

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

June 26, 2022 – NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST (*transferred from June 24*)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: "*A Tale of Two Cousins—Sent from God*"

Isaiah 40:1-11 (The prophet envisions God's *shalom*)
Psalm 85:7-13 (A prayer for salvation and prosperity)
Acts 13:14b-26 (St. Paul preaches about salvation through Christ)
St. Luke 1:57-80 (John, the future prophet, is born to Elizabeth and Zechariah)

If we're honest, many of us will admit to having one or more weird relatives. Aunts, uncles, or cousins—maybe even siblings—that seem as though they came from another planet, not the same gene pool. They embarrass us at family reunions, and we're reluctant to befriend them on Facebook.

In today's celebration of the birth of John the Baptist, we find ourselves in the midst of a family story about two rather different cousins: John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Jesus, the son of Elizabeth's relative, Mary of Nazareth. This morning's Gospel lesson follows St. Luke's account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth when both were pregnant. The Bible records that Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in the hill country of Hebron, south of Jerusalem. Mary traveled there from Nazareth, which is approximately 80 miles to the north—a long trip, in those days.

The two women met to rejoice in their respective miraculous pregnancies and to glorify God. Elizabeth, who was elderly and barren, had conceived, and Mary, who was unmarried and chaste had also conceived a child—by the Holy Spirit! And this is only the beginning of what the two cousins—John and Jesus—had in common, despite their apparent differences as adults.

1. Born six months apart, they were the same age.
2. Both were from the same extended family.
3. Their births fulfilled Old Testament prophecies of a Messiah to come, and one who would be His forerunner, or prophet.
4. Their births were both announced to their parents by the Archangel Gabriel.
5. Their names were divinely given by God, not chosen by their families. John's name means "God is gracious," and Jesus means "God saves."
6. Both boys had godly parents. Zechariah was a priest, and Joseph was a good and ethical man. Their mothers were devout, holy women.
7. Each man began his public ministry near the age of 30, and each had a company of disciples.
8. Both preached about the coming Messianic kingdom and a baptism of repentance.
9. Both were righteous men who testified to God's Truth; neither was accepted by their own people, and both were condemned to death by Roman rulers in the first century A.D.

And tenth, but not to be dismissed as last: John died because of his defense of the sanctity and integrity of marriage, and the wedding feast at Cana was the scene of Jesus' first miracle and the launching of His public ministry, thus sanctifying marriage and making it a Sacrament.¹

There are also many ways that St. John the Baptist and the circumstances surrounding his birth and life serve as a contrast to that of Christ. In a third-century sermon by St. Augustine from the Liturgy of the Hours, he wrote of this feast day: "John was born of a woman too old for childbirth; Christ was born of a youthful virgin. The news of John's birth was met with incredulity, and his father was struck [speechless]. Christ's birth was believed, and He was conceived through faith. John was a voice that lasted only for a time; Christ [was] the Word in the beginning [and] is eternal."

As the son of a priest, John was entitled to wear the prescribed vestments and take part in religious ceremonies. But like Samuel and Samson before him, he became a Nazirite—dedicated to God; abstaining from cutting his hair or imbibing strong drink; wearing a coarse garment, and, filled with the Holy Spirit, crying out in the wilderness, far from the Temple. Significantly, John baptized in the Jordan River, through which the ancient Israelites had passed into the promised land.²

The people's repentance that led to their being baptized was for them—as it is for us today—a *spiritual* liberation, parallel to their ancestors' deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Confessing their sins and washed clean, they were freed from enslavement to sin and death.

Along with baptizing many, John's preaching about the coming Kingdom of God was so powerful that the Gospel of John tells us people asked if he were the Messiah. John answered that he was neither the Christ nor the prophet Elijah come back. He explained that he was baptizing for repentance, but another was to come, who would "baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit." Of course, that prophecy would be fulfilled many years later, on the Day of Pentecost.

The Gospels tell us nothing about the childhood of these two cousins, only that they met as adults. Perhaps living 80 miles apart had something to do with this semi-estrangement. And yet, through the power of the Holy Spirit, when John does finally encounter Jesus as He comes to be baptized, John acclaims Him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29), and goes so far as to proclaim, "This is the Son of God" (John 1:34). This mutual appreciation continues in Matthew 11:11, where Christ declares, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

In this same passage, Jesus highlights the differences in their ministry styles: "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds" (Matthew 11:18-19).

Both cousins were righteous men filled with the Holy Spirit, sent to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God that would be characterized by forgiveness of sins and new life with God. It's hard to imagine this would not be good news and become very popular. But from the time John and Jesus began talking about conversion from sin and freedom in Christ, somehow, the powers that be—and a whole lot of regular folks—found this extremely threatening to the status quo.

Their own religious leaders were concerned that followers of John and Jesus were not keeping the Jewish laws, and that made them nervous. The Roman occupiers just wanted order among the populace, but when Jesus went around raising the dead, healing the paralyzed, and casting out demons—thus causing quite a fuss—the governing leaders were afraid of an uprising.

Around A.D. 29, John was executed by Herod Antipas, ruler of that part of Judea, who had earlier imprisoned John for condemning his incestuous marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias. It was she, through her daughter Salome, who requested the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Luke, chapter 9 relates that when Herod later heard Jesus was being identified with a resurrected John, he became curious about the rumor and sought to meet with the itinerant preacher. That desire would be fulfilled in Jesus' trial, condemnation, and crucifixion, four years after John's death.³

The martyrdom and death of St. John would begin a long history of Christians being put to death for their faith in his cousin Jesus of Nazareth. Two millennia later, believers in Christ are still imprisoned, tortured, and killed because of our faith. And yet, that faith continues to flourish around the world, because it has nothing to do with humans, and everything to do with the power and purposes of God. In the Anglican Church of Africa, where so many have died for their faith, there is a saying: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." That was certainly true of the Early Church, and the martyrdom of all of Jesus' disciples, except for St. John the Apostle.

There's no doubt, St. John the Baptist is a mighty figure in the history of Christianity. But why do we bother to celebrate his birthday? As St. Augustine said, "This day cannot be passed by. And even if my [reflection] does not match the dignity of the feast, you may still meditate on it with great depth and profit."⁴ Hopefully, today's sermon will provide some food for thought on the wonderful mysteries surrounding the birth, life, and death of this great Christ-like saint. Saint John the Baptist, pray for us! *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. Gretchen Filz, "St. John the Baptist: The Preview of Jesus Christ," 23 June 2016, [CatholicCompany.com](https://www.catholiccompany.com/magazine/st-john-baptist-preview-jesus-christ-5840#>) < <https://www.catholiccompany.com/magazine/st-john-baptist-preview-jesus-christ-5840#>> 21 June 2022. Used with permission.

² "John the Baptist," *Illustrated Dictionary and Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: G. G. The Jerusalem Publishing House, Ltd., 1986) pp. 548-550.

³ Charles M. Laymon, Ed. "Luke," *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 686.

⁴ Filz, *op. cit.*