

The eighth day came to circumcise the child, and Elizabeth named him John. The crowd was surprised on many levels. First, they thought the child should bear the name of the father. The infant was the first born of Zechariah and the custom we know in our own time existed 2,000 years ago.

The greater surprise came when Zechariah spoke. Nine months earlier, he did not believe the Angel of the Lord and lost his voice as a result. The people understood that he had seen a vision and knew something mystical had happened. For nine months of silence, Zechariah had time to ponder the encounter. He agrees with his wife that “John is his name” (Lk 1:63). Then with the first chance he has to use his regained speech, he sings the praises of God. “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and brought redemption to his people” (Lk 1:67).

Interestingly, nine months ago, we were just beginning to take the coronavirus seriously. Everything came to a screeching halt. Churches closed and the priests celebrated Mass in isolation, live streaming wherever they could. Everyone spent Holy Week at home, and where possible the faithful watched from afar on the other end of an internet connection. When we were finally able to gather again in person, I recall the awe and wonder of people able to receive Jesus in Holy Communion for the first time in months. This joyful emotion is akin to the experience of Zechariah when his voice was restored.

The final surprise of the crowd is only one that they could guess at. “All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, “What, then, will this child be?” For surely the hand of the Lord was with him” (Lk 1:66). The Israelites had waited for countless generations for the coming of the Messiah and now it was unfolding before their eyes if they had the faith to recognize it.

The Prophet Malachi had promised the Lord would send a messenger to prepare the way of the Lord. “For he is like the “fuller’s lye ... Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the LORD comes ... to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Mal 1:2, 23a, 24b). When we wash clothing, we might use bleach to get tough stains out. John is like the fuller’s lye. He helps prepare people for the coming of the Lord through a cleansing from sin.

And indeed, at the River Jordan, John preaches: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Mt 3:2). The Baptist calls for “a change of heart and conduct, a turning of one’s life from rebellion to obedience towards God” (Note). John was persuasive. “And the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins... ‘I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire’” (3:5-6, 11).

In the Gospel of John, the Baptist refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God. His destiny is to offer his life on the cross as “a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). Through his passion, death and resurrection, Jesus will conquer sin and death.

To faithfully follow Jesus, we must prepare the way of the Lord. With death this often means purification through our time in purgatory. At the conception of John, Zechariah was speechless for nine months. We may encounter a similar experience at the end of our lives as we prepare to spend eternity with our loving God and the Communion of Saints.