

THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Luke 1

The lessons we are taking from the Gospel of Luke do not in themselves depend at any point upon geographical background, and yet the pupils should be aware of the final divisions of the Holy Land as a completion of their map study for the year. It is suggested, therefore, that in connection with this lesson the Sunday school be shown a map of the Holy Land in the Lord's time, pointing out the three divisions and the location of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum, the cross-Jordan country, and Jericho.

We have assigned the whole first chapter of Luke, which includes the annunciation to Mary, and with all classes above the Primary this should be taken up and the events of the Lord's birth as told in Luke 2 should be mentioned briefly. The principal lesson, however, is about John the Baptist, and this should be taken up as the fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi.

Doctrinal Points

Jesus Christ is God come into the world.

The New Testament is bound to the Old by constant references.

Neither can be understood apart from the other.

True faith cherishes every bit of knowledge of the Lord.

It is selfishness in the heart which leads men to reject the Lord.

Notes for Parents

This is a long chapter but a very important one for all of us. People in the Christian world today sometimes think that the New Testament is the only part of the Bible we really need to read, and that all we have to know of the Old Testament is the ten commandments, and some people even think that those are out of date.

But if we read this chapter carefully, we see that it is full of things which we could not understand at all without our knowledge of the Old Testament story, and that is true of all the Gospels. The two cannot be separated.

In the book of Malachi we find prophecies of two messengers: the one Elijah, who was to prepare the way of the Lord; the other “the messenger of the covenant,” who was to be the Lord Himself. Today we read about the fulfillment of both these prophecies. For the angel told Zacharias not only that the child his wife Elisabeth was to bear was to prepare the way of the Lord, but that he was to come “in the spirit and power of Elias.” *Elias* [KJV] is the Greek form of the name *Elijah*. And the angel told Mary that her child was to be called “the Son of the Highest.”

The Lord came into the world almost two thousand years ago. We Christians take that fact so much for granted that we sometimes forget that even today there are millions of people in the world who do not know it. But there is something else we do not consider which comes much closer home to us. The Lord came into the world to stay. He said, “Lo, I am with you always.” And He said, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” (Revelation 3:20) Has the Lord come to us? Have we listened to His voice and opened the door of our hearts and minds so that He could come in?

John was sent to prepare the way of the Lord. The message he preached was, “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2) The kingdom of heaven is always at hand. The Lord is always at the door waiting to come in with heavenly blessing and happiness. But He cannot come in while the door is shut against Him by our concern with ourselves and our worldly advancement. We open the door by repentance. Repentance, however, means more than saying we are sorry when something we have done has produced unpleasant consequences. It is examining ourselves in the light of the truth as the Lord gives it to us in His Word, and trying with His help to root out and put away the feel-

ings, thoughts, and conduct which He shows us to be wrong.

Primary

If this lesson is used following lessons from the Prophets, first see if the children can name the two parts of the Bible. Then introduce the New Testament by reminding them of the meaning of Christmas. Then see if they remember the prophecy about Elijah in Malachi and go on from there with today's story. With the older ones, more should be done, if possible, with the message of John and its effect, and possibly with baptism as a sign of repentance.

You have learned that there are two divisions in the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament. Our lesson today is our first one in the Gospel of Luke. Christmas marks the birthday of the Lord, and the New Testament is about the life of the Lord when He came into the world.

I wonder if you remember a prophecy from the book of Malachi that someone would be sent to prepare people to receive the Lord when He came into the world. Do you remember who it was to be? It was the prophet Elijah.

Today we read about the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Read verse 17 of our lesson.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, but the New Testament was written in Greek.

Elias is the form which *Elijah* takes in the Greek.

So you see the angel told Zacharias that his son was to be the promised Elijah.

What was Zacharias doing when the angel appeared to him?

Read what is said about Zacharias and his wife Elisabeth in verse 6.

You see they were among the good people we spoke about last Sunday.

The angel also gave Zacharias a sign so that he would be sure the promise was true.

