

Birth of John the Baptist
Isaiah 40:1-11

40 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.
³ A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
⁴ 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.
⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
⁶ A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.
⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Luke 1 57-66,80

The Birth of John the Baptist

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ 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.

Today we celebrate the birthday of John the Baptist, the last of the Old testament prophets and the one God chose to prepare the way for His Son Jesus.

In Luke's two first chapters he parallels the birth of John and the birth of Jesus.

You remember how an angel came to Zechariah doing his duty in the temple to tell him that though he and his wife were old they would have this special son "who would go on in the spirit of Elijah to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah doubts and cannot speak. But Elizabeth does become pregnant. Luke breaks off to tell of the Visitation to Mary and the link is the visit of Mary to Elizabeth – to share their joy and to encourage one another in the very extraordinary situations they are in.

Mary's song of joy rings out almost as prophecy of what God has done and is now doing for his people.

Elizabeth gives birth to this long awaited son, and notice how the friends and relatives in the hill country gather round for congratulations and to share her joy. I hope it was an easy first birth for an older woman!

Names in the bible – and in other cultures often have meaning and significance.

Abram's name was changed to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter – the rock for example.

God chose that the child should be called John – a combination of the words for God and for favour – so "God will show him favour."

Zechariah heard Gods command and indicates the child must not be called a traditional family name but he must be John. Through his obedience he regains his speech.

The circumstances of John's birth – to an elderly couple, being foretold for I am sure the couple wanted to tell all how God had blessed them, and Zechariah's miraculous recovery of speech make this a wondrous thing in the small village neighbourhood.

And notice the joy, awe and praise that went on. God was very present with all.

And we did not read it but Zechariah's song sums up his joy and praise in what God has done for his people Israel, in revealing himself in the way in their generation. He uses word like redemption, salvation, mercy "to enable his people to live in holiness and righteousness before him, and guide our feet into the path of peace".

For this is a prophesy – stating what God has done and will do. And the words are for today as much as when John was born.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were chosen to give John a secure home, in a community, being brought up the faithful ways of his parents.

He grew and became "strong in Spirit" we are told, until he left home to become further immersed in Gods ways in the desert.

This may mean he lived the life of a hermit, or that he lived in a religious community like the Essenes – we cannot know. Whatever he did God was preparing him for when he bursts onto the stage "to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous." *Luke 1:17*

He fulfilled the words of Isaiah we heard earlier. "A voice of one crying in the wilderness – prepare the way for the Lord."

Luke goes on after John's birth story to recount Jesus' birth, in very different circumstances – away from home and family – but not unnoticed – for God made other preparations for this birth as we know.

John's birth was foretold by God and prepared the way for Jesus. God makes preparation for so many things in **our** lives. When I look back, I can see God's hand before me. Now observing how others cope in older life, coming alongside those who have trodden a path before me, in the faith, learned from life, is helping me to prepare for whatever comes next for me and eventually meeting him face to face.