

# The Nativity of St. John the Baptist—Faith in a Message Unseen

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Faith and hope. Two words that we use a lot in Christianity. Two words that form the basis of some of our favorite hymns: “My Faith Looks Up to Thee”, “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less”, etc. We use these words all the time. You might say to someone, “I have faith you’ll make the right decision,” or, “I hope this movie is good.” What differentiates these two? What unites these two? Are they merely interchangeable, or is there a degree of difference to them?

During this last year, I had the privilege of serving a congregation in Central Illinois as Vicar, as I am training to be a pastor myself. My first day there, the church had an event going on in the evening, and so I went and began to meet people. I’ll never forget the first gentleman I met because of the first thing he said to me. It wasn’t hello, and it wasn’t his name. Nope, the first words this man spoke to me were, “Cubs or Cardinals?” Wisely, I answered Royals. Come to find out, that is big Cubs territory up there. Another man told me that when the Cubs won the World Series in 2016 the first thing that came in his head was, “Lord, now you let your servant go in peace”—the first line of the Nunc Dimittis. That got me to think, however, about all the Cubs fans over the years who died without ever seeing the Cubs win a World Series, and yet they remained faithful all those years.

To an even greater extent, then, think of the people who were waiting for the coming of the Messiah who died while waiting. Also, the messengers who proclaimed the message that the Messiah was coming, even though they never saw it come to fruition. They proclaimed the message of the coming Messiah who would save them from their sins, and yet they died, not seeing the day when that was fulfilled. Included in these are men like the prophet Jeremiah, whom God tells in our Old Testament reading for today, **“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”** (Je 1:5). God chose Jeremiah before he was even conceived, to proclaim to the people of Israel God’s message both of destruction because of their sins and of grace that would come again. The Lord said to Jeremiah, **“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”** (Je 1:9–10). God tells Jeremiah that He has chosen him from before his birth to proclaim the destruction that is about to come to the Kingdom of Judah. This destruction happens in Jeremiah’s lifetime; Jeremiah sees it with his own eyes. But God also tells him that he will proclaim a message of salvation “to build and to plant.” The destruction does come, but God does not leave Judah without hope.

This message of punishment and hope is the message that all the prophets proclaimed. Even the last of the prophets, Malachi, proclaims this message. In Malachi 4, the last chapter of the Old Testament, he gives a message of destruction of the wicked and healing for the righteous. And then, as he closes out his prophecy, he says, **“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”** (Mal 4:5–6). Through Malachi, God gives the promise that before the Messiah comes, Elijah the prophet will come. This is the same man whom Malachi says in chapter 3, **“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.”** (Mal 3:1). The Elijah was promised to prepare the way for the Lord. When the messenger appeared, then the Lord was close at hand.

Who, then, is this Elijah? It is the man whose nativity we celebrate today: John the Baptist. He, like Jeremiah, was chosen by God before his birth. In fact, before even his conception. As you heard in the Gospel reading for today, the angel Gabriel visits John’s father Zechariah as he was in the temple offering sacrifice. He tells Zechariah that he and his wife will give birth to a son, even though they are well advanced in years, and that they will name him John. And then, at the end of our Gospel reading, he gives the reason for his birth, saying, **“And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”** (Lk 1:16–17). Zechariah was a faithful Jew, one who would’ve been looking for the Messiah to come, so he no doubt would’ve known Malachi 3 and 4. Thus, when Gabriel told him that his son would be “in the spirit and power of Elijah” and that he would “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children” and “make ready for the Lord a people prepared,” he would’ve undoubtedly known that this also meant that the Messiah was at hand as well. His hopes were coming true; his faith was being confirmed. God was keeping his promises.

And when John grows up, he does everything that the Elijah is supposed to do. He is the who turns many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God by proclaiming, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** (Mt 3:2). He is the one who rebukes the disobedient to try to turn them to the wisdom of the just by rebuking the Pharisees and the Sadducees, saying, **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”** (Mt 3:7–8). He is the one who goes before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah by proclaiming, as he sees Jesus coming toward him sometime after His baptism and temptation, **“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before**

me, because he was before me.” (Jn 1:29–30). Yet, even though he is the forerunner, John doesn’t see the Messiah’s work complete. Instead, he ends up in prison, knowing that death is eminent, and so he sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, **“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”** (Lk 7:19). In a moment of weakness, this faithful prophet of God, loses hope and doubts.