Zacharias was made dumb and could not speak again until after John was born.

The first words he spoke were the *Benedictus*, which is sometimes sung in church.

When John grew up, he lived in the wilderness, and the people came out to hear him preach. He dressed just like Elijah and everyone recognized that he was a prophet of the Lord, and once the Lord Himself told the people that John was the messenger promised

by Malachi. John showed the people the bad things they were doing and told them: “Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” So they knew that the Lord was about to come, and all those who wanted to be good and welcomed the Lord’s coming did repent, and John baptized them in the River Jordan.

That is why he is usually called John the Baptist.

Junior

Both stories in this chapter should be given to the Juniors with the emphasis on their factual content and on the connection with the Old Testament. Be sure they look up all the references. At the end they should be taught what repentance is and why it is necessary.

What is the last book in the Old Testament?

What does the name *Malachi* mean?

What great event was foretold through Malachi?

Who did Malachi say would be sent to prepare the way of the Lord?

What is the general theme of all the Gospels?

Now we are studying the Gospel of Luke. We shall not take up the story of the Lord’s birth because we have that story on Christmas Sunday.

Our chapter for today contains two stories, one concerning John the Baptist and one concerning the Lord. You remember that in the first verse of the third chapter of Malachi, which was part of our lesson for last Sunday, two messengers were promised. One was the messenger to prepare the way, and the other was “the messenger of the covenant” or the Lord Himself. So our chapter today tells about the fulfillment of both these promises. The prophecy said that there would be wicked people to whom the coming of the Lord would be like a destroying fire, and good people to whom it would be like the rising sun. Two of these good people were Zacharias and his wife Elisabeth.

What was Zacharias’s profession?

Who is named as the ancestor of Elisabeth?

You remember that Aaron, the brother of Moses, was the first high priest, that the tribe of Levi and especially the descendants of

Aaron were set aside from the other tribes to be the priests, and that instead of a single lot in the land they were given cities throughout the territories of all the tribes to live in. After the people established their worship in the Holy Land, the priests were divided into groups called “courses” (divisions or groups), and each course served in the tabernacle and later in the temple at Jerusalem for one month out of each year. You remember that the altar of incense stood in the Holy Place in front of the entrance to the Holy of Holies, and that incense was burnt upon it regularly as part of the worship.

What was Zacharias doing when the angel appeared to him?

What was the angel’s message to him?

What sign did he give him?

The last part of our chapter tells about the fulfillment of the angel’s promise, which was also the fulfillment of the last prophecy of Malachi. After John was born and Zacharias was able to speak again, he spoke words which are probably familiar to us all because we sometimes sing them as part of our morning service. They are called the *Benedictus* from the first word in the Latin version. *Benedictus* means “blessed.”

Who else in our chapter saw an angel?

What did the angel tell Mary?

Where was Mary’s home?

In the time of the Lord the Holy Land had come to be marked off in three divisions: Galilee on the north, Judea on the south, and Samaria between them. The Samaritans were descendants of the foreigners who had been brought in from Assyria when the people of Israel were carried away. Most of the Jews lived in Judea where Jerusalem was, although there were some in the other divisions of the land. Galilee was called “Galilee of the Gentiles” because there were so many foreigners there—people from many other nations.

Mary was another of the good people who believed the prophecies of the Old Testament and hoped for the coming of the Lord. There was one particular prophecy which must have come to her when the angel spoke to her. Read it in Isaiah 7:14. It must have

been hard for her to believe that she was really the one chosen after all those years to be the mother of the Lord.

What was the child to be named?

What name is commanded in Isaiah 7:14?

Look up Matthew 1:21-23. Both names expressed the character of the Lord. *Immanuel* means “God with us” and *Jesus* means “Jehovah is salvation.” By these two names it was made clear that the child to be born was Jehovah Himself come into the world to save mankind.

