



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist
Post Office Box 441 / 307 Federal Street
Milton, Delaware 19968



www.saintjohnsmilton.org

The Rev. Thomas M. White, Rector

THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
June 24, 2018

Let us pray: Stir up in our hearts, O gracious God, such love for you that we may hear and answer your call to be voices of your truth crying in the wilderness of this world that, like St. John the Baptist, we may prepare the way of the Lord, your Son, the Christ, the Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

The birth of a child is a time for unbounded joy and soaring hopes. Only two weeks ago it was my joy to hold in my arms the newest member of the St. John the Baptist family, Harrison Jasper Willis. As I cradled this bundle of joy, I was filled with joy! And with a newborn there are the hopes of the parents as they contemplate all the accomplishments they dream for their child as he or she grows and matures.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. His birth, you know, shouldn't have been. John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were far too old to conceive and bear a child. But Gabriel, the messenger of God, assured Zechariah and Elizabeth that a son would, indeed, be born to them, a child that would be filled with the Holy Spirit of God and turn many of Israel's people to the Lord God. Surely unimaginable joy and hope must have been theirs when John was born.

As John grew to manhood he became God's messenger, the voice of God, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah heard in today's First Reading: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." John the Baptist saw as his sole purpose and only mission to point away from himself and to the Messiah who had come down from heaven into the world, Jesus Christ. Of this Christ, John witnessed, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world...I came...that he might be revealed to Israel." So far John the Baptist's life and ministry sound like a "happily ever after" Hallmark movie.

But storm clouds gathered for St. John the Baptist when he spoke God's truth to power, in his case to the civil authority, calling out Herod the king. John condemned Herod for marrying his deceased brother's widow, saying it was against God's law. When anyone speaks God's truth to power, though, there is likely a price to pay. John the Baptist was arrested and then beheaded, John's head served to Herod on a silver tray. "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord!"

Today, we planned to welcome Fr. Laurence Miller, who served our parish between 1960 and 1965. Regretfully he can't be with us but will be next Sunday. Fr. Laurence was God's voice in a different kind of wilderness, the wilderness of injustice, hatred, bigotry, and violence. He heard God's call and the appeal of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to join him for a "peaceful, nonviolent march for freedom," the second Selma march, on March 9, 1965, and Fr. Laurence faithfully and courageously said "Yes!" to that call. The first Selma march, of course, was the "Bloody Sunday" march on March 7, when marchers for racial equality were attacked with snarling dogs, billy clubs and tear gas. At the second march, after kneeling and praying at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, instead of marching on to Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. King and the marchers returned to Selma. Their restraint prompted President Johnson to send a voting rights bill to Congress, which subsequently became law. Next Sunday I hope you will thank Fr. Laurence when you see him for being a hero of the faith, a contemporary St. John the Baptist, preparing the way of the Lord by being God's voice for justice and equality crying in the wilderness of intolerance, oppression, and exclusion. I salute Fr. Laurence and thank God for him!

There is a humanitarian wilderness happening right now on America's southern border. Many of you, I feel sure, came to Mass last Sunday with the crisis of family separation at the forefront of your minds, children and toddlers being removed from their dads and moms. I apologize to you and ask your forgiveness that I didn't speak to this moral crisis in my sermon. You see, God's Holy Spirit calls me as preacher to connect the Biblical texts to the issues, whether personal, national, or international, that confront us. My calling at its core is to connect faith and life, the Bible and the world. A preacher better than I most likely would have found a way to connect last week's Scripture readings to this humanitarian crisis, but I didn't find a connection, not last Sunday. This Lord's Day, however, I do. Like John the Baptist, God calls me as the preacher, but all of you as well, faithful followers of Jesus Christ, to speak God's truth to power, even if that witness, as with St. John the Baptist or those who were tear-gassed and billy-clubbed on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, prompts a reaction of violence and rejection. As I have preached many times, as the spiritual shepherd of the St. John the Baptist faith family, you need to know how I hear God's Word addressing issues of the day. You have the right to disagree, just so long as we don't let disagreement disconnect our connection in Holy Baptism as sisters and brothers in Christ, kin in Christ.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, was interviewed on CNBC this past week regarding the family separations at the border. In my view, he spoke eloquently and powerfully—it's Bishop Curry after all!—and said that for him, separating parents from their children is both un-American and un-Christian, is alien to the call of Jesus to welcome the stranger and to love God by showing love for our neighbor. He then gave a real-life example that I found really helpful. He talked about the time when he and one of his children, a toddler, I think he said she was three years old, were together in a department store. He said it was only three or four seconds when his gaze was diverted from his child, and suddenly she was gone; in seconds she had disappeared. His voice trembled when he shared on CNBC that his heart stopped beating. He panicked, was traumatized, and was in unimaginable pain during the minute or two before he found her. For Bp. Curry, and for me, this story made real the panic and pain these refugee

