

The Nativity of St. John the Baptist

June 24, 2018

Isaiah 49:1-6
Acts of the Apostles 13:22-26
Luke 1:57-66, 80

On this last Sunday of June in 1993, I began my ministry here at St. Agnes Parish. Soon after I arrived, Sarah Anderson, a member of the parish, caught me by surprise. She asked me “what would be the focus of your work as the priest here at St. Agnes.” I did not think there was much leeway, I would do the usual things a priest and pastor does. When I responded to Sarah a moment or two later, I found myself speaking of the importance of preaching the scriptures. All in all, over the years, I have put more hours than I can count into homily preparation. I trust that that has been time well spent for the parish and for myself. So let me focus upon the sacred word for this feast of the Birth of John the Baptist and then I have *a brief but spectacular* take on these 25 years.

John the Baptist is a pretty significant person as we reach back into our history. Today we celebrate and ponder the individual who is the bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. His conception, his birth, his naming would not allow him to be an ordinary person. Prophets were always those unusual men and women called by God to speak the truth. They were those figures who had more understanding than others. They were given by God to help people move into a new awareness, a new understanding. Being a prophet is not what someone chooses and is not a call that a person can easily push aside. This morning we celebrate the feast of a great prophet who takes us from the old to the new.

There is an emptiness in Elizabeth and Zachariah’s life. Into this barrenness comes something new. John himself states that he is not what people think he is. Without hesitation he tells the people to look for something more. Within the first testament of the Bible, there is a wonderful rich history of God at work in our human lives. Yet, here is John who says there is some thing more, much more that will bring us into the fulness of truth. John focused upon repentance, that is, turning away from what limits, being open to what gives life. The image of John within the gospels, letting go and submitting to some one he cannot fully understand or comprehend, this is also our call as members of Christ. We submit to Christ Jesus, we submit to the truth in his gospel, that we might grow and come into the fulness God intends for us.

There was a real struggle in naming this child. Elizabeth actually names the child but the relatives and neighbors are perplexed. They are questioning why should a name be selected that is not already within the family. Finally, they turn to Zachariah and he declares emphatically, the name is John ... meaning the Lord is gracious, the Lord is compassion. All of this further emphasizes some thing new is unfolding, the hand of God is visible in this new birth. Jesus would soon appear in a difficult, violent, miserly world and John helped the people take notice. John was the help God was offering. John’s preaching was metanoia, a “transformation of the mind.” The ministry of John was to help people be ready for the One who would be the compassion, mercy, and forgiveness of God.

The work of God was to flow through John, the work of God is to flow through each one of us. Ownership is important, and this means, a willingness to participate in the work of God and to trust fully in the plan of God. We work hard as if all depends upon us, we pray hard knowing that all depends upon God. John teaches us how to be a prophetic people, a people ready to step aside that the Lord Jesus might be more visible and present in this world.

I am truly happy to have arrived at this wonderful milestone of 25 years as the priest and pastor of St. Agnes. It was not by chance that I was given this assignment. My predecessor, Fr. Bob Judge, called to tell me that he was leaving and he thought I would be good for the parish. After some thought, I did request to come to St. Agnes. I had finished my masters in Clinical Psychology and I wanted to further my studies and I knew there were many more opportunities here rather than southern West Virginia. I found myself within a small parish that supported and encouraged me. I resumed my work with the veterans and, all the while, the parish was growing. Out of a very real necessity, we began planning for a new church building and before long, we were able to erect this worship space. We built some thing unique and a beautiful place to celebrate our lives of faith.

As a priest and pastor, as a counselor and therapist, I have a privileged place in the lives of so many people. Celebrating the wonderful moments of Baptism, First Eucharist, Confirmation, and Marriage are truly a blessing that continues for me. Seeing our young folks grow and succeed, taking delight in the birth of a newly married couple's first, second, even third child, I cannot but help to be filled with gratitude. Walking the final years and days with a parishioner who is ill and struggling is difficult, but it is also a moment to witness to God's love and mercy and forgiveness. This has been a great adventure that I expect to continue for a few more years.

Thank you for this incredible opportunity to be your priest and pastor and friend!