

Homily for the Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist

June 23-24, 2018

Readings: Isaiah 49: 1-6; Acts 13: 22-26; Luke 1: 57-66, 80

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Birthdays—we each have one. How they are celebrated may vary, but each of us has a day marking our birth.

Do you know the story surrounding your birth? I have a detailed, written account. The baby book, carefully kept by my mother, records everything. What a gift to have this in her own handwriting! Each year as I celebrate, I subject the members of my community to the solemn reading of the story of my birth. They politely listen and breathe a sigh of relief when I ceremoniously close the book.

Imagine if we approached the Bible as our family story book. What would it teach us? Today we catch a page from the Baptist's "baby book." How does it speak to us? When we live the stories from this book, they become our stories and have the power to shape us into people of faith today.

We begin today's selection nine months into the story. Remember the beginning? It gives some insight into the importance of this birth. Zechariah was fulfilling his priestly duty in the temple, offering prayer and sacrifice. God breaks in, revealing that Elizabeth would have a son and they were to name him John. Zechariah was bold enough to ask how it would happen as Elizabeth, his wife, was past child bearing age. The messenger, identified as Gabriel, pronounced Zechariah would be "unable to talk until the days these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time." Clearly Luke's story is intended to tell the significance of this birth.

It is left to our imagination to fill in the story as Zechariah left the Temple. The community realized something amazing had happened inside. Imagine what was happening in Elizabeth's heart as she welcomed Zechariah home. She conceived, went into seclusion and praised God saying: "The Lord has seen fit to take away my disgrace before others." She is a model of faith for her husband, soon to be born son and each of us reading the book.

From the very beginning, John's story is filled with a profound awareness of a God who answers prayers of a faithful couple and promises to show favor to the people. No wonder the lectionary invites us to sing with the psalmist, "I praise you for I am wonderfully made." John's birth invites us to look back through the pages of our story. Even when, perhaps *especially when*, we are struck totally speechless, how do we come to know the favor of God? Indeed, God knows us, probes us, journeys with us, understands us. What a gift.

Today's story picks up when it was time for Elizabeth to give birth. The community rejoiced with her because they recognized God's mercy. John's birth teaches us that new life is always a gift but especially when one who was thought to be barren gives birth, truly "nothing is impossible for God." What amazing possibilities there are when we remain open to God's plan—even when, *especially when* we feel like secluding ourselves because we do not understand what God is doing.

As faithful Jews, Zechariah and Elizabeth, on the eighth day, performed the customary ritual of circumcision and naming. Imagine the scene—of course the child was to be named after his father. Tradition. But no, Elizabeth proclaimed, "He will be called John." Questioningly, they turned to Zechariah. He wrote on the tablet, "John is his name."

That acknowledgment freed him. Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, responded by blessing the Lord—"the God of Israel who has visited and brought redemption to his people." John's birth teaches us to stand in awe and amazement at the name we have been given. We are named Christian at our baptism into the community. Christian is our name and our mission. We have been anointed and enlightened to be a sign to the world. Truly, as people of faith we are challenged to remember that like John, the Lord called us from birth, named us and promised to guide the steps of our journey.

When helping families prepare for a baptism, I often ask them of their hopes and dreams for their child. I rejoice when faith and a relationship with God is mentioned. How wonderful to imagine the possibility of the

child living into God's dream for them. John's birth teaches us that fulfilling God's dream for us may not always be clear or easy, but surely the hand of the Lord is upon us.

John the Baptist's image is often portrayed with his finger pointing to the one who was coming: Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. He calls us to prepare and repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. He models humility—"He must increase, I must decrease." We who celebrate the birth of John are called to take on John's role of preparing the way in today's world.

Life stories are precious. Through John's story, God prepared the way for his promise, Jesus. We who celebrate John's birthday are abundantly blessed by God's promise. May we take time to remember this awesome event, share the story and live its blessing.