved. What would we hope Christ would bring when coming again? To the whole world? What can save us from ourselves? O, wait, we are saved already. Henri Nouwen says we are at the same time God's Beloved, and yet we must become God's beloved. WE ARE SAVED yet we must become saved. We have won the lottery but we need to go turn in the ticket.

When I cry to the heavens and ask Christ when he is coming again; I imagine God, Christ, at the lottery office wondering why so few people have picked up their winnings. All flesh shall see the salvation of God. Everywhere we look there are opportunities to claim that salvation; to live the first coming; to be the second coming.

Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted a baby – and they got one – John The Baptist, the person

charged with drawing our attention to Christ's coming into the world. What amazement they must have felt, to birth the person God needs.

And yet, I imagine their feeling of awe touched with intimidation is not that different from what every new parent feels. Each new life is a mystery, an untold story, a wonder, a puzzle. AND each new life is like John the Baptist's. Every tiny little wrinkly miracle has a God given purpose. Each is given gifts, talents, capacities, vision that God hopes will be used for God's divine purpose. You were beheld with wonder and hope. Imagine it. Picture it. What was it Gabriel whispered in your parents' ears about you?

This Advent as you prepare to welcome the Christ child into your lives, I yearn for you to claim your part of God's plan, for you to hear Gabriel's whisper and Zechariah's song. All flesh shall see the salvation of God. Imagine if each of us could claim that salvation, even if it's just this one little church in this one small town. Imagine how God's world might change, flourish, take root. What if all Christian's could become the saved they already are. Imagine

the love pouring out of that stable. What if all
flesh – would see the salvation of God. What if,
instead of wishing for Christ's second coming,
we decided to live his first one. May it be so,
for you, for our world, for God.