



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, June 24, 2007

The Nativity of John the Baptist

Festal Eucharist

at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Luke 1:57-80

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JOHN THE FORERUNNER

And thou, child, shalt be called the Prophet of the Highest; for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his way... St. Luke 1:57-80

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Church has two liturgical calendars going at the same time. One revolves around the date of Easter, which next year is the earliest it can possibly be. The other revolves around the date of Christmas, which was set to be just a few days after the winter solstice, as the days begin to get longer. Jesus' official birthday, December 25, was settled around the time of the Nicene Creed, in 325, during the reign of the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine. The idea was to pre-empt the old pagan festival of *Sol Invictus*, which celebrated the rebirth of the light of the sun. Just so, the Church reasoned, the light of the Sun of Righteousness, God incarnate Jesus Christ, made headway at his birth against the darkness of sin and death.

That is why we celebrate the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist today, just days after the summer solstice, six months before the birth of Jesus. Following Saint Luke the Evangelist, the master historian among our Gospel writers, the Incarnation calendar, which centers on December 25, works like this: On March 25, nine months before Christ's birth, we celebrate his Conception, the Annunciation by the Angel Gabriel to the Blessed Virgin Mary. At that time, the Angel reminded Mary that her elderly cousin, Elizabeth, was already six month's pregnant with her son, John, who had been named by the same Angel Gabriel even before his conception (more on that in a minute). Gabriel addressed Mary's concern, "How can this be, for I know not a man"; she was a young virgin. Replied Gabriel: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest will overshadow thee." He told her to consider her old kinswoman Elizabeth – "for with God nothing shall be impossible."

Over the ages, God had an extraordinary way of working through these sorts of unusual circumstances to advance his purposes. Think of Abraham and Sarah, of Samson's parents, of Samuel's mother; or, for that matter, of the harlot Rahab, the Moabite Ruth, or even King David's wife Bathsheba and their son Solomon. A different kind of king was

about to be conceived and born; and his still unborn yet already named cousin, John, his prophetic forerunner, was well on the way.

So Mary, two months later, went to visit Elizabeth. We kept this festival, the Visitation, on May 31 with a Festal Eucharist in the week. On that occasion, John, less than one month away from birth, leaped in the womb of his mother, who interpreted it as a salute at the approach of Mary and her child. "How is this granted me," exclaimed Elizabeth, "that the mother of my Lord should come to me!"

Elizabeth's husband Zechariah was slower than his wife to sense the presence of the Lord. It is worth noting that Zechariah was a priest who took his rounds at the Jerusalem Temple. Perhaps he was afflicted with the familiar problem of clergy burnout. In any case, he didn't believe the Angel Gabriel: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years?" The messenger answered: "I am Gabriel, who stand in presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you to bring you this good news. And behold you shall be unable to speak until this comes to pass." Imagine a priest unable to speak for nine months. Zechariah sounds a little like that other religious leader, Nicodemus, who visited Jesus by night and asked, "How can a man be born again; can he enter his mother's womb a second time?"

Nicodemus came around in the end, and so did poor old Zechariah, as we saw in today's Gospel which tells of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist. When Elizabeth, faithful as ever, resisted the gathered people and insisted that the newborn boy's name be John rather than Zechariah Junior; and when the crowd made signs to the father, Zechariah wrote, "His name is John": Whereupon the father's tongue was loosed, and he sang one of the Church's most beautiful canticles. The Song of Zechariah, the *Benedictus Dominus Deus*, is a regular part of our Prayer Book service of Morning Prayer and has occupied that position in Christian worship since at least a millennium and a half ago.

Zechariah's song is about freedom, freedom to worship God without fear. It is about release, not just from external enemies, but even more, from our internal, and therefore also eternal, enemies: bondage to sin, violence and death. Saint Luke means for us to see that just as old Zechariah was given freedom of speech at the birth of his son whom he obediently named John, so the way is prepared for the rest of us to receive the freedom of the Gospel.

John the Baptist, with his austere, simple message of repentance, shows the way forward. Turn to God; break away from your sins, and bear fruit that shows a new mind and heart. For what, we may ask; what then? For the coming of the Redeemer Jesus Christ, for the birth of the Messiah, not only into human history but into our hearts.

Jesus Christ is a Messiah who is not so much a political deliverer as he is a liberator from the deepest enemies of human life: sin, violence and death; although throughout history, the liberation of the Gospel has led to political justice and freedom as well. John leaped in his mother's womb at this Messiah's approach. John baptized Jesus thirty years later and said he was not worthy to untie his sandal. But John himself had to struggle with doubt over whether such a figure as Jesus, such a Lamb of God, was really the one he was expecting. Or should he look for another? No, Jesus was the one for whom John was the forerunner. As Zechariah prophesied, "Thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways...to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

My wife Nancy brought home from Germany a print of the famous crucifixion scene by sixteenth century artist Matthias Grunewald in the celebrated Isenheim Altar-piece. There the Messiah is dying a most horrible death, a death that burns away any sentimentality

about our Savior. But next to this ghastly scene is, of all people, John the Baptist, pointing his finger at the crucified Lord, holding the writings of the prophets in his other hand. The artist has it right, as did John when he leaped in his mother's womb at the approach of pregnant Mary. Jesus is the one. Behold the Lamb of God! Christ's crucifixion, which silences all of us, just as the first notice of Christ's forerunner silenced old Zechariah, is the very thing which gives us freedom to live, to pray, and to sing God's praises.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.