

These come under the heading of 'this and that.' I don't mean to brag – but I finished my 14 day diet in 3 hours and 12 minutes.....I don't think I get enough credit for the fact that I do all of this unmedicated.....Billion dollar idea. A smoke detector that shuts off when you yell 'I'm just cooking!'And finally, the trouble with living alone is that it's always my turn to do the dishes and take out the trash.

OK, first what are we doing with the Feast of the BIRTH of John the Baptist on a Sunday on June 24th? Most of you probably already know that we normally celebrate the day of a saint's DEATH, rather than their birth – for it was on their day of DEATH that they were BORN into eternal life. The only other saint whose birth we celebrate is Mary. And St. Augustine taught that "because John came into this world sinless, that his birthday rather than the anniversary of his death is regarded as his general feast day." He based this on an earlier part of the passage from Luke's gospel we just heard, where in the Visitation Story, John leaps in Elizabeth's womb when Mary enters pregnant with the child Jesus. And Elizabeth proclaims: "The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby leapt in my womb for joy." Augustine taught that John recognized the presence of Christ even in the womb.

This date is 6 months and one day from the birth of Jesus on December 25th. Both of these dates are artificial creations; scholars think that Jesus was probably born in early April, but we'll deal with that at Christmas! The variance of one day underscores the perfection of Christ beyond all others, even the baptizer for whom Jesus had been mistaken (Lk 9:18-24). But this date comes soon after the longest day of the year in the northern hemisphere, the summer solstice. From this point on, we will have decreasing light. John said of his relationship to Christ: "HE must increase and I must decrease." And after the winter solstice we have the birth of the One-who-is-light, Christ, and from then on, we have INCREASING light. An Orthodox liturgical text gives us the proper perspective: "By your birth, O forerunner, the godless night has been driven away from the earth. From one end to the other the rays of divine grace shine forth because you announce the SUN which never sets." (HOMILY SERVICE, Vol 34 #3, June 2001, p. 53-54)

Second, names given by angels in the scripture always have a deep significance. The angel had announced that the name for John in Greek is YOHANAN, which means "God has given grace" to Zechariah (v. 13), but having been struck deaf and mute because of his disobedience (v. 20), Zechariah had not conveyed this information. We are probably to assume that Elizabeth herself knows the name through divine guidance. Luke provides a vivid vignette: the officious relatives taking it on themselves to name the infant after his father, Elizabeth's insistence that he be called John, the pantomimed consultation with the father, his dramatic confirmation of Elizabeth's judgment and his even more dramatic deliverance from his deaf-mute condition. In the context of Zechariah's praise of God, Luke places the beautiful canticle known as THE BENEDICTUS (vv 68-79), which is prayed every day in morning prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours, the prayer prayed by priests and religious every day of their lives. (HOMILY SERVICE, op cit., p. 59-60)

We know that Jesus' name was JOSHUA, which means "God saves." Matthew gives a different nuance saying "the child shall be called EMMANUEL, a name which means God with us." (Mt 1:23)

The two cousin's destinies will be deeply entwined, and their approaches to the world could not be more different. In Nikos Kazantzakis' intriguing book THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST, Jesus and John are in the hollow of a rock arguing all night long about what to do with the world. The Baptist's face is hard and decisive; from time to time his arms go up and down as though he were chopping wood. Maybe he is showing Jesus how to lay the axe to the root of the tree.

By contrast, the face of Jesus is calm and hesitant; His eyes are full of compassion. He asks John: "Isn't love enough?" John answers angrily: "No! The tree is rotten. God called me and gave me the axe, which I placed at the roots of the tree. I did my duty; now you do yours. Take the axe and strike!"

Jesus sighs: "If I were fire I would burn; if I were a woodcutter I would strike. But I am a heart – so I love."

We understand the frustration of the Baptist. We have often done our duty only to see it undone by our successor. We have often seen our carefully planned projects botched up by an incompetent friend. And we often feel that we are orthodox, believe correctly and do the right thing. Why can't other people – and GOD! – live up to our expectations? Why can't the world and the church be run as *I THINK they should be run?! Along with the Baptist, we anxiously ask: "Are we stuck with you, Jesus – or do we wait for someone more like what we wanted?"*

This story of John's disillusionment is ours, too. It is the story of everyone who looks for a God who does not come or who comes in a way we didn't expect. But disillusionment is not a bad thing. It is, literally, the loss of illusion about God, about the world, about our self. And although often painful, it is never a bad thing to lose the lies that we have mistaken for the truth.

Disillusioned, we discover that God does not conform to our expectations. We glimpse our own relative place in the grand cosmic scene, and we suddenly have to admit that we are puny and our contribution not nearly as grand as we like to think. We review our divine job description and are shocked that God has a different self-description.

Did God fail to come when I rubbed the lantern? Then maybe God is not a genie who comes at my beck and call. Did God fail to punish my enemies or those I judge to have done wrong? Then maybe God is not a cop. Does God not make everything run smoothly? Then maybe God is not a mechanic.

