

The Nativity of John the Baptist

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 49:1-6
<i>Response</i>	I praise you, for I am wonderfully made.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 139
<i>Second Reading</i>	Acts 13:22-26
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	You, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 1:57-66, 80

Today the church celebrates the Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, technically the Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. Every year on June 24 the church celebrates this festival which goes back to ancient times, goes back to the fourth or fifth Centuries A.D. And this year since it falls on a Sunday in Ordinary Time, the Feast, the Solemnity of John the Baptist, supersedes the Sunday of Ordinary Time. So one of the things you'll notice about the readings today is that the gospel will come from the Gospel of Luke even though it's Year B, because that gospel is the one that records the account of the birth of St. John the Baptist. So a few points before we begin to look at the readings for today. I just want to start by pointing out the reason for celebrating the feast today, right. So why does the church celebrate the festival of John's birth on June 24? Well if you go back to the Gospel of Luke and you think about the story of the Annunciation to Mary, you will recall that when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, he tells Mary that her cousin Elizabeth is pregnant with a child and that she is now in her sixth month. That's in Luke 1:36. And so because of this, we can infer that Jesus is born six months after John the Baptist, and that's always been the traditional interpretation of the gospel account. So when we think about the of birth of Christ, the traditional date of Christ's birth being December 25, if you just back it up six months it puts you in June. And so the traditional date for the birth of John the Baptist is June 24 and the church has celebrated it on that date.

Now with that said though there's another kind of deeper reason for this, and it has to do with the Winter and Summer Solstice. So if you pay attention and you don't

get confused by daylight savings time — which I hate but I don't want to go into that right now — if you don't get confused by daylight savings time you'll notice that as we move toward Christmas the days get gradually shorter and shorter and shorter until we come to the Winter Solstice, which is the shortest day of the year. And then the light begins to lengthen all the way through to the Summer Solstice, which is in late June, right around June 24-25th. And in the Summer Solstice you reach the time when the light in the year is at its longest, when the days are at their longest, those long days of summer. So one of the things the church is also doing with celebrating the feast on this day is kind of recognizing the movement of salvation history from John the Baptist coming to the birth of Jesus Christ. And the first person that brought this to my attention was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who later went on to become Pope Benedict XVI. In his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, which is probably my favorite book that Benedict wrote, well he wrote it before he was Pope, but in his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* Cardinal Ratzinger makes a point about the meaning of this particular feast that the church is celebrating today, the Nativity of John the Baptist. So I just want to read you his words here. On page 109 Ratzinger says this:

Between the two dates of March 25 [the Annunciation]...

Which is the traditional date by the way of the Annunciation, right. Nine months before December 25.

...and December 25 [Christmas] comes the feast of the forerunner, St. John the Baptist, on *June 24, at the time of the summer solstice*. The link between the dates can now be seen as a liturgical and cosmic expression of the Baptist's words: "*He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease*" (Jn 3:30). The birthday of St. John the Baptist takes place on the date when the days begin to shorten, just as the birthday of Christ takes place when they begin again to lengthen."¹

So what Ratzinger is pointing out there is that not only is the celebration of the birth of John in June premised on the gospel account of the timing of the Annunciation and the birth of John, it also has a kind of cosmic significance. When John

¹ Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 109 [emphasis added]

says, "He must increase, but I must decrease," what we see there is this kind of movement from the old covenant to the new covenant in a way that's similar to the movement from the time of winter to the time of spring, to the growing darkness in the world that precedes the birth of Christ at Christmas. And then when Christ comes the days begin to lengthen because he is the light of the world who's come into the world, right, to bring the light of truth, the light of grace, the light of salvation. So that in a sense, the period between June and December is like the old covenant, the gradual growing of darkness and sin in the world that's only going to be redeemed by the coming and the birth of Christ. And then the time between Christmas and June is the expansion of the light in the world, it's like the new covenant period. And every year the church takes us through this cycle of beginning again. So in a sense, this feast of John's birth is the church getting ready for Christmas, right. We're already starting to look ahead to the birth of Christ in a small way but in an important way. And that's why this feast, which is an ancient one, trumps — or supersedes I should say — the ordinary Sundays of Ordinary Time.

