

Nativity of St. John the Baptist

2018 (Sunday)

1

- Today we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist—normally not falling on Sunday, but when it does, it becomes a rare Sunday solemnity.
- John is the one—as we read every Advent—who prepared the way of the Lord...and who subsequently pointed others to Jesus, the Lamb of God...and who was ultimately martyred for his fidelity.
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- We read from the prophet Malachi: “...*for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise ...Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him...Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers...*” (Malachi 4:2-6)
- And then in the Gospel of Matthew there is that interchange between Jesus and the apostles as they descend from the Transfiguration, and Jesus telling them of His future resurrection and for them to not yet reveal what they had witnessed: “*And the disciples asked him, ‘Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?’ [Jesus] replied, ‘...I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased...’ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.*” (Matthew 17:10-13)
- This is why John the Baptist was Elijah—not that the undead Elijah returned, but coming in the spirit of Elijah, as John led so many to repentance fidelity to God, as we read in the Gospels.

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- But why do we celebrate John’s birth on June 24? Because the archangel came “...*in [Elizabeth’s] sixth month [of pregnancy] to announce to Mary the birth of the [Jesus] from her.*” So Elizabeth conceived six months before Mary, thus giving birth six months before Mary...and six months from today is Christmas eve—the birth of Jesus.

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- And the foretelling of John's birth reminds us of the prophet Jeremiah: *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* (Jeremiah 1:5)
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- Now John's parents Zechariah and Elizabeth are both from the high priestly family of Aaron, Moses' brother ...thus establishing John's own priestly and prophetic lineage.
- Elizabeth barrenness and old age recalls Abraham's wife Sarah—whose son Isaac's birth was also foretold by an angel...and barren, nameless wife of Manoah in the book of Judges, whose son Samson was also announced by an angel...and Hannah, barren until her prayer was heard then becoming mother of the first prophet Samuel, who would anoint David as king of Israel.
- Similarly, John would anoint Jesus at baptism...ushering in the true and eternal kingship of Christ.

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- The name "John" is short for *Yohanan*, which means "God's gift", or "God is gracious"...certainly most apropos after Elizabeth's long childlessness.
 - And Elizabeth says on the day of his circumcision—the day of his naming: *"His name will be John"*...obeying God's command given through the Archangel Gabriel to Zechariah...and affirmed by Zechariah who had been struck mute due to his lack of faith in Gabriel's prophecy, indicating his repentance and trust...his tongue thereby loosed to proclaim the praise of God.
 - Then at the Visitation, John leapt in his mother's womb at the words and presence of Mary and her divine unborn Son, the Messiah...just as David leapt before the ark of the covenant, as the prophet Malachi writes: *"...for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise...You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall."* (Malachi 4:2)
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- John is the boundary between the old and new covenants...the pinnacle of the age of the prophets, and proclaims the fulfillment of messianic prophecy in his own time.
- Many would mistook John himself for the Messiah...but John in his humility and fidelity strongly denied it.
- We read in the Gospel of John of John the Baptist proclaiming: “‘... *he...comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.*’ ...*The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.’ ...I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel....this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit...I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.’*” (John 1:26-34)
- And John affirms later: “*You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him...He must increase, but I must decrease.*” (John 3:28-30)
- This “decreasing” is reflected in the heavens on this feast day, because we celebrate John’s nativity just after the summer solstice, when daylight begins to decrease every day...just as six month later we celebrate Jesus’ birth just after the winter solstice, when days begin to lengthen...analogous to the decrease of the Old Covenant and the increase of the New, ushered in by Christ.

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- Why celebrate John the Baptist? For his fidelity and his zeal for God, which earns him the praise of Jesus Himself: “*Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist...*” (Matthew 11:11)
 - ...reminding us of the prophet Isaiah’s words: “*It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant...I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*” (Isaiah 49:6)
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4

- John's preaching prepared the way for Jesus. What did he taught? "Repent! Bear fruit of repentance and charity! Fidelity to God is what brings us to eternal life!"
- Jesus, of course, would teach the same...adding miracles to affirm the truth of His teaching and His person...and the urgency of converting here and now... "*for you know not the day nor the hour*" that we are all to be called to God.
- If we *truly* believe in Christ, that belief will be reflected in our actions; we will bear fruit as John exhorts and Jesus commands—fruit expressed in love of God and obedience to His commands...and in the fruit of love and care for our neighbor.

Mass during the Day

Reading 1 IS 49:1-6

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.

Responsorial Psalm PS 139:1B-3, 13-14AB, 14C-15

R. (14) **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.

R. **I praise you for I am wonderfully made.**

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.

R. **I praise you, for I am wonderfully made.**

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.

R. **I praise you, for I am wonderfully made.**

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6

Reading 2 **ACTS 13:22-26**

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.”

Gospel **LK 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.