Over and over again, our disappointments can draw us deeper into the mystery of God's being and God's doing. Every time God refuses to meet our expectations, another of our idols is exposed; another curtain is drawn back so we can see the puppet we have propped up in God's place. Disillusioned, we can finally realize our human error and be graced with a bigger and fuller truth.

Blessed are those who do not let the minimal Messiah they want overshadow the majestic Messiah that the world needs. Blessed are they who name the things that God IS doing instead of the things God is not doing. Blessed are they who are not afraid to change their plans, to adjust their hopes, to bend their will to God's will. Blessed are they who trade their private illusions for God's saving truth. (adapted from PREACHING RESOURCES, December 16, 2007, p. 4)

Third, so what? John is such a unique person because he was not threatened when someone came along who shone a lot brighter. John the Baptist could have reacted entirely differently when Jesus came to be baptized. He could have ignored Jesus, put Him down, shut Him out. We've seen such things happen. But John the Baptist was a big man – big enough to be supportive of someone who might turn out to be his rival and even surpass him.

John Sculley, former head of APPLE COMPUTER tells about his first encounter with Tom Watson, the man who made IBM into one of the world's great corporations. Sculley left PEPSI COLA to take the presidency of APPLE. It was not an easy transition. During a time of tremendous pressure Sculley received an invitation from Watson to come to Watson's home. During the weekend, Sculley was most impressed by Watson on

many levels, but particularly by his modesty and by how genuinely interested he was in APPLE. Watson seemed confident that Sculley could turn APPLE back around and get over their problems. He told him: "As long as APPLE continues to innovate and hold together the things it believes in, it will pull through." Sculley said it was the word of encouragement he needed coming from a man he greatly admired. This is the man who headed IBM encouraging the head of APPLE, their biggest competitor!

It takes a remarkable man or woman to offer encouragement and support to a potential rival. Could we do that? Could we offer that word of encouragement to that new kid at school or that new member of our team at work or that new member of this church or the new associate pastor at St. Andrew's who might one day shine a little brighter than us?

We can if we are a person of faith. For our faith tells us two things that can help us in such a situation. FIRST OF ALL, OUR FAITH TELLS US THAT EACH OF US IS A PERSON OF SIGNIFICANT WORTH. We don't have to prove anything to anybody. We are already special people, because we are made in the image and likeness of God. We are so important that the Son of God gave His life on our behalf. That is the first thing our faith says to us. AND SECONDLY, OUR FAITH TELLS US THAT GOD IS A GOD OF ABUNDANCE. IF WE DO OUR BEST, THERE IS PLENTY OF GLORY TO GO AROUND.

It all comes down to whether or not we believe this or not. Author Stephen Covey uses the terms 'an abundance mentality or a scarcity mentality.' People with a scarcity mentality see life as a finite pie: if someone gets a big piece of the pie, it means less for me. People with a scarcity mentality have a hard time sharing anything -- recognition, credit, power, or profit. They also have a tough time being genuinely happy for the success of others -- even, and sometimes especially, members of their own family or close friends and associates. How often have we seen family members close ranks against someone who has made it big time financially. Whether it was luck or hard work -- or more likely a combination of both -- if we are healthy we rejoice in it. But it's almost as if something were being taken from them when someone else receives special recognition or success. We recognize people with a scarcity mentality by the disparaging remarks they make following someone else's success. It's a sad situation when other people's happiness somehow diminishes our own -- but that's the scarcity mentality. It's being played out big time in our politics today -- our harsh treatment of immigrants is all about our fear that there won't be enough to go around. Funny how quickly we seem to forget that about 99% of us in this church come from immigrant stock, unless we are Native Americans, and almost all of our ancestors were illegal. WOP -- means WITHOUT PAPERS. That's the way most came through Ellis Island.

The abundance mentality says that there is enough glory, enough credit, enough honor and resources for everybody -- that our God is a God of abundance, not of scarcity. Just open the book of Genesis to the story of Cain and Abel. God had regard for Abel's offering but not for Cain's. Cain was furious. Do we remember God's words to Cain? God asked Cain why he was so angry and then God asked, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (Gen 4:7)

That's God's word to us: If we do well, we will be accepted. You and I are not in competition with anyone else. The only competition going on is within our own hearts. It is the competition between darkness and light, anger and joy, envy and love. So we need to keep rereading the story of John the Baptist. Even though he had a very special place in the plan of God, he could not be sure who Jesus was. He was walking by faith even as we are. In prison, John sent a message to Jesus asking if He indeed was the One they had been awaiting. The point is that even though he was uncertain about Jesus, John was able to rise above any threat he may have felt to his own ministry. He was able to offer encouragement and support to one more talented

than he. That is why Jesus would later say about John: “There has never been a greater man than John the Baptist.” (Mt 11:11)

It takes a very mature person to rise above the threat of a person more talented, more gifted, more wealthy, more attractive. John the Baptist is worthy of a lot of reflection. We are all special children of God. Relax. Live in the light of the love of an abundant God and do not be afraid to share that love with anyone – even the person who may one day be our rival. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, January 1996, p. 16-18)
Let the Church say AMEN.

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