

29 August 2010
The Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist
Holy Baptism of John Peter Hensley

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“One Lamb, Two Saint Johns”

Text: Mark 6:14-29; Revelation 6:9-11; Romans 6:1-5

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

Today we commemorate the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist, the same day we baptized little John the Hensley. I don't know if that's a sign of things to come or not. I don't know what little Johnno will grow up to be or do. God knows, as He knew and planned with John the Baptist. He knew and planned great things. John (of the baptizing variety) was the forerunner of Christ, calling sinners to repentance and preparing the way of the Lord. Already in the womb John was doing this, leaping for joy when he heard the voice of Mary when she and Jesus came to visit him. He would also later cry out in joy when Jesus came to him at the Jordan, *“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29)

Some folks picture John the Baptist as a grumpy, sour grapes kind of guy - wearing funny clothes, eating funny food, and telling everyone how wrong and sinful they are. John, the Law-man. But I don't think so. The Law wearies you and wears you out pretty quickly. You know that. But the Gospel gives life, and John was full of life. And if John was in the way of the Lord, then he was in the way of the Gospel. Yes, he preached repentance, but repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*. Repentance to point to the good news - to Jesus, the Son of God, the Lamb of God, come to lay down His life for the life of the world. That's why folks from Jerusalem, and Judea, and the whole region (Mark 1:5) were coming out to John at the Jordan, to hear him preach and to be baptized by him. They weren't coming for the Law - they were coming for the Gospel. Their lives were already full of bad news; they didn't need anymore of that. They were coming to hear a John who was *still* leaping for joy, because His Saviour was coming.

But, of course, not all heard John's preaching as good news. And Adam and Joanna, I can fairly surely say that you will not hear all of little Johnno's preaching to you as good news - especially when he calls out to you at 3 am, calling you to your vocation as father or mother to come and feed him, or to change his diaper. But he will call out, whether you like it or not, because that's *his* vocation right now, calling you to your vocation, and so being God's gift to you. That you may serve as you have been served. That you may love as you have been loved. And he will

rejoice to see you.

John (again, of the Baptist variety) also could not stop preaching - even in prison - because that was his vocation. And so when King Herod took his brother's wife to be his wife, John preached to him repentance. When Herod had John seized and thrown into prison, John preached to him repentance. And when prison could not silence him, Herodias found a way - by severing his head from his body. And with that, John received his next to last vocation - that of martyr. To be killed for the faith.

I say "next to last" vocation because his death is not the final chapter in his life. With Jesus, life always has the last word. And so John has taken his place under the altar in heaven, with all the martyrs. That is his final vocation, his final calling. To receive the Sabbath rest of God. And so even in martyrdom, there is joy for John. On that day, the roles were reversed, as *he* took the journey to *Jesus'* home, and all the angels leaped for joy at *his* arrival.

So did Herod and Herodias finally get some peace once John was silenced? No. John was preaching to them *so that they may have peace* - the peace of Christ in the forgiveness of their sins. The true peace of reconciliation with God. The peace that comes only when we know that our sins are not held against us because they are forgiven in Christ. Just as at the Jordan with all who came out to him, John wanted Herod and Herodias to have this peace and joy. To know the Lamb of God who had come to bear *their* sin on the cross. To leap for joy with him as St. Herod and St. Herodias. Wouldn't it be great to have a day in the church year to commemorate them, their conversion, and their life in Christ?

But *today* we do have a new saint day in the church! Because today John the Hensley was baptized and became St. John of the Lamb. Today he was given the new life of faith, the forgiveness of all his sins, and the new birth as a child of God. Greater gifts he will never receive. And so satan, today, burned with hate as this new littlest saint was snatched from his grasp, even as the angels of God danced with joy. The angels whom God will send to watch over little Johnno, and serve him, and protect him, and one day - we know not when - come to take him to his home, to be with his heavenly Father, his Saviour-brother, and with his namesake St. John, forever.