The angel Gabriel is mentioned four times in the Word: Luke 1:19 and 26 and in Daniel 8:16 and 9:21. Swedenborg tells us that there is no one angel who is called Gabriel but that this is the name of a whole society of angels, those who particularly love the teaching of the Word that Jehovah Himself came into the world as the savior.

The angel spoke to Mary of her cousin Elisabeth and so Mary went to see Elisabeth, and as soon as Elisabeth saw Mary the Lord showed her that Mary was to be the mother of the promised Messiah. *Messiah* from the Hebrew language and *Christ* from the Greek both mean “the anointed one.” The words which Mary spoke (verses 46-55) after Elisabeth confirmed the angel’s message are called the *Magnificat*, from the word with which the Latin version of them begins. They are also set to music to be sung in church, especially at Christmas time.

The angel had told Zacharias that the son who was to be born to him would go before the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elias.” *Elias* [KJV] is the Greek form of *Elijah*. Elijah had gone about the country telling people of their sins and warning them to change their ways or disaster would fall on them. The message of John was the same: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” John dressed just as the old prophets had dressed (Mark 1:6), and there was a power in his words which made all the people recognize him as a prophet. Those who were looking for someone to tell them the right way to live welcomed him and believed him and were baptized by Him in the Jordan. That is why he is called John the Baptist.

No one can really receive the Lord into his heart and mind as long as he is satisfied with himself and bent on having his own way. He has to recognize his faults and overcome them. This is repentance. But the Lord is always “at hand” to help us and to fill our hearts with His unselfish love as fast as we make room for Him there.

Intermediate

The meaning of the mission of John the Baptist for our own lives is the important lesson for this class, but the fulfillment of prophecies in this chapter should also be studied and explained. Be sure the pupils know the meaning of baptism.

We turn now to the account of the life of the Lord as it is recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Some four hundred years had passed since the Lord last sent a prophet, and in that time the Scriptures, which had been given for their instruction, had been so overlaid by the priests and scribes with man-made laws and traditions that the people no longer knew what the law of the Lord was. Most of the people were satisfied to perform the various ceremonies required of them and then to feel free to be as worldly and selfish as they pleased. But a few cherished in their hearts the longing for a really good life. We see this pictured in the last chapter of the Old Testament. The prophecies contained in that chapter were fulfilled in the birth of John the Baptist, followed by the birth of the Lord. In verse 17 of our chapter for today the angel gives us the reason why it was prophesied that Elijah would come. *Elias* [KJV] is the Greek form of *Elijah*. Look up also Matthew 11:13-14 and 17:10-13.

The story of the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Zacharias is a striking one. The same angel had appeared to Daniel to prophesy the coming of the Messiah (Daniel 8:16 and 9:21). *Gabriel* means “God is mighty.” Swedenborg tells us that by Gabriel are meant all in the heavens who especially love to know and to teach the great truth that the Lord Jesus Christ is God Himself. It was really a whole angelic society which appeared to Daniel and to Zacharias,

although in the form of one man. The dumbness of Zacharias pictures his inability, in the state in which he then was, to understand the great promise well enough to believe and talk about it. You see, even in slang we sometimes speak in correspondences, for we call a person “dumb” when we mean that he is too ignorant to understand what we are trying to tell him and discuss it with us. When John was born, Zacharias could speak again, because then he could believe. Notice that the first words he spoke were the *Benedictus*, which is sung from time to time in church.

Mary, as well as Zacharias and Elisabeth, was of those who remained devout and faithful. It was the angel Gabriel who was sent to her also with the wonderful announcement that she was to be the mother of the Lord. The Old Testament is full of prophecies of the Lord’s birth. The most direct, perhaps, is that in Isaiah 7:14, which is cited in Matthew 1:22-23. The good Jews of that day were acutely conscious of the condition of their people, and clung to these prophecies as their only hope and comfort. See what is said of the prophetess Anna in Luke 2:36-38. It is evident in the letter of our lesson that Mary had no doubt of the meaning of the angel’s words, and that Elisabeth also received divine confirmation of the function Mary was to serve.

