

7-7-19 Nativity of St. John the Forerunner

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

It is said among certain circles within our tradition, within the oral tradition of the church, that Adam one day was walking with God in the Garden of Eden, before the fall, before even Eve existed. Adam had named all the animals and none, although wonderful, were found to be the right help mate for him, and he was discussing this with God in the garden, and God was talking to them about the help mate that he wanted to bring into his life. God said to Adam, "I want to make for you a help mate who is perfect for you. You are a he. It will be a she. When you are hungry, she will provide food for you. When you bring in the harvest, she will make the bread. She will bring children into the world, your children, and she will raise them perfectly. She will never argue with you. She'll never do anything that you don't want her to do. She will follow your will perfectly. Your life will be made excellent and perfect in every way by all of the things that she does without argument in total cooperation perfectly."

Adam, being of Mediterranean descent or the original Mediterranean, right? He thought about it for a minute and he said, "My Lord, that sounds incredible, but what would it cost me?" God said to him, "It will cost you an arm and a leg," and Adam thought about it for a minute and he said, "What could I get for a rib?" Thus began the trials between men and women from the beginning, but it's interesting that even today when we see that, we hear this incredible story, right, the tear jerking story of Zachariah and Elizabeth bringing Saint John into the world, and the struggle that Zachariah predominantly, and usually in these stories, it is the man who has a hard time believing God, and we see this incredible juxtaposition between the birth of Saint John, announced by Gabriel to Zachariah, who doubts. Yet, only a few months later, that same archangel will announce the same type of miraculous birth to Mary, and she will believe.

But Zachariah, when he encounters the Archangel Gabriel, this offer is being made to him by God, that from you and your wife will come forth the greatest of men born from women, meaning not compared to Christ, but compared to every other person. Whoever came out of the normal, average household, conception achieved by a husband and a wife, the greatest of them, and he will do all of these amazing things to prepare the people of God for the Christ. Zachariah, he's not sure if that's the deal he should make. In his own doubt, in his own pragmatism, really, being very rational and objective about what is going on, he says, "How can this be? I'm an old man and my wife is beyond child bearing years," right? Rationally what he's looking at is impossible and it's very interesting. I even noticed this just this morning when we were just listening to the Gospel, that the Archangel Gabriel doesn't say it to him, "Because you have doubted, you're not going to speak for a long time."

He doesn't say, "Because you have doubted the words of God. You are going to be speechless for a time." He says, "Because you have doubted my words." My words. I like that. The Archangel Gabriel has a job to do and that is to deliver the messages to, the greatest messages to those who are going to be among the greatest people. The Archangel Gabriel is the archangel over all of the messenger angels. Whenever we receive a word from God, it is through the messenger angels, not the warrior angels, the guardian Angels who are there, Michael. Yet when there is the most profound message to be delivered, Gabriel himself comes, and he says to them, in a sense, "God told me what reality is, and he told me to go tell it to you and I'm here

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telling you, and you don't believe me." I don't think angels get offended any more than God do, does, but it certainly was an offense.

Zachariah is struck speechless, unable to speak. I love that. Also, if you listen carefully, the people are waiting. They're wondering what's on. Have you ever had those times when you have the curtains closed, and something's going on back there, and it seems to be going on a little longer than it should, all right? He comes out, and he's trying to make signs that he's seen this vision but he can't speak, and they realize that something amazing has happened. We sang this morning that from the barrenness of his father's mouth and his mother's womb comes forth the holy prophet in Baptist John. We see in ways when we look at the annunciation to Zachariah about John and the annunciation about Christ to the Theotokos, that we also have this fulfillment and division between the Old and New Testament. Throughout the whole Old Testament, God has been revealing his will to the people and they have doubted it. They just have doubted that it's going to work out.

Like Adam, in my joke, doubted that he was going to make it, that it would be worth it to go through life without an arm and a leg to have a wife like that. We know he's wrong, don't we men? She would even push us around in the wheelchair, and Zachariah doubts, but in the Theotokos, we see a new relationship with mankind, the New Testament relationship where no longer is there going to be heritage that makes you among the chosen people, but it is going to be your personal faith that makes you among the chosen people. It's a very important, I think, that we stop and we think about this aspect of barrenness that we see God working with, that from the barrenness of Zachariah's words, from the barrenness of Elizabeth's womb, from the technical barrenness of the virginity of the mother of God. God is going to bring forth miraculously, miraculously his will, and the people that he needs to have among us in order for us to be saved.

When we look at ourselves, even, we see that this miraculous event takes place for us personally as well, when God overcomes in our lives, our weaknesses, our passions, our spiritual barrenness, and he is going to use it. Despite the weakness and the barrenness that we have in order to bring forth his will in the world. How many of us read the lives of the saints and feel so bare and compare to them? Our lives weak and stumbled compared to theirs. The devil loves to come when we see our own barrenness, we see our own weaknesses, our own inability. He likes to come and accuse us for those things, and tell us that that's what's going to keep us from being saved or doing the will of God. Without enough humility, we see that we are sinners and we think that that is evidence that we are not going to be saved.

With a lack of humility, we look at our own faults, our own weaknesses, our personality flaws, our conflicts with the people around us, our inability to do what is right all the time, even though it has been told to us and all we have to do is follow the list, and the devil comes and says, "See, this is evidence that you're lost. You're not going to be saved. Look at yourself compared to all the wonderful people around you. Look at the failings that you have." When we see this evidence, the devil accuses us and says, "You're probably not among that people of God. You're probably not going to make it," and yet we see directly from Saint Paul, which I'll read to you in a moment, that God reveals to us that he is going to work miraculously in our lives. He is

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going to take the barren womb and bring forth a child. He is going to take the virginal womb and bring forth a child.