Until then, John's Father has given him back to you, Adam and Joanna, to raise as His child. That is your vocation. To care for the physical life His Father in heaven gave him, and to care for the spiritual life His Father in heaven has given him. That is a daunting task, as it must have been also for John's (of the Baptist variety's) parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. What a gift they had received - a baby boy after they had already grown old and given up hope; for not only were they too old to

have children, but Elizabeth had been barren all her life. But nothing is impossible for God. And so God gives them the gift of a boy, and then tells them he will be the forerunner of the Messiah! And you can be sure they worried about being up for that task. To raise such an important son.

But God does not give a vocation without giving you what you need to fulfill that vocation. And remember that while little Johnno is a child of God, for whom God has great and wonderful plans . . . *so are you*. For the same baptism that we witnessed today being given to little Johnno is also the baptism with which you are baptized. And the same gifts and promises given to him, are given to you. To all of you [congregation]. You too are all saints and sons of God in Christ Jesus, your Saviour. Your heavenly Father has taken you as His own, given you the gift of faith to know and trust in Him, and promised you eternal life. Greater gifts you will never receive.

And so all of you have a joy, like *both* St. Johns - of the Baptist and Hensley varieties - that can never be taken away. No matter what comes in your life - be it prison or beheading or other difficulties many or few, great or small - you have a joy that can never be taken away. Which does not mean that you will always be *happy* living in your vocations - I doubt very much that John was *happy* languishing in prison! You have a joy that *surpasses* understanding. A joy that's not a feeling, but a confidence, a trust. The joy of knowing that you are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. And so come what may, you have a life that cannot be taken away from you. You walk in a newness of life that leaps for joy in Christ. That responds to sin with repentant joy. That responds to death with sober joy. That responds to the cross with hopeful joy. Knowing that joined to Christ in His resurrection, all your enemies have been defeated. Sin, death, and the devil may bare their fangs at you, but they cannot win. Your sins are forgiven and your life is now hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3) - and not even the sword of a Herodias can take that away from you.

And know that there *will be* swords in your life. A sword pierced Mary's heart as she watched her Son hang on the cross. A sword divided John's head from his body. And there will be swords in your life as well. Will you be called to be a martyr - to fill out the number of martyrs under the altar of God in heaven? Will St. John - of the Hensley variety - be so called? I don't know. But neither does it matter. For he - and you - have already died and risen with Christ in Holy Baptism. That is not just a symbolic thing, but a very real truth! And so when death comes to your body - whenever, however, wherever - that day will simply be *your* call to your final and eternal vocation; to join St. John (of the Baptist variety) and the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven around the throne of the Lamb. The Lamb who came to John in the Jordan, and the Lamb who came to Johnno - and you - at the Font. Same Lamb, same life, same forgiveness. For you, for me, for all

people.

That same Lamb now comes again for you on this altar, that you may eat and drink His body and blood. That having received the new birth by water and the Spirit, you may be fed and nourished by our passover Lamb, who has promised to put here **for you** His Body and Blood *and all that comes with it* - His forgiveness, life, and salvation. And so we sing after receiving this gift, "*Lord, now let your servant depart in peace.*" Which is not to say: "Lord, let my death be a peaceful one," but rather, whenever, however, and wherever I die - even if it be by a sword in prison - I shall die in peace. For I have peace in Christ, my Saviour. In His forgiveness, in His life, in His salvation. For by faith my eyes have seen His salvation, even as my mouth and tongue have tasted it. And so there is joy and peace.

Today, Johnno has received that same joy and peace. His heart leapt for joy when His Saviour came to Him. You too, come now and receive that joy - yes, *receive* it, as your Saviour comes to you. Don't try to whip it up in your own heart - that's a joy that will not last. Come and *receive* the joy of Christ in His forgiveness of your sins. *That's* the joy proclaimed by *both* our Johns today. From the womb to tomb. From font to altar. From this time forth and even forevermore.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.