So with that in mind then let's look at the readings for this day, this festival of the birth of St. John the Baptist and try get a feel for why the birth of this particular man is so important and what it means in the scriptural testimony of the gospel, in particular the Gospel of Luke. So the gospel for today is of course the account of John's birth. It's from Luke 1:57-66, along with verse 80, a little appendage there from verse 80. So let's read through that together. The Gospel of Luke 1:57 says this:

Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son. And her neighbors and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they would have named him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said, "Not so; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your kindred is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, "His name is John." And they all marveled. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these

things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea; and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then the lectionary skips basically Zechariah's famous hymn called the Benedictus. It skips down to after that hymn in verse 80 where it says:

And the child [John] grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel.²

Okay there are several aspects of this account of the birth of John that are worth highlighting. The first one is just the fact that he was born of a miraculous birth, he has a miraculous nativity. So in this case if you recall from earlier in Luke's gospel, Elizabeth was barren, she was unable to have a child and she was an elderly woman. It kind of echoes of Sarah for example in the Old Testament who is both barren and old and yet God was able to vivify her womb to bring life through her in the birth and the conception of Isaac. Well John the Baptist is like that. So whenever you see a miraculous birth, whether it be Isaac in the Old Testament or John the Baptist in the New Testament, that's always a sign of some special status, some special role in salvation history. So that's the first thing we see here.

The second thing that we learn from this passage is that both Elizabeth and Zechariah were faithful to the Law of Moses. You see that in particular from the fact that it says that on the eighth day they bring John to be circumcised. So in the Book of Genesis 17, as well as the Book of Leviticus 12, that was one of the most central laws of the old covenant, that when a child would be born, when a boy would be born, in order for him to receive the grace to enter into the covenant, on the eighth day after his birth he was to be circumcised as a sign of God's perpetual covenant between himself and Abraham and all of his descendants. And eventually by the time you got to the First Century A.D. the time of Christ, the circumcision also became the naming day. That became the day on which you would declare the name of the child, you would make public the child's name. And so that's what's

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

happening here. So the church has chosen this passage not just because it gives us an account of John's birth but also because it gives us an account of John's name, which is always significant in the Old Testament. Whenever God gives someone a name it is always revelatory of what that person's identity and mission is going to be within the plan of salvation history. Now if you recall from earlier in John's Gospel, in this case what happened was the angel had appeared to Zechariah, who was John's father, who was priest, told him he was going to have a very special child who would be anointed with the Holy Spirit, who will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah. And Zechariah's response to that annunciation of John's birth had been doubt, "how is this possible?" And so as a punishment for his doubt, Zechariah was rendered mute, he was rendered unable to speak, right, for the entirety of Elizabeth's pregnancy. So think about that, for at least nine months he's unable to speak.

So in this context what happens is when they bring John in on the eighth day to have him circumcised they were going to just assume that he would be named after his father or some relative, because it was very customary, it still is to this day in Orthodox Jewish circles, for a child to be named after some relative, whether it's an uncle or an aunt or a grandfather or father. In other words, the idea is that you don't make up new names, you take names from within the family, that's the custom. And so what happened here is they assume he is going to be named Zechariah after his father but Elizabeth steps in and says, "not so, he shall be called John." Now why does that matter here? Well on one level it's just unusual for the mother to speak up to name the child, she's kind of stepping into a unique role here, of course because Zechariah is mute, but on an even deeper level it has to do with the meaning of the name John. So in Greek the name John is *Iōannēs*, but that's based on a Hebrew name *Yōhanan*, which literally means "the Lord has been gracious" or "the Lord has given grace." Why is he called that? Well above all because the fact that his very birth was an act of grace to Elizabeth, right. She was barren. But as it said in the second verse, the Lord had shown great mercy to her and they rejoice with her. So the miraculous birth of John is a sign of God's grace toward Elizabeth. That's one level of meaning. But on a deeper level of meaning, John's name means the Lord has shown grace because John is going to be the forerunner to the Messiah, the forerunner to the birth of Christ through whom grace and peace and salvation are going to come into the world, right. So John heralds the birth of the one

who is, in a sense, truth in person, grace in person, salvation in person, namely Jesus Christ. So God's grace has come upon Elizabeth. God's grace has come upon Israel through the figure of John.

The third aspect of the story here that's significant is that when Zechariah consents to naming John 'John', to naming the child John, the punishment of muteness is lifted and he's now able to speak. It says immediately his mouth was open, his tongue was loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. So we've got several miracles going on here, the miraculous birth and then the miraculous healing of Zechariah's muteness. And you can see here that the response to these miracles amongst all the people is what? Fear. In other words, awe, they're awestruck by these miracles and they recognize that because of these things something special is going to take place through this child. There's something unique about John the Baptist, about this little baby. And so what do they say? It says his fame spread throughout all of Judea and they laid this up in their hearts saying, "What then will this child be," for the hand of the Lord was with him. So they raise the question of who is John the Baptist. Now this text that we read for the gospel today doesn't answer that but we know from elsewhere in Luke's gospel who John is. John is, in a sense, the new Elijah. He's the forerunner of the Messiah. He's the one upon whom the spirit and the power of Elijah is going to fall. He's the one who is going to prepare the way of the Lord. Not just the way of the Messiah, the king who is to come, but he's going to prepare the way for God himself, the Lord himself, to come in person as the savior of his people Israel. So his birth is extremely significant, his birth is extremely important. So this is one of the reasons Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospel of John that he's not just a prophet, he's more than a prophet. He says that:

...among those born of women no one is greater than John the Baptist.

