

**June 24, 2012 – Birth of John the Baptist**  
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*Isaiah 49: 1-6; Psalm 139:1-3, 13-14, 14-15; Acts 13: 22-26; Luke 1: 57-66, 80*

The readings of today are filled with that ineffable quality that we associate with “the call.” Isaiah states “God called me from my birth ... [F]rom my mother’s womb he gave me my name.” Thus, Isaiah knows that he will be working for God and announcing the words that God gives him. He deems himself unworthy to be God’s messenger, but does what he is called to do. We see that Isaiah, like John the Baptist, saw himself as an unlikely candidate for the mission that God gave him. Upon recognizing Jesus for who he really was, John said, “I am not worthy to tie his shoe laces.” John knew intuitively that he was the forerunner of “the one who is to come,” the one who would be greater than John.

From Scripture, we know very little of John the Baptist except that miracles surrounded his birth. It was an act of God that Elizabeth became pregnant as it is explained that she was old and beyond the years for child bearing. Mary herself went directly to meet Elizabeth when she heard that Elizabeth was with child. Then, upon meeting Mary, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leapt for joy. Somehow the extraordinary was intermingled with the ordinary in their lives and in the words they spoke. The signs of God’s favor continue, as soon after John’s birth at his circumcision they must name the child. They had wanted to name the boy Zechariah after the father but Zechariah is struck mute at that time. Thus when asked, Elizabeth said that the boy’s “name will be John.” The people then ask the father, and when Zechariah writes down the name as John, he regains his speech. Upon witnessing these things, the people in the surrounding country say, “What then will this child be?”

The person of John, the herald of the Savior, is a larger than life figure. He is there at the cusp of the Old Testament and the New Testament to declare repentance and the forgiveness of sins to the people of Israel. The idea of repentance for sins was not new, but maybe “forgiveness” was a newer concept – as John announced this as his mission. Before this, people were more likely to demand “an eye for an eye” type of justice or retribution. But both John and Jesus were bringing a new insight into what is needed – the forgiveness of one another.

I worked for many years in Tanzania, including 12 years at an AIDS outreach program, where I worked with a counselor named Anna. She herself was HIV positive, which her husband had passed onto her. She decided to speak out in public about being HIV positive, in order to warn others and to stop the spread of the disease. She courageously spoke at group gatherings, at church and at civic events. Her husband, angered by her witness, beat her. Luckily she escaped from him and moved in with a daughter who lived not far away. Within a year or so, Anna came to a moment when she could forgive her husband, but they no longer lived together. It was very hard for her, and she prayed for the gift of forgiveness, through which she again had peace in her life.

Thus, the life of John the Baptist is one of singular purpose – to point the way to “the one who is to come,” Jesus. In preparing the road for Jesus, he announces a new age where forgiveness is a central theme. Even in the story of John’s life, forgiveness is a feature. As Zechariah comes around to accept God’s mysterious work in Elizabeth’s pregnancy, and agrees to call the infant John, he is healed and his voice is returned to him. May we all experience God’s mercy, and accept that call to proclaim justice, peace and forgiveness, and to show others the way, as John and Jesus did through their lives and their actions.