parents must certainly be experiencing in having their children taken from them and, even worse, not knowing where they are.

Now some might talk a great deal about the fact that the frightened and sobbing child looking up at an ICE agent in the photograph that has gone viral, was not, in fact, separated from her mother. But, does that somehow mean that there are no longer 2,299 children and toddlers who have been separated from their mother or father, and are frightened and traumatized?

There's another story, this one from my life, a true one, that I hope you will find meaningful and helpful. It's about my beloved grandmother, who had four children in four years, and by her horrible choice of a husband, was married to a chronic womanizer and gambler. Although my grandfather, even during the Depression, was making good money as a printer with his own business, he squandered his income on racing bets and women. One day, my grandmother's young children said to her, "Mama, you don't love us anymore because you won't feed us." That day she went immediately to the local grocery store and, when no one was watching, took a package of baloney and a loaf of bread, hid them under her winter coat, and walked out of the store. For sure, my grandmother had broken the law, she stole, you might call her a criminal. But, why? Because she was desperate. Her love for her children, and her complete commitment to their welfare, had to come first. She was desperate. The front page of yesterday's "Washington Post" included an article entitled "Zero Tolerance Meets Desperation." Are all the illegal refugees at the Mexican border desperate? Maybe not. Are many, if not most of them? I would guess yes. Are we a nation of laws? Most certainly. Civil law brings order, stability, and civility to society. But are all laws just? Certainly not; laws consigned Japanese Americans to internment camps during World War II and tried to relegate Rosa Parks to the "colored" section in the back of the bus. Immigration reform, if it ever happens, I pray will reflect God's justice, God's compassion, God's generosity, God's welcome to the stranger, God's call that we respect the dignity and care about the well-being of every person.

Bp. Brown, bishop of our Diocese of Delaware, spoke last Wednesday regarding this crisis of separation. I strongly encourage you to watch his video at our parish website, linking to "The Net." Permit me to share a quote from his courageous talk: "We may disagree on how to repair immigration. We must not disagree on what it means to offer basic human dignity to our fellow human beings...to speak up as an American and as a Christian to express that this is not the way we behave. This humanitarian crisis is one of our own creation and it is one that we can end." Amen, Bp. Brown! "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord!"

Now what you might be waiting for...the "finally!" Finally, in closing, when I first came as your priest, I wondered how in the world in 1728 God's people decided to name the church they were establishing in the town of Milton after St. John the Baptist. Why not Christ Church, or St. Matthew Church, or Mary, Mother of our Lord Church, or St. Peter Anglican Church? But, St. John the Baptist? Far from a best-known saint. Of course, I learned in time that those pioneers in the faith in Milton most likely chose St. John the Baptist because they were building the church in dense wilderness, like the wilderness where St. John the Baptist preached and pointed to Jesus. Now I love our name because I've come to realize that all Christians, you, I,

Dr. King and Rosa Parks, Fr. Laurence, Bps. Curry and Brown, we are all like St. John the Baptist, that is, all of us, called by God to be God's voice for compassion and love, of justice and equality, of dignity and decency, of generosity and mercy—of grace!—in whatever wilderness confronts us as God's people, that by our witness we too "in the wilderness" might "prepare the way of the Lord!"

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