He is going to strike a man dumb, and the first thing, if you paid attention, the first thing that Zachariah does when his mouth opens... Sometimes we remember that story and think, oh, the first thing you said is, "No, his name is going to be John," but that's not what he says. He writes, his name is going to be John. The first thing that comes out of his mouth, out after a time of doubt, after a time of being penanced by the Archangel Gabriel, the first thing that comes out of his mouth is praise of God. Even out of his punishment, we might say, out of his penance comes a love for God and the glorification of God because he realizes that God is working in miracle not only in the womb of his wife, but in his own life, in his own faith, in his own soul. We have to, when we see the barrenness of our own life, where we see ourselves living in conflict, not voluntarily, but circumstantially, or in the state of our fallenness, in conflict with the commandments of Christ, in conflict with the ideal that he is calling us to, or that perfection that he is calling us to, we have to realize that it is in...

When we except in humility, that that is who we really are, the doubting Zachariah, the barren Elizabeth, that then God will start working deeply within us, and from Second Corinthians 12:9 and 10, we have the story of Paul crying out to God. The great Paul. That great educated Pharisee who is willing to participate even in the murder of Saint Stephen, the Protomartyr in order to, in his mind, defend the faith. The exalted Paul, the co-leader of the apostles, he who came latest to the apostolic band and ends up being greatest among them. He who preaches the Gospel inspired by Christ himself after being struck blind, and his sight restored only through his exception, his receiving of Christ as a savior. The great Paul. When he looks at himself among his journeys while writing his epistles to the various churches that he is visiting while preparing spiritually for his martyrdom in Rome, he sees that he has a flaw on the inside that he can't overcome. Could Elizabeth overcome the barrenness of her womb? Could Zachariah overcome the speechlessness that was with which he was penanced on his own?

No. Neither of them could, and Paul himself looks inside and he sees this flaw, this passion that he is unable to overcome. He says in Corinthians, Second Corinthians, that he begs God three times to take it away from him, and God says to him, "No. It's not strange. No, I'm not going to take away the flaw that you have. I am not going to let you perfect yourself without me. I am not going to relieve you from the reality that there is a barrenness in all of us, that if we allow Christ to, he will come, and he will till that soil, and make us fertile with the Holy Spirit," and Christ says to God, to Paul, "No, I will not take your weakness away. My power is made perfect in your weakness." Think about that for a minute. Apply it to your own life. Think about Zachariah and Elizabeth, being unable to bring forth Saint John on their own.

My power, God reveals to us, is made perfect in your weakness, and Paul responds by saying, therefore, now, now he's talking to the Corinthians again, because Christ said that to me, I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses. That's what humility allows us to do. Humility allows us to say, "I'm terrible at those things. I'm a very angry person. I always... I'm greedy, you know that. I'm very impatient." Humility allows us to admit exactly who we really are and without any problem, tell the truth, to confess what our weaknesses are without being

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disturbed at all. Because in humility, we know ourselves, and we also like Paul take hope in the fact that the power of God is made perfect or full in its fullness in our weakness.

Saint Paul says, "Therefore, I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may be, may rest upon me for the sake of Christ, for the sake of Christ," for my love for Christ, because I am a Christian, then I am content with my weaknesses, for when I am weak, when I really admit them and confess them and know that it is me, then, then I am strong. In this vision that we get from Zachariah and Elizabeth with the nativity of the Saint John, which we are joyfully celebrating on a Sunday this year, we have to take hope that we are, that although we are as barren as they were spiritually, we are barren as they were barren in the womb. At the same time, we are in this condition of barrenness this condition of virginity, in the sense. We have not given birth yet to holiness, but that is what God wants to us to realize in humility and ask him to come and be our strength.

We must defeat the devil when the devil comes to us with his demons and accuses us for being sinners. It's only pride that's surprised by that, right? Only pride is surprised when it finds out that we're actually a sinner. Humility isn't surprised at all. Oh, yeah, I've been that way all the way from the beginning. Glory to God for all things, and God is going to save me despite my sin, despite my weakness, despite my barrenness. We must defeat the devil in that. When we in humility realize that we are broken and barren, we realize that we are the very person that God wants to work in miracle through, and I will end with this exhortation that if you pay attention to lives of the saints, particularly the ones that we have a lot of information about the saint, it is very typical that a saint ends up being the expert in an area that they are actually the most weak, naturally.

If a saint writes great volumes on overcoming the passions, you can be assured they were a very passionate person. Like Saint John of Kronstadt becoming known, famous worldwide for being this incredible saint who created Christian community. He became an expert in crushing community of love, of neighbor, of finding our salvation in relationship with our neighbors around us. He was the most antisocial person to begin with you would ever imagine. He did not like people. He didn't. It made him feel awkward. He didn't like to be around them. Say, what about Saint Mark of Ephesus, who I love always to talk about because he comes out of the monastery almost completely unknown, defends that faith at the Council of Florence one man defeating all the weakness of orthodoxy and all of the pressure, the assault of the Catholic church, one man alone saving the church, saving all of the parishes, saving the faith alone, and all of his contemporaries joked about him, that Saint Mark of Ephesus loved God, and he loved books and study, and he loved people, in that order. You didn't get the joke. He liked books more than he liked people.

When we look the saints, we see the even they, it is in their weakness that they are made strong. This summer, as you go about your duties, and we have a good time, and we relax and have a joyful, joyful time, after Paska and Pentecost, with the feast of the Holy Apostles, when you hear that voice that says, "You don't have any hope because you are weak and barren," counter that with just a little bit of humility and say, "Yeah, you're right. I am weaken and barren, and God, if I allow him, it's going to work miracles in me," in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.