

## **Sermon, 24 June 2007—Birth of John the Baptizer**

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85; Acts 13:14-26; Luke 1:57-80

Today we celebrate the feast of the birth of John the Baptizer, the Forerunner, the Bridegroom's Best Man. Of course, we don't know when he was born any more than we know when Jesus was born. The early Church had only one celebration: the Resurrection. What mattered about the Resurrection was its connection with Passover; both Christians and Jews were celebrating their escape from bondage and their deliverance from the angel of death.

Now, Passover and Easter are yoked to the full moon like the tides and drift across the calendar every year. Easter is celebrated on the first day of the first week after the first full moon that falls on or after the Spring Equinox. The extraordinary thing about this is that we cannot anticipate the Feast of Resurrection on any given year, because we are never sure on what day it will fall. We exclaim, "My, isn't it late this year!" or "Goodness, it seems to fall late this year!" Because of that, Easter always seems to arrive fresh and surprising—as Resurrection ought to be. It is not a date we recall, but an event that happens to us yearly. To locate Easter we don't look back, but forward. As we wait yearly on the changeable moon, one of the greater servants that preside over the natural order from the heavens, Christians rehearse being flexible in God's hands and open to God's times.

However, this Risen Christ was not a simply a spotless heavenly guest, but one who lived and died as one of us. When Jesus was raised to life again, God was breaking through human limitation and fallibility and mortality in order to preserve us all as His own forever, because Jesus shared our human nature. This means that he was born of a woman, that he arrived

slick with her blood and sweat, still shaped into the cramped fold that fit into her, that he learned to squall for air within seconds of entering this empty space we share, and that he started to bawl soon after for the milk he had never tasted but knew he wanted. To be human is to have a birth day.

The early Christians—either cunning or witty—began to celebrate his birth at the same time their pagan neighbors were celebrating the birth of the invincible sun at the winter solstice. At the darkest point of the year, when the Northern hemisphere finally begins to tilt towards the light again and the days begin to get longer, the early Christians rejoiced over the birth of the Light of the World—and they meant the Christ. This feast wore the safest camouflage imaginable. The Church built on a secular Gentile festival to celebrate his Incarnation, his entry into humanity, as it retained a sacred Jewish festival to celebrate his Resurrection, his raising of humanity. So the cycle of the sun reminds us at Christmas of his descent into the temporal and circumstantial life of human beings, and the cycle of the moon reminds us at Easter of his ascent into the eternal and uncircumscribed life of the Trinity.

The other birth in the Gospels is the one we celebrate today. Luke tells us that John was born six months before Jesus, so we remember John's birth at the summer solstice. There is a melancholy fit to this, because John represents the end of all the waiting, the conclusion of everything that had gone before, the last of all the prophets, Elijah returned before the great and awful day of the LORD. What follows, once you have reached a peak, is descent. John's light will shrink as Jesus' light grows. When John the Baptizer's disciples come to him in the Gospel of another John, alarmed that Jesus is becoming more popular and therefore turning into a rival preacher, John the Baptizer calms them. "He must increase," John says, "and I must decrease"—and he might have been saying that about the hours of daylight

after each solstice: from now on, the days get shorter. In all of us, of course, the same prayer ought to be said: let the light of Christ in me increase, and let the energy-draining neon glare of my distractions decrease.

This celebration reaches us in the midst of an anxious time: the person we have been paying to serve as our youth minister is leaving—and you know we have been enjoying two for the price of one, a bargain and a blessing and a source of great joy and an example of faithfulness that we will all miss terribly. So I want to say two things about our ministry with youth and our next steps in light of John, whom we remember today.

First, let's glance at John's comment about increasing and decreasing. Exactly that ought to be foremost in our mind with every ministry: we serve others so that their strengths and happiness might increase, and we can only do that if our self-concern and defensiveness decrease. That is, I think, most true when we consider all the young people in our lives, not only those who are present and active here. No question about it: they will increase and we will decrease. Of course, I am not suggesting these kids are Jesus; all it takes is one round of Confirmation classes or one sleep-over to clear that up. Of course, I am not suggesting that wisdom ought to submit to whims or that we forget who the adult is in the room. I am suggesting that in them, still being formed, is the full stature of the mature Christ. That must increase.

