

June 24, 2018

Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist

Luke 1:57-66, 80

When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her. When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said in reply, "No. He will be called John." But they answered her, "There is no one among your relatives who has this name." So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called. He asked for a tablet and wrote, "John is his name," and all were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke, blessing God. Then fear came upon all their neighbors, and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea. All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, "What, then, will this child be?" For surely the hand of the Lord was with him.

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel.

Background:

The celebration of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist does not usually fall on a Sunday. When it does, as it does this year, the Scripture readings are proper to the feast. The birth of John is one of the three births that the Church celebrates each year, the births of Jesus and Mary being the other two.

Like with Christmas, the Church places the celebration of this feast in relation to cycles of nature, at least in the Northern Hemisphere. Christmas is celebrated just as the days are beginning to grow longer, emphasizing that Jesus is the one who dispels the darkness. In contrast, the church places this feast of the birth of John the Baptist just as the days begin to grow shorter. This reinforces John's own statement, "He must increase; I must decrease." (John 3:30)

Births are always a dramatic entry into history. Each birth brings with it two hopes. The first is that this child will have a better life than those who have gone before. The second is that somehow this child will have a positive impact on the world. There are those who even believe that the cosmos is changed in some way by the birth of each child. The magi saw the star in the night sky that marked the birth of Jesus.

The birth of John the Baptist is only important because he points out and proclaims the importance of Jesus. But the Church still understands his birth to be so important that its celebration takes precedence over the normal cycle of Sunday celebrations. This is done very rarely, especially for someone who was never a disciple of Jesus. Yet John spent his adult life preparing the Jewish community and the world for the arrival of Jesus in human history.

Circumcision is the sign of incorporation into the Jewish covenant community. This is a day of celebration, both for Elizabeth, since the embarrassment of her barrenness has been removed, and for the community, who receives and welcomes a new member. The importance of the community is apparent in their active role in determining the name of the child. The custom would have it that he would be named after his grandfather. The people are surprised that Elizabeth wants to give him the name John. The community questions her choice, and therefore they consult his father Zechariah. The dialogue makes it clear that the family and neighbors have a vested interest in the situation. The child is given the name "Yehohanan," which means "Yahweh is gracious."

The last verse states simply that John spent his life in the desert until the time when he began his public ministry. Luke tells of John the Baptist in a way that parallels the life of Jesus. Both births happen through extraordinary intervention, both spend time in the desert before their public life, and both have a divine mission to fulfill.

Reflection Questions:

1. The last time a couple announced that they were pregnant I found myself thinking ...
2. Do you know the story of how your name was chosen?
3. When I think of Elizabeth and Zacharia finally becoming pregnant, I ...
4. When I think of this community gathering to circumcise and give the baby John a name ...
5. How does this reading to speak to you of God's desires for you and your life?
6. Can you take time to talk to God about your own hope for your life, or your sense of God's desire for you, or whatever else arose within you as you reflected on this gospel?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for June 24, 2018, Solemnity of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist

Hear me, O coastlands, listen, O distant peoples. The Lord called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name. He made of me a sharp-edged sword and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. He made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me. You are my servant, he said to me, Israel, through whom I show my glory. Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength, yet my reward is with the Lord, my recompense is with my God. For now the Lord has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him; and I am made glorious in the sight of the Lord, and my God is now my strength! It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

I praise you, for I am wonderfully made. O Lord, you have probed me, you know me: you know when I sit and when I stand; you understand my thoughts from afar. My journeys and my rest you scrutinize, with all my ways you are familiar. Truly you have formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb. I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made; wonderful are your works. My soul also you knew full well; nor was my frame unknown to you

When I was made in secret, when I was fashioned in the depths of the earth.

In those days, Paul said: "God raised up David as king; of him God testified, I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will carry out my every wish. From this man's descendants God, according to his promise, has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus. John heralded his coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel; and as John was completing his course, he would say, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.' 'My brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those others among you who are God-fearing, to us this word of salvation has been sent.'"

When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her. When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said in reply, "No. He will be called John." But they answered her, "No one among your relatives has this name." They made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called. He asked for a tablet and wrote, "John is his name," and all were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God. Then fear came upon all their neighbors, and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea. All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, "What, then, will this child be?" For surely the hand of the Lord was with him. The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel.

Excerpts from Isaiah 49:1-6; Psalm 139:1-3, 13-15; Acts 13:22-26; and Luke 1:57-66, 80