

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

God is faithful. He makes promises, and He keeps them.

Hear the promise of the Lord from the prophet Amos: "'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord GOD, 'That I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine of bread, Nor a thirst for water, But of hearing the words of the LORD.'" (Amos 8:11) Days are coming, He says, when there will no longer be the hearing of the words of the LORD. The Word will cease to be given and received, and God likens it to a famine.

Hear the promise of the Lord from the prophet Malachi: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse." (Malachi 4:5-6) There will be a famine of hearing the words of the LORD, but God will send Elijah to them. Elijah will come before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.

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Those words from Malachi are the last recorded in the Old Testament. These are the last words of the Lord given and received for 430 years, because "...the prophets ceased to appear among them." (1 Maccabees 9:27) 430 years of famine, not of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. Much happened in those 430 years. Having fallen to the Babylonians, that empire, including the lands of Judah, were conquered by the Persians, then Alexander the Great. Then, Judea fell under the governorship of the Ptolomies then the Seleucids. Antiochus Epiphanes, a Seleucid, ruled ruthlessly, desecrating the temple by having hogs sacrificed there. The Maccabees revolt. Rome assumes rule over Judea.

During those 430 years, however, no prophet revealed the will of God for the people. There were prophets, to be sure, but none like the prophets of the Old Testament. They preached, they recounted the promises of God made through the prophets who came before them. But God never spoke directly through them. There was no, "Say to the children of Israel..." The words, "Thus says the LORD," were never uttered anew.

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Into Roman occupied Judea the angel Gabriel goes. He visits a man serving as priest before God in the order of his division, burning incense in the temple. He and his wife were barren, though they had long prayed for children. They likely had given up any hope of having children, now, though, as they were advanced in years. Gabriel finds the priest and tells him,

Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also 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 a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1: [5-12], 13-17)

You might well imagine that the priest thought this a joke; "How shall I know this?" He asks, "For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." (Luke 1:18) Doubting the promises of God, the priest is struck a mute until he names his son John.

Elizabeth conceives a son. Before long, she is visited by her relative, a young maiden also miraculously pregnant, and Elizabeth's son leaps for joy in her womb, confirming what Gabriel had told

Zacharias; "He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb." Even in his mother's womb, this son is turning "the children of Israel to the Lord their God," as the One whom the young maiden bears is none other than YHWH in the flesh. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Luke 1:42) But that's the topic of last week.

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Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. The people in attendance thought that they would name the child after a relative, the usual custom. "No," Elizabeth replies, "He shall be called John." They have no relative named John, so they turn to the mute priest. Looking to Zacharias, and seemingly thinking that because he is mute, he is deaf as well, made signs to him. (I suppose we would probably ask him loudly and slowly.) He writes on a tablet, "His name is John."

"His name is John." God is faithful. He makes promises, and He keeps them. That's what the name John means—one of the name's meanings. God is faithful. Here is Elijah, not reborn, but come again, as it were, to go before the Lord and prepare His way, to bring His people knowledge of salvation, to call the people to repentance before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. He is not Elijah, but is a prophet come in the spirit of the greatest of Old Testament prophets, and of those born of women, there is none greater than this John. God is faithful, and John will remind the people of the promises of God, and that He will keep them.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;
To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace.

Zacharias' mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke praises to God. The people marveled at this and wondered what kind of man this John would be. They were unaccustomed to prophets, having lived their lives without one who spoke, "Thus says the Lord," anew. But God is faithful, and He has sent His messenger on ahead of Him.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zacharias gets it. He sings the *Benedictus*, a portion of which was just quoted. The Lord has visited His people; He's growing right now in the womb of Elizabeth's relative. He has raised up a horn of salvation in the house of His servant David; the priest sings of salvation coming from the tribe of Judah, not his own tribe, despite the miracle he now beholds with his eyes and holds with his hands. This was spoken of by the mouths of the prophets; this salvation was promised of God by the prophets—sworn on oath to Father Abraham—and John would continue in that line.

In time, Elizabeth's relative gave birth to a Son, wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger. "[T]here is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11) He, too, received a name given to Him by Gabriel: Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. (cf. Matthew 1:21) Both men grew up, and both would do what they were sent to do.

John went before Jesus to prepare His way:

- John would Baptize Jesus, though not being worthy to loose the straps of His sandals.
- Marveling at what John was doing, he was asked, "Who are you?" "I am not the Christ." "What then? Are you Elijah?" "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" "No." He whom Gabriel called Elijah denies being Elijah. Why? Because as He once said,
A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.
You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, "I am not the Christ," but, "I have been sent before Him." He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.

He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:27-30)

John was the prophet of the Most High, not to draw attention to himself, but to Jesus, the One whom he was sent before to prepare His way.

- And so, one day, John saw Jesus coming, pointed to Him, and called out, 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 is preferred before me, for He was before me." I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water. (John 1:29-31)
- John would lose his life on account of his prophetic mission. He called Herod to repentance, and was "kindly" beheaded in thanks.

John lost his life because of Jesus; Jesus gave His life freely for John. John pointed to Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb, whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. For pointing to Jesus, John was murdered; this Lamb made His way to Jerusalem, to a hill outside of Jerusalem, and gave His life as a ransom for John and for all, willingly spilling His blood as the propitiation for the sins of the world, and if for the world, then for John and yours, too, dear hearers.

John's job was to point to Jesus, and get out of the way. Your pastor's job is to point to Jesus and get out of the way. Like John, your pastor reminds you of the promises made by God, a promise to have mercy on you and forgive you, to save and redeem you, and to bring you to Himself. He must increase, and your pastor decrease.

You are not faithful. You make promises—some to your fellow man, some to God—and though you may keep some, you also break many. John's message, and that of your pastor, is, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (cf. Matthew 3:1-2) Then, he gets out of the way, pointing you to the kingdom of heaven who is come: Jesus, the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—who takes away your sin.

Because, God is faithful. He makes promises, and He keeps them. He has promised to save you, to cover your unfaithfulness with His faithfulness. In Jesus Christ, He has kept that promise.

Jesus is come. He was born in the city of David, lowly Bethlehem—the House of Bread—the Savior, Christ the Lord. And as His name declares, He has saved you. He bore you in His flesh as He gave that flesh over to death in your place. His blood is spilled, and you are covered in it; and though your robes were as scarlet, they have been made clean in His blood. (cf. Isaiah 1:18b, c) Jesus, this one proclaimed to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, was led like a lamb to the slaughter silently (cf. Isaiah 53:6-7), bearing in His flesh your sins in order that He would destroy them by His death in your place, and give you His life—give you Life—in exchange, a most blessed exchange indeed.

The Great and Dreadful Day of the Lord has come—Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried. The Lord's wrath was exacted fully on the One conceived and born of Elizabeth's relative. Jesus received it all for you, dear hearers. Now, through a baptism like His, you are made ready for the coming of the great and dreadful day again, when the Lamb of God returns in glory to judge the quick and the dead.

Now, risen and ascended, the Lamb of God is seated in glory, preparing a place for you at His eternal feast, for you, whom He has prepared for a place there. His way to death was prepared by John. Your way to life eternal, as well as John's, was prepared by Jesus. For, just as He rose again from the dead, you, too, will burst forth from your graves, the earth giving up what it has taken from you, and you will rise to meet Jesus and your fellow saints in the clouds. (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) God is faithful. He has made this promise to you, and He will keep it, just as He has forgiven you for all of your sins.

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