Sin, ultimately, tempts all of us to lose hope and doubt. When John doubted, Jesus tells John’s disciples, **“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”** (Lk 7:22–23). Jesus tells them to point to the works that He is doing as proof that He is who John proclaimed Him to be. We, likewise, find ourselves in times of doubt, without much hope, wondering if God has simply forgotten us, if God even exists. Maybe it’s physical conditions that this to happen: wrongful imprisonment like John faced, failing health of ourselves or of our loved ones, loss of job, loss of a house, or the like. Or it could be something different: the affair of a spouse, the betrayal of someone you trusted, you name it. These events cause us to have doubts, to lose hope. They cause us to wonder if God exists, and if He does, then if He cares.

Yet, as we said in our Introit for today, **“My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day, for their number is past my knowledge.”** (Ps 71:15). In both the times when our faith feels like it couldn’t be stronger and when we have little hope, we are called to tell of God’s deeds of salvation, to recount all that He has done for us, and all that He has promised He will do. This is because our faith isn’t founded on feelings, but on facts. Our faith is built on the fact that God sent His Son into the world. It’s built on the fact that Jesus Christ, the one whom John was sent to foretell, worked for us salvation. This He did by suffering and dying on Calvary’s cross, there defeating once and for all time sin, death, and the devil. And because those were defeated, we tell how on the third day, He rose again from the dead and then ascended into Heaven. We tell that He will come again to judge both the living and dead. Furthermore, our faith is built on the fact that we have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. Through our baptism, God has made us His own children, by placing our unrighteousness on His Son at the cross and giving us His Son’s righteousness. And we know that each time that we come to the altar and receive His Body and Blood in Holy Communion, that God is, through that meal, giving us the forgiveness of sins and strengthening us to life everlasting. This is not to deny that there is a feeling aspect to faith. Mere knowledge of the work of Christ does not equate to saving faith, for even the demons and the devil have this head knowledge. Faith, however, takes this knowledge of what Christ has done and believes it to be true, clings to it, loves it, hopes in it, rejoices in it. Therefore, what Peter says in our Epistle reading for today is true of us: **“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not**

**now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”** (1 Pe 1:8–9). Yes, we haven’t seen Christ in the flesh. And yet, we rejoice with joy because we know that we have salvation for our souls in Christ’s death and resurrection.

And so that we may have the certainty of this, God gives us faithful ministers to proclaim this word to us. Peter says, **“It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”** (1 Pe 1:12). This is true of the Old Testament prophets who foretold the coming Messiah, it is true of the New Testament apostles who told of Christ’s work, and it is true of pastors today. They are to serve not themselves but you, the sheep. That is why a congregation calls a pastor and it is why a pastor should not go looking for a call. A faithful pastor, called by the congregation, serves with your best interest in mind, shepherding you, and proclaiming to you God’s righteous acts, His deeds of salvation all the day.

So, what is the difference between faith and hope? Maybe the best answer comes in Hebrews 11: **“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”** (Heb 11:1). Hope has an aspect of uncertainty to it in normal every day usage. Many Cubs fans hoped that their team would win the World Series, yet for 108 years, those hopes were crushed year after year. But faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Faith takes those hopes and removes the uncertainty from them. This is because God is the faithful God who fulfills all the promises that He has made. Thus, we not only hope in what He has said, but we have certainty of faith that what He has said is true. Our faith is based on God’s Word and is given to us by the Holy Spirit. It is faith in what God tells he has done for us, will do for us in the end, and does for us each day in Christ. So that you may have this certainty of faith God gave the Old Testament prophets to prophesy of the coming Messiah; He sent John the Baptist to be the forerunner of Christ; and He gave the New Testament apostles to proclaim the work that Christ did in dying on the cross for the sins of the entire world. It’s also why He continues to send men into the field to this day, to proclaim the same message to you. All this He does so that your faith may be strengthened unto life everlasting. God’s Word enables you, his servants, to have this certainty of faith so that you may find peace and rejoice in your salvation, even though you will most likely die without seeing the final fulfillment of that salvation, as His Word has enabled all the saints who have come before us to have that same peace. May you always have faith in the one whom John the Baptist foretold, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who died and rose so that your sins may be taken away. Amen.