

Advent 3 2020 Destiny's child.

Over the coming week the story of John the Baptist features. Traditionally the third advent candle is for John.

This coming week we shall explore the story of John, his godly, righteous, elderly parents, the encounter with an angel, the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, John's birth and we hear his voice calling to us from the desert...make a highway for the Lord.

I've been struck once again how in Luke's gospel – chapter 1 - the two birth narratives of John and Jesus are intertwined. It reminds me that John was extremely well-known, popular and had a large following of disciples. The Gospel writers are at pains to show that Jesus was of course superior to John, (and John would agree) but his reputation and influence was huge. So Luke gives more space in chapter one to John's story, after which our attention re-focuses on Jesus.

(These notes are illustrated on screen)

Luke 1:5-25 – John's birth foretold

Luke 1:26-38 – Jesus birth is foretold

39-48 Mary and Elizabeth

49- 56 – Mary's song of praise

57-66 birth of John

67-79 – Zechariah's song of praise

80- John and the child grew and became strong in spirit^[d]; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

A character like John gets me thinking about free-will and destiny. About God choosing and calling and the free-will to respond.

It's like this. 740 years before Christ, Isaiah prophesies that a messenger would come to prepare the way for the Messiah.

In Luke chapter One...the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that John will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth, that he should be brought up in the Nazarite tradition and he will have an incredibly powerful ministry.

SO it makes me wonder, what choice did John get in all of that if this was his pre-planned destiny? Are you and I following a closely mapped out plan? Or should we be? Could John have done something different?

I think he could have done and the evidence is a parallel story in the Old Testament.

An angel appears to a women and then to her husband. They are childless, they will have a son to be brought up in the strict Nazarite tradition...he was to lead the people against the Philistines. The boy was Samson.

But Samson didn't follow the path of a Nazarite and didn't do what was expected of him and was a wild and unruly individual. (You can read his story in Judges 13-16.)

What we learn about John is that he did follow his calling and did fulfil all that was required of him – and I believe that was his choice. Like us – he had doubts, uncertainty, made decisions...he didn't experience life as if he was just all easily laid out and explained to him day by day.

The Angel Gabriel tells Zechariah what John will become, because the angel Gabriel already knows. God the Father knows all things, beginning and end...or to borrow from Psalm 139, before a word is on my tongue you know it O Lord.

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I only know what I'm going to say next – because I've written it down!

Do each of us have a specific, defined calling? Is there a master plan to be followed (like John) or loosely followed, sort of followed, like Samson?

I think we are called to follow and each have a role to play in building God's kingdom...or revealing Jesus as the Christ; to quote John. But before we get too anxious about whether we have followed it ideally or not, God is able to work out His purposes through our failures and mistakes as well as the things we feel are a success.

In fact, as we sang the other week, our scars are a sign of grace in our lives.

If we spend too long mulling over what our destiny is and how it should be fulfilled, I think we are already missing the point. John was chosen because God knew what the desire of his heart would be.

So – what is your heart's desire?

There will be personal things of course, and those things we long for in the lives of those we love most dearly. There may be work related things, or life-time things that you desire. There will be our hopes and longing for the church and the community and it may be on your heart to pray for our leaders and nation and world issues.

What is your heart's desire?

In chapter 6 of Matthew, Jesus is explaining how others worry about clothes and food and everything else, but his instruction is simple.

Seek first the kingdom of God and all these other things will be given – in other words there is an awful lot of facets in life that don't have any real bearing on what is essential. God's Kingdom.

But I think the answer to destiny and purpose, vocation and calling is not so much in what you do, but who you are.

The Westminster Catechism from 1648 begins with this question and answer (and I'll quote the original)

Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

I think John would have heartily approved. Let us pray.

**Lord, as we hear the call of your prophet John the Baptist,
I may truly repent of all that does not bring you glory.
Let whatever is crooked in me become straight.
Let what is rough become smooth.
Fill what is empty and grant that I may glorify God and enjoy
him forever,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

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13 December 2020**