

## JOHN THE BAPTIST, 2018

### Luke 1.57-80

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Today in the Church calendar is the Nativity of John the Baptist. Since it happens exactly six months before the birth of Christ, it is known as the “summer Christmas” – without, of course, Santa and carols and a Christmas tree and presents.

In all the Gospels Jesus and John the Baptist are linked. They were cousins. John baptized Jesus. Jesus began His ministry after John was arrested. Jesus said that of all the people who were ever born, John the Baptist was the greatest – and yet the least in God’s kingdom. John the Baptist is the link between the Old Testament and the New. He is the last and greatest of the Jewish prophets, the boundary between the old age and the new age God began in the resurrection of Jesus.

I want, first, to give a brief summary of John’s life, and second, offer a few reflections on his importance for our faith and life in the Church.

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John the Baptist was born into a priestly family. At his birth his father sang the hymn of praise called the *Benedictus*, from the Latin word “blessed,” the first word of the hymn. It is the hymn sung by the Church every day in the service of morning prayer.

The public ministry of John emerged around AD 29. He was a wandering preacher in the desert beyond the Jordan River. He called upon the people to repent because of the coming judgment of God. He challenged people to change their lives and walk in the ways of the Lord, which John characterized as showing compassion, doing righteousness, and defending the weak. As a sign of repentance and renewal in faith, John practiced baptism. John’s preaching inevitably came into conflict with the ruling authorities. He dared to criticize the king for his immoral behavior. As a result, he was thrown into prison and eventually killed.

To this day there exists in Iraq a small group of followers of John the Baptist and his teachings. They are called Mandaeans. The Church has always held John in high honor. Other than the birth of Jesus, John the Baptist is the only other figure in Church history whose birth is celebrated. Two

Sundays of Advent remember John the Baptist and his role in the Christmas story.

So, what can we learn from John the Baptist for our life of faith and witness today?

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First: John the Baptist was a pointer to Jesus. He is our role-model as a witness to Christ.

In a museum in Alsace, France is the famous Isenheim Altarpiece, painted in the 16th Century by Matthias Grunewald. In it John the Baptist stands next to the crucified Jesus. At his feet is a lamb. John points to Jesus, as if to say, “Here is the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Here is your salvation.”

That is Christian witness in its simplest terms: Pointing to Jesus. That’s our calling. How you do it – that’s the challenging part. Maybe it is speaking from the standpoint of Christian faith when you and others are discussing an issue or situation. Maybe it is offering the hope we have in Christ to someone struggling with doubt or despair. Maybe it is defending the hope that we have as Christians when challenged by others, especially opponents of Christian faith. Maybe it is by your actions – “being the arms of Christ” reaching out with care and compassion for those who are suffering.

Our witness to Jesus takes many forms, but it is the same message: Here is the One in whom we have our salvation, the Savior of the world.

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Second, John the Baptist knew his place. He had his ego in order.

About 50 years ago Robert Townsend was asked to become president and CEO of a struggling little car rental company called “Avis.” Townsend asked an advertising agency to develop a new campaign for the company. So the agency did a study of Avis. They came back and said, “We did our study. All we can say is, you are the #2 car rental company, and you’re trying very hard.” They made that one of the most successful advertising campaigns ever: “Avis. We’re #2. We try harder.”

It's a slogan that would work well for John the Baptist. "I'm #2." For that is what he was. God's #2 man. He said it of himself: "There is one who is coming who is greater than I." He did not boast of himself; he did not call attention to himself. John's role in God's purposes was to be #2: a pointer to Jesus, the Savior, the Christ.

We would do well to keep this in mind in our witness to Christ. We're #2. The Gospel is not about us. It's about Jesus. Following John the Baptist's example, our task is to point people to Jesus, the world's true savior. We are not here to parade ourselves, our goodness, our experiences. We exist to point others to Jesus, in whom all people can find the Way, the Truth, the real Life.

So ask yourself: what does your manner of life say to other people about Jesus as your Lord? Does your life reflect Christ to others? What impression of Jesus do people get from you, from your words and actions and manner of life?

The first rule of effective marketing is: Nothing can replace honesty: Be honest about Whom we represent – i.e., the Lord our God -- what we believe, and who we are as His people.

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Last: John the Baptist is an example and inspiration of the courage to speak truth to power.

The issue that John was speaking concerned the king's behavior. King Herod was having an affair with his brother's wife. John had exposed it and called the king to account. John, you see, had this little hang-up, a word from the Lord called The 10 Commandments. Particularly #6: "You shall not commit adultery."

King Herod did not like this message, or its messenger. Power usually does not like being confronted with the truth. So, Herod's response was, "Don't like the message? Get rid of the messenger." Shut him up in prison. Later on, he had him killed. No one said speaking up for the Lord would be easy.

I wonder what would happen if John was dealing with King Herod in our time. What would people say? Would people even care? In the early 90s

Senator Daniel Moynihan wrote an article, "Defining Deviancy Down." His argument was that immoral behavior had increased so much, people took it as normal. Immoral behavior had lost its "shock effect." So, people just ignore any new incident as, "Same old, same old. What else is new?" Immorality has become the normal morality.

Or, maybe people would say, as one religious leader recently did, "What Herod is doing is wrong, but we should give him a 'moral mulligan'." I don't think John the Baptist would buy that.

Or would people say to John the Baptist today, "Don't be so judgmental. After all, there are different versions of the truth. You have yours; Herod has his. Who are you to judge?" (In truth, no one who says that really believes it. Indeed, I find people who preach non-judgmentalism are very judgmental, especially about people they perceive as judgmental.)

John's answer would be, I believe: Truth matters. Virtue matters. God's Law matters. No society, no person, can long endure who consistently deny truth, ignore virtue, and mock God's ways. And, at this time of year, as we near our national holiday, it is worth reminding ourselves that the founders of our nation insisted that a democratic government like ours can only work if its citizens are a virtuous people. Otherwise, it will dissolve into selfishness. So, we might ask of our leaders and ourselves, "How are we doing?"

John reminded the king that he was accountable to a higher authority than his own whims and pleasures: the Lord God. That is a solid-rock biblical principle. So, forty years ago when former President Richard Nixon claimed, "If the President does it, it cannot be illegal," John the Baptist would have said, "Hold on there, Tricky Dick. The President is not the State. He is not above the Law. Like the Hebrew National hot dog commercials used to say, "We are accountable to a higher authority."

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Point to Jesus. We're God's #2. Have courage to speak the truth. Three things to learn from John the Baptist, and do. And John's cousin, the risen Lord Jesus, will be with you and bless you. Amen.