

Nativity of John the Baptist 2018

Isaiah 49:1-6; Acts 13:22-26; Luke 1:57-66,80

We often pick a name for a baby to honor a family member or a celebrity, or because we like the way it sounds. In older times names were much more significant - they symbolized both who that person was, and what they were expected to be - and a change in name was an indication of a change of direction in life. God changes Abrams's name to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Sarai to Sarah, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul. These are indications of a change in their mission and place in the plan of God. Other times, God gives a name through an angel for the naming of a baby that has not yet been born to indicate who this child will be and what role they will play in God's plan. Some of these include Sampson, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself. For example the name Jesus means "God Saves," it is a clear indicator of what this child's mission will be (to bring the saving power of God) and also who he is (not just a person who points to how to be saved, but he will be the Savior - the one through whom God's salvation comes). In our Gospel today we have the story of the naming of John the Baptist. The important part of this story is not so much which name John was given ... but what name he was not given.

Let's take a step back in the story. A strange thing had happened to Zechariah (John's father) before the story we hear today. Zechariah was a priest ministering in the temple, when the Angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him he and his wife (both very old) were going to have a child. Unlike Mary who will get a similar visit from this angel a few months later, Zechariah doubted the angel. Although there are several examples in the Hebrew scriptures of children being born to elderly parents - and he had studied all these - he thinks he and his wife were too old to have children. He doubted the God could or would do the miracles he had heard about in the scriptures - maybe he thought that all those were stories or the action of God in times past, but that those things don't happen anymore. He is stuck in one direction in life, and unable to see the present power of God and the role in the plan of God that he was being asked to play. Zechariah is made deaf and unable to speak by God - not to punish or hurt him, but to give him time to reflect on the upon the angel's words and the prophecies before he speaks.

Today's story is John's circumcision and naming. Elizabeth gives the name the angel told Zechariah (which means "God has shown favor"). This is rejected by the others. They disregard Elizabeth, maybe they are thinking that she is trying to name him in honor of the favor shown to

her. They most likely assume he will be named after his father - a common practice that would symbolize him following in his father's footsteps. They go to Zechariah who shocks them by agreeing with his wife - Zechariah has come to understand that the favor being shown was not a favor for he and his wife - it is a favor for all humankind. John being given a name that is not a name of any of his relatives symbolizes that he will not walk in his father's footsteps, that John will not doubt God, but will speak loudly of something new. Zechariah regains his power of speech as the name is given, and he proclaims a great prayer and a prophecy concerning John that he would not have said before. He starts out with the words *Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, he has come to his people and set them free. He has raised up for us a mighty savior.* He is referring to John's cousin Jesus who will be born in a few months. The first words Zechariah speaks to his new son are: *You my child shall go before the Lord to prepare his way.*

God has shown favor by sending Jesus to be God's salvation, and this child whose name means "God has shown favor" will proclaim the favor God has shown in sending the Savior. John's name symbolizes a break from doubting the power of God, a break from thinking that the wonders of God are things in the past, a break from despair. Jesus and John both work hard to fulfill their mission, are misunderstood, and are executed. However, despite the difficulties, God's mission is accomplished, and they receive their reward. We also are tasked with a mission from God, one that may be hard. The prophecy from the first reading is about Jesus but can say something about John - and us - as well: *Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength, yet my reward is with the LORD, my recompense is with my God.*

When you are thinking that your efforts are in vain, that your strength is spent, or you doubt that God is able to work miracles today - just keep working to live out the mission given to you at your Baptismal naming, don't worry if others want to "name" you differently, and remember John the Baptist. John, like Jesus, went a different way from the doubt of those around him. John was a person born of a miracle and who fulfilled his mission to tell of the great favor we all have received in Jesus Christ. He is a sign of hope, of faith, of the great things that can be accomplished through the power of Jesus which will come to us in this Eucharist. When you feel hopeless, remember the name of Jesus and look to the Powerful One that John pointed to when he said: *Behold, one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.* If we listen in the silence of our hearts like Zechariah, maybe we will see what Zechariah came to see, and look forward as he did to the coming of the savior in our lives.