

[Readings: Is 49:1-6; Psalm 139; Acts 13:22-26; Luke 1:57-- 66, 80]

Believe it or not, the Gospel of Luke doesn't begin with Jesus. It begins with the birth of John the Baptist, an event nearly as stunning, almost as impossible as the Incarnation of Jesus Christ himself. Elizabeth and Zechariah are righteous and barren (Lk 1:6-7). Like Abraham and Sarah, they should not be able to conceive a child. They are beyond the age at which children are born to couples.

One can only imagine the pain that both Elizabeth and Zechariah experienced. The Psalmist promises that the one who fears the Lord will have many descendants (Ps 112:1-2). How often they must have cried out to God together, asking for descendants. Praying for a son. A child-less couple was considered a curse from God for some personal sins they may have committed.

God has something else in store for Elizabeth and Zechariah. Performing his priestly duty in the Temple, Zechariah is visited by the angel Gabriel.

Gabriel not only promises that Elizabeth and Zechariah will have a child. This son will be a source of "joy and gladness" (Lk 1:14), he will be "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 1:15), and "he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God" (Lk 1:16). In the Gospel of Luke, the words "joy and gladness" is evidence that the moment of salvation is near. John is chosen by God to be a prophet, to turn Israel to God. To prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah.

Zechariah cannot believe. He cannot "know" this truth, perceive it with his own eyes. Who could? And he is thus made silent, waiting for the birth of John.

In the meantime, more wondrous events unfold in Nazareth. The same angel Gabriel appears to Mary, inviting her into an even more wondrous birth. Mary, too, wonders how this is possible, since she has not "known" a man (a word pertaining to sexual intimacy).

Zechariah cannot "know" this truth because it cannot be perceived. Mary "knows" the possibility of truth, even if she herself has not been "known."

Mary and Elizabeth encounter one another, two women pregnant with divine possibility. Jesus and His cousin John greet one another in the womb,

joyfully aware of the mysterious salvation happening in hidden Judah. Some theologians say that this is when John was “baptized” – at this encounter with Jesus while they were both in the wombs of their mothers.

While Zechariah remains silent, Mary speaks. Her soul magnifies the Lord. She proclaims the mercy that has come to visit her people. The moment of judgment is at hand, the time for divine possibility. Her song of praise is called the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Could Zechariah have heard these wondrous words of Mary? Was it her witness that led him to know the unknowable?

And then, at last, John is born. When Zechariah writes his name upon the tablet, fulfilling the prophecy of the angel Gabriel, he can once again speak. And his first words bless God. His song of praise is called the Benedictus: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel...”

John’s first renewal of Israel begins with his dad, who comes to rejoice in the salvation made present here and now.

Filled with the very Spirit of God, Zechariah now offers his own parallel song to Mary’s. He sees his son for who he is -- the prophet of the Most High, the one who comes to announce the presence of light in the world.

The births of John and Jesus are both announced by angels: the first to a priest-father who doubts and will be silenced, the second to a mere girl who believes and springs into faith-based action. While Elizabeth hides herself away to escape the public eye, Mary runs into the Judean hills to share her news at once. When Mary appears, Elizabeth’s unborn son acknowledges the presence of the “blessed fruit” of her womb before she even has a chance to sing her Magnificat. This hymn is prayed every evening during the Church’s solemn evening prayer; Zechariah’s Benedictus hymn of praise is prayed every morning.

So today’s a good day to remember the importance of people who are seldom in the spotlight, whether others or ourselves. Recognize that even small actions and choices are significant; they either build up the community of faith or they do not. The power of the Gospel in action can be the “loosening of the

sandal strap” that may seem unimportant to everyone -- except of course to the person whose feet are tired and hurting.

Also, think about your own name. The family of Zechariah and Elizabeth murmur that they have chosen to give their son a name which no relative has – quite uncommon and disrespectful at that time. The name John means “beloved of God” or “favored by God” or “given grace by God.” What does YOUR name mean? How was your name chosen by your parents? Were you named after a special relative, or some then-current celebrity?

My mother’s father was named Nicholas. He was born on the feast of St. Nicholas – December 6th – so I guess that’s why HIS parents named him that.

My mother’s father died just when my mom was getting ready to graduate from the eighth grade. To honor the memory of her father, I was named after him. I would also guess that whenever she called out my name, it reminded her of HER mother calling out to her husband.

Parenthetically, whenever my mom and her mom would be over the gossip fence talking about the latest events of the family in English, and they would see me approaching, they would say, “Maly Uszy” (MAH-wee OO-shee) – “Little Ears” – and the conversation would switch to Polish. I was 14 years old before I realized that my first name in Polish was NOT “Maly Uszy!”

On the feast of John’s nativity, we should allow ourselves to be conformed to the prophetic wisdom of Jesus’ cousin. Like John, we are called to be witnesses to the one who witnesses to the love of the Father. “Joyful, missionary disciples!” We are witnesses to the joyful resurrection of the beloved Son.

And like the last prophet of Israel, St. John the Baptist, we must announce to the world the good news: The Most High is here. We are not him.

Come with us. And meet the source of joy and gladness.

Finally, I ask you to spend some time in quiet prayer and reflect on today’s Psalm 139, which is prescribed for today’s feast day. Realize what God thinks of you. Like John, you are beloved. This is my favorite and most consoling psalm in the entire Book of Psalms. If you are having a good day, and especially if you are having a bad day, open up the Book of Psalms to Psalm 139 and let God

console you and uplift you. “I thank you, Lord, for I am fearlessly, wonderfully made.” These are the words that make up the song, “Yahweh, I Know You are Near.” Where does God or your faith “amaze you? Be courageous proclaimers. Come out from the shadows and proclaim to others, all that God has done for you. You may be surprised at whose sandal straps you loosen, and whose feet – and lives – you will touch and help to heal! AMEN!