John had to be sent to prepare the way of the Lord because only the humble mind, conscious of its evils and need of the Lord, is open to receive Him. John’s message was “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The kingdom of heaven is always at hand, but repentance must come before salvation. We must recognize and put away our evil thoughts and feelings before the Lord’s spirit can enter our hearts. This is something we need to think about. We take it for granted sometimes that we are Christians because we have been baptized and brought up in the Christian Church. And indeed baptism is the sign of Christianity. But it is only a sign that we have the great privilege of knowing that Jesus Christ came into the world to be our savior, and of knowing that we ought to live according to the example He gave us. We are not really Christians unless we do follow His example. We receive

Him when we get rid of our selfish ways and allow His unselfish love to enter our hearts and work through us in the world. He says in John 13:35, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”

So John’s work was to show the people their selfishness and lead them to struggle against it, and it was the people who had listened to John and obeyed his injunction to repentance who were ready to listen to the Lord and follow Him. In Malachi the Lord’s coming was likened to the rising of the sun. When we turn away from the sun, the thing we see nearest to us is our own shadow. When we turn away from the Lord, the shadow of our own self is between us and everyone else.

Those who did repent were baptized by John in the Jordan. That is why, of course, he is called John the Baptist. Baptism with water is a symbol of the intention to cleanse our lives by means of obedience to the truths of the Word.

Basic Correspondences

- dumbness = inability to “confess” or
acknowledge the Lord openly
- baptism = cleansing the life by means of
truths from the Word

Senior

The immediate connection between the Old and the New Testaments through the fulfillment of prophecy should be stressed, as well as the early connection between John the Baptist and the Lord. Then discuss the mission of John the Baptist—what it did for the good in the Lord’s day and what it means in our lives.

Not only Malachi but many other books of the Old Testament contain wonderful prophecies of the Lord’s Advent. In the four hundred years which elapsed between Malachi and the Advent these prophecies were the subject of much study, as we know by the prompt reply given by the chief priests and scribes when Herod asked them where Christ should be born. Some of this study was prompted by fear of a judgment, and some by unhappiness under

existing evil conditions. The Jews of that day—like people in all places and at all times—were divided into two groups, those who longed for the coming of a time of righteousness and those who preferred not to change their lives.

The first chapter of Luke gives us more clearly than either Matthew or John the relationship between the Lord and John the Baptist. We can know from the prophecies in the Old Testament that a part of the divine plan was that when the appointed time came, the way of the Lord should be prepared by a forerunner. Malachi calls him Elijah the prophet. That such a forerunner was expected we know from Matthew 11:10-14. Yet, in spite of his own denials, many of his followers wished to believe him the Christ.

The angel Gabriel—Swedenborg tells us that this is the name of a whole angelic society—was sent to announce the birth of John and also that of the Lord. His words to Zacharias concerning John's mission should be carefully compared with those to Mary concerning the Lord. John's mission was "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord," whereas the Lord's was "to reign over the house of Jacob forever."

Even those good people who looked and longed for the coming of the Messiah were in gross darkness and in deep evils. The teachings of the Law and the Prophets had been so confused with the traditions of the elders and so buried under selfishness and worldliness that without preparation no one could have received the Lord. The Lord's truth comes as a destroyer if we have nothing but evil and falsity in our hearts and minds. Humility and repentance are the only ground of salvation.

The angel Gabriel told Zacharias that the child to be born to his wife Elisabeth and to be called John would go before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elias," *Elias* [KJV] being the Greek form of *Elijah*. John himself later (Luke 3:4) claimed to be the promised forerunner of the Lord, and the Lord Himself revealed the same truth to Peter, James, and John after the transfiguration (Matthew 17:10-13). John also dressed like Elijah and, like him, lived in the wilderness.