That's in Matthew 11. So I think in our day and time it's become kind of customary for us to relegate John to not that important of a status. Like most of us don't think of St. John the Baptist as a great saint, much less as the greatest human being, which is what Jesus refers to him in terms of the old covenant, as there being no one greater than him. Now Jesus appends to that a qualifier, he says but the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. And what he means by that is that in a sense, John belongs to the old covenant. So he's the apex of all the old covenant

prophets, he's the greatest of all the old covenant saints, in part because he's the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, but also because he himself has a powerful and special role to play and his birth is attended by miracles that show the significance of his role in salvation history. And you can't help but wonder here that if the signs were known, right, the healing of Zechariah, his father, and the miraculous conception of John the Baptist in the barren womb of Elizabeth, that if these were known that this is one of the reasons John was famous, right, because we get to his adult period, as we're going to see, John was extremely popular. He was a widely revered prophet. People came from all over the holy land, all over Judea and throughout the land of Israel to come to receive John's baptism. Maybe in part that's because they, these signs that attend his birth, were part of the collective memory of who he was. They recognize that he was going to be someone significant, a significant person in the history of salvation, a great prophet.

And sure enough if you look at that final verse the lectionary cites it says, "The child grew and became strong in spirit and he was in the wilderness until the day of his manifestation in Israel." Now what does that mean? Well obviously saying he's strong in spirit is a way of talking about his prophetic identity, because what do the prophets do? They speak the word of the Lord through the Spirit of the Lord that comes upon them to equip them to speak. So John is a prophet, he's endued with the Spirit but secondly it says something interesting about him here. Although his daddy was a priest, although Zechariah is a priest, John does not go into the temple to begin training to prepare to be an ordinary levitical priest. He goes into the desert and there prepares for his public ministry, prepares for the time of his manifestation in Israel, right, which will come about when he begins his ministry of proclaiming a baptism for the repentance of sins. Now that's a strange statement. What's he doing out in the desert? Why doesn't he live in the hill country of Judea with his parents? Why doesn't he go to the temple with his father? We don't know. We can only speculate. But it is interesting that certain modern scholars have pointed out like Joseph Fitzmyer, Fr. Joseph Fitzmyer, he was a Jesuit commentator on Luke, points out that some scholars have wondered if John the Baptist going out into the desert is a clue here that he lived among a group of Jews known as the Essenes. They were celibate Jewish men who lived out at Qumran. They had a community there, sometimes referred to as kind of a Jewish monastery. It was a group of community of celibate Jewish men who trained in the scriptures, who

studied the Scriptures and whom, Josephus tells us, did not themselves have children but would adopt the children of others in order to raise them in their ways and teach them their ways. And one of things that they were known for was practicing ritual washings of purifications. They actually have found, archaeologists have found *mikva'ot*, which are these ritual baths down at Qumran, the site frequently associated with the community of the Essenes there, where they would wash in order to kind of live, although they were not living in the Temple itself, they would follow the ritual purity laws that priests would following in the Temple for example.

Although we can't prove those connections, it is fascinating to note that there are lots of parallels between some of the statements that John makes in the gospel, especially the Gospel of John, and things we find in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were an ancient collection of writings attributed to the Essenes; as well as the very fact that John's ministry was revolved around ritual washing, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We can't prove any of that but what is clear is that John is no ordinary prophet, that John is no ordinary priest, although he's a priest by birth, he doesn't follow the ordinary path of growing up in the Temple. He grows up in the desert. That's where he prepares to become the prophet who will announce the coming of the Messiah, and not just the coming of the Messiah but the coming of God himself in the person of Jesus Christ, preparing the way of the Lord, the *kyrios* from the Old Testament. Alright, all that to say John the Baptist is important. That's the part we need to remember here. He really is a significant figure. He's the bridge between the Old and New Testament. He's a pivotal, literally a pivotal figure.