In the next months, whatever steps we take must be taken so that these young people have the best possible context for growth into the persons God would rejoice to see them become, fully known as the Beloved of God. Our rosy fabricated memories of our own youth groups, our notions of what we ought to do to fix this thing and of what a chugging youth ministry would look like, our anxious self-punishing aspirations for this congregation and our self-serving strategies for its growth—these do not matter as we seek to

discern what God is calling us to do now. What matters is asking ourselves with patient discernment how we ought to go about increasing the knowledge of God-in-Christ in them and in us.

We already know, in other words, that we want to accompany them on service projects to help others. We know we want to discuss our own understanding of Christian Scripture and Episcopal Tradition and human Reason with them. We know we want to go with them to Diocesan activities where all of us can see that we are not alone, but one single body of praise. The wonderful thing is this: when our first priority is the increase of the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, then we are all after the same thing. Adults are on the same pilgrimage as young people are, headed towards deep faith and high hope and wide love, and the most crucial is whether or not we can all reach love. The great blessing of these days is to see that we, youth and adult, are called to share our faith that the love of Christ will increase in us and are called to strive together for that. The great challenge of these days is to see that we are called to share our hope that anxiety and resentment and fixation on a single solution will decrease in us and are called to strive together, youth and adult, for that. We are all on the same journey; we are all members of one Body.

Second, let's glance at the silence of Zechariah. Perhaps you remember the story. Zachariah, John's father, was in the Temple offering incense, when the angel Gabriel arrived to announce to him the birth of a son. Zechariah was skeptical, so Gabriel told him that he would be unable to speak until the boy's birth. As we heard today, as soon as Zechariah named his son, his tongue was freed, and he praised God.

This is the crystal-clear picture of a profound spiritual truth. Our skepticism reduces us to silence. What I was saying a few moments ago

could strike many of you as at best off the mark and naive. What we need, some of you might think, is to recruit volunteers to serve on committees and to hold fund-raisers. You might be right, but I doubt we will be joyful. Skepticism about God's ability to act in us, to vivify us, to renew us, will slowly reduce us to silence about God's presence and power. Once we begin to explain away or even to withhold admitting God's transformation of us, we lose the ability to talk about it at all. This is seen in the smallest and most fragile moments. All you have to notice at first is the one extra drop of patience or persistence or compassion or forgiveness that makes it possible for you to take the next step, and at that moment, all you have to do is say "thank you." These drops, these moments, accumulate if we are not skeptical about them, but recognize them as feathers from Gabriel's wing and, when you can, bear witness to them. But be warned: as soon as we shrug them off, we have gagged our own mouth.

None of us want to seem gullible or boastful; all of us are rightly shy about spiritual matters. So guard that holy space of awareness in yourself by witnessing only to what you know is true, what you can retell as fact, what you can testify to in yourself. But remember that to opt for silence means that at the moment you need to draw water from the well in you that God was trying to fill with power and peace, you will find only a rusted out cistern, where the rattle of pebbles echo down into the dark as far as you can hear, until silence is all that is left.

We cannot afford to be skeptical when it comes to our trust that God can act among us to further ministry with your young people. We are, as I said, journeying together towards the same heavenly city. We have every reason to invest in each other and support each other and learn from each other and act as members of one Body, which always naturally aims for the

equilibrium and equipment of its entire self. We are asked to trust that no one will be left behind, because we are committed to each other, and because we hold even our young people in common as our own together. We cannot discern together into what God is calling us by skepticism and silence, but only be recalling how God has already acted, by telling each other when we have known that in our own life, and be moving forward together in faith. “In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in the darkness of the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The story of John the Baptizer is not about success. He never owned a town home, but lived on the deserted banks of the Jordan River. He was upstaged by someone he baptized—a wise-cracking carpenter from Nazareth with a healing touch. He was arrested and beheaded in Herod’s dungeons. He had every reason to be bitter and cautious, more aware of what he lacked and needed than of anything else. In other words, he had, as every one of us does, every reason to believe he needed to live from fear. But he did not. His courage and commitment, that faith and hope, is what I commend to all of us today, knowing that the Love that called us into existence longs to be the Love with which we care for each other until we know it as the Love we will be free to worship without fear, all the days of our life, as we praise the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one God, now and forever.