John's message was "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The burden of Elijah's message was likewise the need for repentance. The wilderness pictures the barren nature of all of the merely external life, the rough clothing the harshness with which the thought of repentance comes to us, the locusts and wild honey which John ate the scanty satisfaction we derive from the act of repentance.

Although we are told that Zacharias and his wife Elisabeth "were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless," yet even Zacharias was slow to believe the promise of the angel, because from a worldly point of view it seemed impossible of fulfillment. This unwillingness to believe resulted in his dumbness. Swedenborg says that in the internal sense of the Word "dumb" means "those who are not able to confess the Lord, thus neither to preach faith in Him, from ignorance; in which state are the Gentiles outside the Church, and also the simple within the church." It took the actual birth of John to open the mouth of Zacharias, and his first words were the beautiful confession of the Lord which we call the *Benedictus*.

John preceded the Lord even as to his natural birth, and even before his birth his mother Elisabeth was enabled to recognize that the promise of the Messiah was to be fulfilled in the child of her cousin Mary.

The Lord can come to us only after the work of John is performed in us—only after we open the way for Him by recognizing and fighting our evils. We see people sometimes claiming to be instruments of the Lord, but actually inflated by self-love and proclaiming falsity. This is the effect which religious zeal has in the mind of one who has not first seen and fought his own evils. We need always to pass judgment on ourselves rather than on others. It is a popular fallacy to imagine that man of himself is good; this is contrary to the teaching of the Word and of the church. By nature we incline to evil, and this must be acknowledged before our hearts and minds are open to receive the Lord. Repentance is absolutely necessary to any degree of regeneration and salvation.

Unless we are willing to face honestly our own specific weaknesses and shortcomings, we must remain filled up with self-satisfaction and with the pride of our own intelligence. The Lord's loving, unselfish spirit cannot enter the proud heart.

Adult

In many of the other Christian churches there is a strong tendency to relegate the Old Testament to the past and to feel that the New Testament is the only part of the Word we really need to study. This lesson is a good one in which to bring out the inseparable nature of the two and the fact that no one can understand the New Testament without knowing the Old. The meaning of John's message in our own lives is also important for Adults.

Concerning the state of the church at the time of the Advent Swedenborg says: "The church was then altogether vastated, so that there was no longer any good, or any truth" (AC 2708). The Roman Empire, whose doctrine was "might is right," controlled the world. The Jews had the Word but had made it "of none effect" through their traditions. The Scriptures were read, and worship was carried on in the temple with all the traditional ceremonies; but the aim of the church was temporal power, and the temple was in reality no longer a house of prayer, but a den of thieves. Yet even in this bleak situation there were a few simple pious people who cherished the prophecies of salvation and longed for their fulfillment. Examples of such people were Zacharias and Elisabeth, who "were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless"; Joseph and Mary; Simeon (Luke 2:25-35) and Anna (Luke 2:36-38); the shepherds and the apostles. And outside the church among the Gentile nations were multitudes who knew that they walked in darkness and longed for light. The song of Zacharias (Luke 1:68-79) is a glorification of the Lord for His mercy in fulfilling the prophecies and visiting His people, "To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." Swedenborg tells us that visitation is predicated of the exploration of both the good and the evil as to their real quality, preceding a judgment, and that

darkness may be the darkness either of falsity from evil or of falsity from ignorance. The death in whose shadow they were was spiritual death, which must have overtaken the whole world if the Lord had not come to restore the light of truth; for those who had the truth had perverted it so that those who came seeking it found only falsity. The Lord said of the scribes and Pharisees, “Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. (Matthew 23:15) The whole of the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, as also most of Luke 11, is a vivid description of the conditions existing in the church.

