

We celebrate most saints' feasts on their death anniversaries – their births into heaven. Only the Blessed Virgin and St. John the Baptist have the distinct honor of birthday celebrations. Maybe we're okay with that, but the Nativity of the Baptizer displacing the Lord's Day may make us uncomfortable. Yet, if we consider this very date on our calendar we won't be. Christ's birth is celebrated on December 25 at which point dark nights give way to ever longer days until June 24 when daylight recedes. John said to his disciples once he announced Jesus was the Messiah: "He must increase, I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). Thus, everything about John the Baptist's birth prepares for Christ's Incarnation. So it's worth it to think about what John helps us understand in relation to Jesus. Two things I'd suggest for reflection are these: 1.) the importance of a calling, and 2.) that it's okay to point.

First, **the importance of a calling**. Isaiah makes clear today a prophetic mission is chosen by God: "The Lord called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name.... You are my servant." It's echoed in the young Jeremiah too, to whom God says: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you..., a prophet to the nations I appointed you" (1:5). Indeed, at the Visitation between Elizabeth and Mary, when Christ is present in the Virgin's womb, *in utero* the Baptizer leapt for joy! Even before birth John lived out his calling to direct the nations to the Savior!

God doesn't make accidents. John falls into a long line of miraculous births and prophetic calls, his birth throws stark contrast onto Christ's: John's birth is very public, Christ's is hidden in a stable; Zechariah is high priest and Mary, a backwater maiden; when John is presented in the Temple all are amazed, but at Christ's only a couple old fools notice. And yet as much as John stands in a long line of prophets, Christ is the

fulfillment of every major event of the Old Testament: the New Adam, the beloved Son of the covenant, a liberator greater than Moses, and the definitive King David. Even despite human freedom and sin God was in control preparing the way of the Lord, giving him the ultimate hype man in John.

The importance of John's call before Christ's manifestation as Messiah *then*, tells us something about religious vocations *now*. I remember our old carpenter at the abbey told me he had more respect for priests who came to their callings later. His idea was that having roamed from job to job and maybe even having had a failed marriage would prepare them well for priesthood. Now, there's no one call story, God has His time for each of us that He'll use for His purpose. But let's follow our carpenter's logic to its end: You mean to tell me that you want a guy who's failed at *everything* in life to be the one who directs you toward your most important destination?? Y'know, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.... Such logic discounts a **supernatural call** – and it flies in the face of biblical witness. Jeremiah complained he was too young to be a prophet and the Lord said, “Do not say, ‘I am too young’.... See, I place my words in your mouth” (Jer. 1:7, 9), and Paul says to Timothy, “Let no one have contempt for your youth.... Do not neglect the gift you have” (1 Tim 4:12, 14).

Maybe such sentiments speak more to our feelings about our own children, our generosity in fostering vocations. It's as if some think: Let's find the most unmarried, socially awkward guy to be a priest or a monk. *No!* Anyone unable to be a natural father shouldn't be a *supernatural* father, and someone without social intelligence can't live as close as monks do. Or maybe some think: She's too beautiful to be a nun – as if God doesn't like pretty things. *No!* “He made of me a sharp-edged

sword,” not a dull knife through haphazard use! “He made of me a polished arrow,” to cut through the noise and attract others to the gospel. John is formed from the instant of his existence to be a prophet of Christ Jesus, and the Church still has these calls.

A second thing to consider about John the Baptist is this: **it’s okay to point**. Your mama told you growing up: “It’s rude to point!” But the Baptizer’s vocation is to be *one who points*. [It’s interesting that at the naming of John, people made signs asking Zechariah if that could really be his name. That’s ironic, because God Himself had made a sign in John. The name *John* means: **God is gracious**. God is gracious to not let righteous Zechariah and Elizabeth remain childless; God is gracious that while we’re convicted in our sins He allows the gift of repentance; God is gracious in pointing out the Christ, whose name *Jesus* means, *God saves*.]

When John had prepared the people for the Savior, as Paul explains, he said, “What do you suppose that I am? I am not [the Christ].” Then, recalling the Passover sacrifice that saved the Hebrews from slavery, John pointed out the Lamb of God who saves *all* from sin and death: **the Lord Jesus**. Every sign points to something else. You’d never walk down here by Highway 136 with a sign that reads ‘Kansas City 100 miles,’ and think you were already there. No, a sign always points *beyond* itself.

Last fall, the famous biblical scholar, Scott Hahn, spoke at Conception. A friend from Columbia went up for the lecture and he texted me to ask: “Why does the water at the abbey taste like dirt?” Y’know, being from Columbia it didn’t have all the lead and estrogen flavor he’s used to.... And trying to shrug off the snipe I said, “That’s how you know our water’s really good: it’s organic.” And my friend, who’s a bit of a know-it-all,

the kind of guy who'd rather be correct than happy – you know the type – he replied:  
“Well, by definition because it's not alive, water is *inorganic*.” Touché....

When John the Baptist came into the world as a prophet pointing out the Savior, he baptized only with water. Necessary for life, this water, but not alive itself. Water washed away sins symbolically, exposing in the runoff what still afflicted humanity. But Jesus said when He came into the world: “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me: ‘Rivers of *living water* will flow from within him’” (Jn 7:38). At your baptism you weren't just cleansed with water, but divine life created a spring within your soul that sustains you in Christ. Through grave sin the wellspring dries up. Sometimes we fail to follow the signs we're given: a health care close call, confession available but we put it off, the resolve to ask for help with habitual sin. The stark Baptizer who did not shrink from calling out even the king in His sin and lived what he preached continues *to point out* how close we are to salvation.

Dear friends in Christ, as the days shorten and the nights grow longer, we're reminded of God's graciousness. As once God called His servants from the womb, so He calls them still from our parish – there are young people here God has made to be religious and priests. As once John the Baptist pointed out the Christ, so now the Church re-presents the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of world; the call to communion is also a call to conversion, to not stay at the sign but to go from death to life. As we celebrate the birth of the greatest prophet born of woman, may we know that any one of us, least in the kingdom, can be still greater than John!