

St. John the Baptist  
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Taking a cue from the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary the mother of Jesus concerning Elizabeth, "this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren," the church celebrates the birth of John the Baptist six months before we celebrate Christmas. The church has long taught there is symbolism in the timing. John was born near the summer solstice and Jesus near the winter solstice. John's birth is near the longest day of the year and Jesus' birth near the shortest day of the year. That means the days will begin to shorten after we celebrate John's birth and the days will begin to be longer after the celebrate Jesus' birth. This lengthening of days corresponds to John's statement about Jesus that Jesus must increase and he, John, must decrease. In his birth, his ministry and his life, John the Baptist is the forerunner for Jesus.

At the time John was born the people of Israel were under the tyranny of the Roman Empire. Roman troops were everywhere and people dared not disobey the Emperor. The religious authority was not much better than the political authority. Religious leaders had rules for everything. The people were told what to eat, what to wear, who to associate with and who was to be ignored. National and religious taxes were placed on just about every aspect of life and tax collectors were among the most despised of their society. Life at the time was very regimented. The people longed for a better life and a word from God.

Zechariah was a priest of the temple in Jerusalem. He was married to Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, and they wanted desperately to have a child. Now the time had come when they were beyond child bearing age, so they resigned themselves to that fact. One day as Zechariah was serving at the altar an angel of the Lord appeared to him. The angel told Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son and they were to call the son John meaning "God has shown favor."

The angel said John would be great in the eyes of the Lord because he would bring many people to the Lord their God. Zechariah was so taken back by this message that he was unable to speak until the child was born. At the circumcision of John, Zechariah spoke, he named his son John and prophesied the beautiful canticle we know as the Benedictus. "Blessed be the Lord God of

Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people. He has raised up a mighty salvation for us in the house of his servant David....."

The year was about 27 when John first appeared preaching baptism for remission of sins and washing people in the river as a sign of new life. The prophet Isaiah had said there would be "a voice in the wilderness crying out to prepare the way of the Lord." People flocked to hear John in the belief that he was indeed that wilderness voice.

The theme of John's message was always the same, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand." What did that mean to people? People heard a variety of things in John's message. They heard that God had not forgotten them as they feared. The ideal of God's kingdom was that a Messiah would come to save God's people from the suffering of their time. They heard that all people would be cared for because God cared about the fate of God's people. They heard that God would rule the world rather than one group of people telling another group of people how to live. In God's kingdom justice, righteousness and peace would reign. Times had to get better if God's kingdom was a hand. The people had renewed hope.

John was a stern preacher. He challenged rich and poor alike, the priests of the temple and even the king. One day priests from the Temple, curious about what John was doing, arrived on the shores of the Jordan River. John looked up and said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He then proceeded to preach a sermon to the priests. "Go and bear fruit worthy of repentance," John warned them, "just because you are descendants of Abraham do not think you are guaranteed a place in God's kingdom." John went on to tell the priests that those who do not bear fruit are like a barren tree that is cut down and thrown into the fire.

John even challenged Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas had put aside his wife so he could marry the wife of his brother. John warned Herod that what he had done was unlawful. Herodias, Herod's new wife, seethed with anger. She waited for the day when she could get even with John.

One day as John was baptizing in the Jordan River the crowd parted and Jesus stood before him. John was at first struck by his own need and questioned that Jesus would come to him to be baptized. Jesus told John he had come to fulfill all that the law demanded. John lowered Jesus into the water. As Jesus

emerged from the Jordan River the Holy Spirit rested upon him and a voice said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

Do you ever stop to think about this encounter? John the Baptizer came to call people to repentance. Jesus, the Savior, came to identify with us all. Jesus stood right there in the Jordan River with everyone else and identified himself with our greatest human need; the need to be in a right relationship with God and with each other.

John would not see Jesus again until he emerged from forty days and nights in the wilderness. As the story is told, John by this time had a large faithful following. John saw Jesus and said to his following, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." From that time forward many of John's followers became followers of Jesus. The Gospel writer John tells us that John the Baptist said, "Jesus must increase and I must decrease."

Herod Antipas felt threatened by John and so he had John arrested and thrown in prison. Herodias saw her opportunity to get even with John for his condemnation of her marriage to Herod. Herod had promised her daughter Salome a gift for her birthday. Herodias plotted with Salome to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. John was executed so Herod could fulfill her request. Jesus was to have said of John, "Among those born of woman, there is none greater than John the Baptist."

I have often wondered what message John would preach if we could invite him to stand in the pulpit of the church incorporated in his name on this feast day that commemorates his life. I don't think there would be much need to change his message. John would still call us to repentance and to a life that befits one who lives in the kingdom of God. John would remind us that in God's kingdom the strong protect the weak and those who have more than enough share with those who do not have as much. John would remind us that in God's kingdom no one should ever go to bed hungry, no one should lack adequate shelter, no one should die from AIDS, malaria or any other disease for lack of medication. In God's kingdom there are no distinctions based on race, sexual orientation, economic status for we are all God's children. In God's kingdom we act in ways of respect toward one another and we strive for peace and justice for all people.

In the meantime, you and I have tasted God's kingdom. We may not have all the answers to the questions about how we can live into the challenge of John's message but we have been challenged to try. John has invited us to find ways

to allow the new life we have been giving in Jesus Christ to emerge making the world a better place for all of God's people. We are called to continue John's ministry, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are to confront evil in our world and to announce the coming of God's reign in Jesus Christ. God grant us every day the grace to amend our lives in ways that allow new life to emerge as John challenged us and the power to be the faithful follower Jesus calls us to be.