Zacharias and Elisabeth were both descendants of Aaron. Zacharias was of the “course” or division of Abia, or Abijah. The house of Aaron was divided into twenty-four “courses” or groups of priests, who took turns in administering the worship of the temple (I Chronicles 24:1-19). When a course finished its period of ministry, its members returned to their homes until their turn came again (Luke 1:23). The duty of Zacharias on this particular day was to burn incense on the altar of incense. AE 298 explains that the angel appeared to Zacharias standing on the right side of the altar because the “right hand” in reference to angels and men means “the wisdom and intelligence that they have from the Divine good through the Divine truth preceeding from the Lord.” Swedenborg also tells us that Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael in the Word are not the names of individual angels but of angelic societies, named from particular functions, and that by Gabriel is meant “the ministry of those who teach from the Word, that Jehovah came into the world, and that the Human He there assumed is the Son of God, and Divine” (AR 548). Study also the messages which the angel Gabriel brought to Daniel (Daniel 8:16 and 9:21 ff.).

The Gospel of Luke gives the most complete, although not the most detailed, account of the life of the Lord. It begins with the annunciation concerning John the Baptist, and it is the only Gospel which describes the ascension. Miracles attending John’s birth link the New Testament directly with the Old, bridging a period of

four hundred years, for the last verses of the last chapter of Malachi are a prophecy of the coming of Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord.

Swedenborg tells us what is meant by these last words of Malachi: “John the Baptist was sent before to prepare the people for the reception of the Lord by baptism, because baptism represented and signified purification from evils and falsities, and also regeneration by the Lord by means of the Word. Unless this representation had preceded, the Lord could not have manifested Himself and have taught and lived in Judea and in Jerusalem, since the Lord was the God of heaven and earth under a human form, and He could not have been present with a nation that was in mere falsities in respect to doctrine and in mere evils in respect to life; consequently, unless that nation had been prepared for the reception of the Lord by a representation of purification from falsities and evils by baptism, it would have been destroyed by diseases of every kind by the presence of the Divine Itself; therefore, this is what is signified by ‘lest I come and smite the earth with a curse’ ” (AE 724). The Lord says of John, “And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.” (Matthew 11:14) The angel says that John will come “in the spirit and power of Elias.” John himself says that he is the fulfillment of the prophecies in Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. And after the transfiguration the Lord revealed to Peter, James, and John that John the Baptist had been the promised Elijah (Matthew 17:10-13). *Elias* [KJV] is the Greek form of *Elijah*. We are thus made to realize how close is the relation between the two testaments, the whole of the Old Testament being in reality a prophecy of the life of the Lord. The Lord said that He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, and He later expounded to the disciples in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself “beginning at Moses and all the Prophets.”

The dumbness of Zacharias offers an interesting correspondence, for the slang expression “dumb” may be thought of as one of the natural outgrowths of correspondence. “Dumb” of course means unable to speak; yet we use it to mean “ignorant” or “stupid.”

Ignorance or lack of intelligence with regard to any subject makes it impossible for us to speak effectively on that subject. Dumbness is thus the direct result of lack of knowledge, understanding, and consequent convictions. The angel said to Zacharias, “And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, *because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.*” Swedenborg says that in the internal sense by the dumb are signified “they who cannot confess the Lord, thus cannot profess faith in Him, by reason of ignorance, in which state are the nations outside the church, and also the simple within the church” (AC 6988). In the same number he says that the miracles wrought by the Lord all signify the state of the church and of the human race saved by His coming into the world. The healing of the dumb man by the Lord thus pictured the deliverance of men from falsities which prevented their acknowledging Him. Of the idols that men make it is said, “They have mouths, but they speak not” (Psalm 135:16). Of the coming of the Lord’s kingdom Isaiah prophesies: “Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing; for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.” (Isaiah 35:6) The wilderness and the desert picture the state of the church at the time of the Advent—for this reason, of course, John was in the desert—and the waters and streams breaking out picture the truth which the Lord came to restore. When John was born according to the angel’s prophecy, and Zacharias had signified that his name was to be *John*—the name means “the Lord is gracious”—it is reported, “And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God.” Ignorance in regard to the Lord, lack of understanding of Him and of His purposes make it impossible for one to confess Him in such a way as to convey any impression to anyone else. If we do not wish to be spiritually “dumb,” we must learn all we can about the Lord as He reveals Himself in His Word, and by living according to what we learn acquire that spiritual wisdom which will also enable us to show forth the Lord’s praise “not only with our lips, but in our lives.”

