

# THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

## June 23, 2019

Let us pray: O God of unquenchable light, how blessed we are to name your humble servant, John the Baptist, as our patron saint. Today we celebrate his birth and give thanks that perpetually he pointed to your Son, Jesus, as the way, truth, and life. Like John the Baptist may the light of Christ increase in us daily. Amen.

Today we remember who we are called to be as disciples of Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, the saint after which this community of faith is named. I find it significant that it is the birth, the nativity, of St. John the Baptist that we commemorate. John the Baptist is the only saint in the church year calendar where the focus is on the saint's birth. Why is that?

I would suggest it's because there's only one other birth that we celebrate in the church year, at Christmas, the Nativity of the Savior, Jesus Christ. Not only were John the Baptist and Jesus related, for John's mother and the virgin Mary were cousins, but the births were only six months apart, first John the Baptist and then Jesus. When the church's calendar of saints was devised, although we do not know what time of year John the Baptist was born, the celebration of his birth was placed just after the summer solstice, which was this past Friday, the day the daylight begins to decrease. And then, six months from now, the church fathers, again not knowing what time of year Jesus was born, placed the celebration of his nativity right after the winter solstice, as the light of day begins to increase. All this was to illustrate what John the Baptist said as an adult about Jesus: "He must increase, but I must decrease." John's preaching, indeed, his entire ministry was

about pointing away from himself and pointing toward Jesus as the messianic Savior God had promised.

Notice that on the eighth day after John was born, he was presented in the Temple to be named and circumcised, yet even then it was about Jesus not John. At his own son's naming, John's father, Zechariah, begins his song, just heard in the Gospel reading, by singing about his wife's cousin's kid, Jesus. In contemplation of Jesus' birth, Zechariah sings: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel...He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David." It's a strange moment, Zechariah first singing praise, not of his own son, newly born, but about Jesus as the Savior.

In the same way, as an adult, John the Baptist devoted his entire life to pointing away from himself and to Jesus, proclaiming about Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Or again, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." And still again, in the opening verses of the Gospel according to John the Evangelist we hear: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." And, again, John the Baptist says of Jesus: "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

I began this sermon by saying that today we are called to remember who we are to be as followers of Jesus Christ. In the life and ministry and preaching of John the Baptist we are reminded that, like John the Baptist, we are called day by day to let Jesus and his love for us and our love for him increase in our hearts and our lives. When I look at the life of John the Baptist I see a disciple of Jesus who

was devoid of prideful ego. He lived a stark life, in the wilderness, not in a mansion; wearing a camel hair tunic, not fine purple raiment; eating locusts and wild honey, not caviar and fillet mignon. And unlike the disciples, James and John, who led a discussion among the disciples about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom Jesus was ushering in, and whether they might sit, one of them at Jesus' right hand and the other at his left on heaven's throne, John the Baptist was all about glorifying Jesus, not himself. "He must increase, but I must decrease."

The Church of Christ in general and this Church of St. John the Baptist in particular would be stronger and healthier, marked by far greater vitality and growth, it's members more caring of one another, if we were less egotistical and more centered and grounded in Jesus Christ. If the motto that guided our interactions with one another, and our congregational decisions, and our parish goals, and our treatment of each other, our forgiveness of one another, which takes only one, and to seek reconciliation which takes at least two, if all of this was marked by the motto that John the Baptist embodied in his life: "I must decrease, Christ must increase," Christ's Church would be better for it, more a place of divine light and love, if there was less ego and more Jesus. So, not just for this day of St. John the Baptist, but for Christ's followers each day, every day, a great question to ask might be: "How today have I served, not my ego, but Jesus Christ my Savior?" John the Baptist has so much to teach us. Life in Christ is all about the decrease of self, of ego, and the increase of Christ in our words and actions! The dates chosen for the celebrations of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus in the church year make this witness!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.