

SERMON - Synaxis of St. John the Baptist, John 1:29-34, Sunday, January 7, 2018

Today we celebrate the Synaxis of the Holy and Great Forerunner and Baptist John. A *Synaxis* is a liturgical gathering to celebrate the feast of a saint. A Synaxis often occurs on the day following a major feast day and is in honor of saints who participated in the event. Yesterday we celebrated the great feast of Theophany, the Baptism of the Lord, and today is the Synaxis of the Forerunner, John the Baptist. St. John's father, Zachariah, was an elderly priest who served in the Temple in Jerusalem. Zachariah's wife Elizabeth, who was now old and past the age of being able to bear children, was barren. One day, while Zachariah was offering incense in the Temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him in bodily form, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. Zachariah was seized with fear, and the angel told Zachariah, "Do not be afraid." This instruction, "to not be afraid", according to Fr. Tom Hopko, is the most common commandment in the Holy Scriptures. The angel Gabriel, often sent as the Lord's messenger, informed Zachariah that Elizabeth will conceive and bear a child, and the child's name shall be John. In Luke chapter 1, Gabriel says concerning St. John, "Many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine or 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". Zachariah did not fully believe in the words of the angel, which resulted in the Lord removing Zachariah's ability to speak during the entire pregnancy of his wife Elizabeth. We see a similar incident in the life of King David. When David sinned with Bathsheba and arranged for her husband Uriah the Hittite to be killed, David's lips were also sealed by the Lord. In the 50th psalm, the prayer of David's repentance, we hear David beseech the Lord "open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise." Having repented and having received God's forgiveness, David's tongue is loosened and his ability to speak is restored. When Zachariah's son is eight days old, Zachariah is also forgiven for his doubt and his speech is restored. This occurs after being asked what his son's name should be and he writes on a tablet "His name is John." The Theotokos and Elizabeth are relatives. When the Virgin Mary, carrying the Lord in her womb, visits Elizabeth, in Luke chapter 1 it says that Elizabeth's babe "leaped in her womb." Even as a fetus, John the Baptist recognized the the Divine fetus in Mary's womb as the Son of God, the Lord, the Messiah. As a young man, John goes into the desert and lives like a hermit in solitude, prayer, asceticism and contemplation on Divine things. He fasts strictly, eating locusts and wild honey. St. John practices chastity and wears a camel hair garment and leather belt. He is considered the prototype of the monastic life, which is also called the "angelic life," living on earth like an angel in the flesh. Thus we see icons of St. John which depict him with angelic wings. The Logos, the word of God, comes to John and he returns to the world to preach repentance and foretell the imminent coming of the Lord and the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus St. John's iconographic angelic wings also symbolize his role as messenger, for the Greek word ἄγγελος means "messenger." St. John practices a baptism, not as a Jewish ritual purification, but as a symbolic cleansing and washing away of sins. Many of the Jews come to him in the desert and receive his baptism. John's baptism and preaching are preparatory. They are fulfilled and actualized through Jesus Christ, through whom the Holy Spirit and redemption are gifted to mankind. In Matthew 11:11 our Savior Himself said, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist." St. John is also considered to be the greatest prophet of all time. Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra (Holy Mountain Athos) says the following about St. John the Baptist: "Exemplar of temperance, of virginity, of the life of repentance and of purification of the passions through asceticism and prayer, initiator of the monastic and desert way of life, he continues to prepare for us the way that leads to the Lord. It is by accepting his message of repentance and conversion that we can prepare worthily to receive holy Baptism; and, after illumination, it is by imitating his holy way of life in the desert that we can preserve Grace and cause it to grow unceasingly, until Christ dwells in

us in all the splendor of His Resurrection” (*The Synaxarion* by Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, Volume Three, page 72). Through the prayers of our Holy Father, the Venerable, Glorious, Prophet, Forerunner and Baptizer of the Lord John, may our souls be saved! Amen!