The good people of that time recognized in John a power which cut through all the superficialities with which the scribes and Pharisees had obscured the Scriptures, and revealed to them anew the fundamental principles of right and wrong which the Scriptures laid down for their own daily lives. Once they were able to recognize their evils and falsities and to make the effort to overcome them, they were prepared to recognize the Lord, to welcome Him, and to listen to the deeper truths He preached. This is equally true for us. The Lord's spirit cannot enter except where the way is prepared by humility and obedience to truth from the Word. We recall that in the Old Testament the period of the wilderness wanderings represented a similar period of reformation, a setting in order of the external life by obedience to the commandments, and that this had to precede entrance into the Holy Land, which pictures a state of inner achievement and happiness. John's whole appeal was to reformation of the external life. He wore a garment of camel's hair, which represents the truths of the literal sense of the Word as to good (AC 5620¹²).

John's message, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," is eternally valid. The kingdom of heaven is always at hand. The Lord stands at the door, always ready to enter. Our part is to open the door, to clear the way for the Lord's spirit by rejecting the things in us which stand in His way.

Our chapter weaves together the fulfillment of two prophecies in Malachi. The angel Gabriel appeared first to Zacharias and then to Mary. Mary was told that her cousin Elisabeth was to have a child, and was moved to visit her. And even before he was born John bore witness—the child leaped in the womb—and Elisabeth and Mary were given divine confirmation of the promises which had been made to them. So we have given us in this same chapter both the *Benedictus* spoken by Zacharias and the *Magnificat* spoken by Mary. John was born first; he entered upon his public mission first; and at the time of his baptism of the Lord he made the first public proclamation of the Lord's identity, which was immediately confirmed by the voice and sign from heaven. Then, as the Lord's

ministry became established, John's came to its end, as he himself prophesied: "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30) He was imprisoned during the second year of the Lord's ministry and put to death early in the third year. So the Lord takes fuller and fuller possession of the prepared heart and mind, and the ordering of the external life becomes a matter of course as the expression of the spirit within.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 6988: "That this signifies no utterance, is evident from the signification of 'dumb,' as being no utterance. . . . By 'utterance' is not here meant that of the voice, or speech, for this utterance is natural; but by 'utterance' is meant confession of the Lord, and the profession of faith in Him; for this utterance is spiritual. Hence it is evident [*inde patet*] what is signified in the internal sense by the 'dumb,' namely, they who cannot confess the Lord, thus cannot profess faith in Him, by reason of ignorance, in which state are the nations outside the church, and also the simple within the church."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. What is the last book in the Old Testament? *Malachi*
- J. What event did Malachi foretell? *coming of the Lord*
- J. Of what two messengers did he speak? *(1) to prepare the way, (2) of the covenant*
- J. What two kinds of people would the Lord find in the Holy Land when He came? *(1) self-satisfied, (2) those who wanted to be good*
- P. How would his coming affect the wicked? *burn like an oven*
- P. What would His coming be like to the good? *healing*
- J. Who was the first messenger to be? *Elijah (John)*
- P. What angel is named in our lesson for today? *Gabriel*
- J. To whom did he come first? *Zacharias*
- P. What message did he give to Zacharias? *he would have a son*
- J. What sign did he give him? *unable to speak until son was born*
- J. To what other person did Gabriel appear? *Mary*
- J. What was his message to Mary? *she would have a son*
- I. How do we know that John was the promised Elijah? *the Lord said so*
- J. What was John's message? *Repent!*
- P. Why was he called John the Baptist? *he baptized*

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THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

- I. What does dumbness represent? *spiritual ignorance*
- S. Why did John have to “prepare the way of the Lord”? *only the humble and repentant can receive the Lord*
- S. What does baptism represent? *our intention to cleanse our lives*