Alright, with that in mind then, that's the gospel for today. What about the Old Testament reading? Well in this case, if you go back, the Old Testament reading is from the book of Isaiah 49, and this is kind of a mysterious passage. It's one of the so-called servant songs in the book of Isaiah, where the servant of God is speaking through the voice of Isaiah about the vocation that God has given him. And in this case, although usually the servant is identified with Christ as a kind of prefiguration of Christ, the suffering servant, in this case the servant figure is expressly identified with Israel. And the reason the church appears to pick this passage is because

it talks about the servant having a mission, a vocation from God, that he has had from the womb of his mother. So here are the verses:

Listen to me, O coastlands, and hearken, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God." And now the LORD says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength — he says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Okay, so why does church choose this again? Not necessarily because it's an explicit prophecy of the birth of John the Baptist. It's really about the servant of God, and Jesus of course is the supreme servant of God, but in a sense, every prophet of Israel is a servant who has a mission from God. And in this case two elements really do apply to John, can be applied to John. First, the idea that he has his vocation from his mother's womb and secondly, that he has his name from before he was born, from the body of my mother he named my name. Both of those things are true of John because at the beginning of Luke's gospel, when the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah before John is even conceived, the angel tells Zechariah that John is going to be the forerunner of the Messiah and he also tells Zechariah that his name is going to be John. So in other words, John is known by God from before he was born. John is named by God from before he is born. From all eternity John has a special identity and mission in salvation history and that's proclaimed to Zechariah and revealed to Elizabeth precisely because he is this figure of the one who goes before the Lord to prepare his way. That's what John is. He is the great servant of the Lord.

And if you have any doubts about that being the theme for today, you can just look at Psalm 139 which is the responsorial psalm and you see the same theme. The idea of God's providence, the idea of being called by God from the womb to a particular mission. So Psalm 139:13 and 14, I'll just pick two verses, the psalmist is speaking to God and he says:

For thou didst form my inward parts,
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful.
Wonderful are thy works!

Thou knowest me right well;
my frame was not hidden from thee,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.

In other words, the psalmist is speaking on behalf of all human beings, right. God knows every one of us from all eternity, he knows all things, he's omniscient, right. He's also the God of Providence. He has a plan from all eternity for every single one of our lives. And in a special way that applies to people like John the Baptist, people like the prophets in the Old Testament, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who are going to play pivotal roles in the unfolding of the divine plan of salvation in human history. So the church is here calling us to remind us, this is really important, that a human being does not acquire their identity and their dignity simply by what we do, or much less only right after we're born. Even from the moment of our conception, even before that we are known, we are loved by the God who is our Creator, who is the omniscient creator of the world and who also is the one who leads all of human history, right, to its ultimate culmination in salvation that comes through Christ. And John the Baptist makes that evident in a very special and powerful way.

Alright, so those are the bridges from the Old Testament, being called from the womb in Isaiah, being called from the womb, being known from the womb in Psalm 139 and then the birth of John the Baptist and the celebration of that in the gospel for today. In closing I'd like to just end with an insight from the Living Tra-

dition of the church. As I pointed out at the beginning of the video, June 24 is not just a special day now, it has been a solemnity, it has been a festival that has been considered of pivotal importance for over 1000 years. We actually have a quote from St. Maximus of Turin, he lived in the late Fourth, early Fifth Century A.D. in Italy and he had a sermon where he's celebrating the Feast of John the Baptist and here are his words. I'd like to close with this insight from St. Maximus, he says this about why this particular day is special. He says:

[L]et us give all honor to the most blessed John [the Baptist] by celebrating this day of his birth with great joy, for before anyone else he recognized the everlasting light of heaven which was going to dispel the darkness of the world, and he was the first to point it out.³

Beautiful quote there from St. Maximus, *Sermon 57*, drawing on the imagery of light and darkness that I said at the beginning, right, that the light begins to increase in the world with the birth of Jesus Christ on December 25 and that John is the first to point us to that. I think it also gives us an important insight too into the dignity of the unborn here because what is St. Maximus saying? That it was an unborn child, that it was John the Baptist in the womb, right, who was the first to recognize his Lord, who was the first to recognize the Messiah, who was filled with grace even from the womb to be able to leap for joy in the presence of his Messiah, in the presence of Jesus Christ. And I think that's a reminder to us all in this day when the lives of the unborn are not respected, are taken, right, through the tragedy and the horrors of abortion, for us to remember that in salvation history God chose an unborn child, St. John the Baptist, to be filled with grace and to be the first person to recognize the Messiah.

³ St. Maximus of Turin, *Sermon 57*; trans. E. Barnecut