

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

cf. Luke 1:76

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

You, child, will be called prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Luke 1:57-66, 80; L587

When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son.

Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her.

When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said in reply, "No. He will be called John."

But they answered her,

"There is no one among your relatives who has this name."

So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called.

He asked for a tablet and wrote, "John is his name," and all were amazed.

Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God.

Then fear came upon all their neighbors,

and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea.

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.

The child grew and became strong in spirit,

and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel.

Reflecting on the Gospel

Families can be powerful indicators of paths we take in life. Children born into a family of those dedicated to public service often grow up to be public servants themselves. Those who teach for a living often have children in the teaching professions. And how many police officers and firefighters have come from families of the same. It's too simplistic to say we follow in our parents' footsteps, but it can also be challenging (but not impossible) for us to blaze new trails or to do something completely different. Our environment, especially our family environment, shapes who we are and who we become.



Luke is the sole voice in the New Testament telling us about the familial relationship between Elizabeth and Mary, making Jesus and John the Baptist cousins. Should we be surprised that each child was a charismatic preacher, attracting crowds, challenging religious and political leaders, and paying the ultimate price for their actions? What kind of relationship did Mary and Elizabeth have? What were their conversations to have resulted in the raising of two such sons? How did they act with one another and with their children? Perhaps surprisingly, we don't hear much

about either Zechariah or Joseph. Luke tells us more about the women, and this might be a nod to the influence mothers have in our lives, and therefore in the lives of Jesus and John.

As Luke tells the story, Elizabeth was three months pregnant when Mary received the news that she would bear a son. Liturgically speaking, this feast is thus three months later than the annunciation (March 25) or six months prior to Christmas. The newborn John is a herald of the Messiah, even by his very birth. Like the marvelous conception and birth of Jesus, John too has something marvelous surrounding his conception and birth. Like the forebears in faith, Zechariah and Elizabeth are too old to have children. But God has other plans.

Today we consider the role of family in our own upbringing and that of John and his cousin Jesus. It has been said that the family is the domestic church. It is there that children first learn the faith, first learn what is important, what is a priority. And actions certainly speak more loudly than words. How our family acts indicates its priorities. A nourishing faith life, which is so important for so many in finding meaning in daily life, is often nurtured first in the family. May our families be places of safety, nourishment, love, care, and faith.

Living the Paschal Mystery

The natural cycle of life involves both birth and death. Moments of joy, love, hope, and sheer happiness accompany the birth of a child. We wonder what she will do, what choices she will make, what her personality will be, etc. This entire future life is pure potential and opportunity in a newborn. And at the conclusion of one's life, we reflect back on what this person has become, the

relationships and choices that made him who he was. We often look to the children and grandchildren, if the person was so blessed, and are in some ways comforted to know that something of the deceased lives on in his posterity.

Churches are often the points at which these significant life moments are ritualized, like baptism, marriage, or a funeral. Our faith can be nourished by such events, but also by the daily activities of life.

For Elizabeth and Mary, too, their faith was nourished by the joys of a newborn with all the hope and promise that brought. On this day we recognize how fundamentally human our relationship with God is. Through the sacred event of a birth, which we know ultimately leads to death, hope springs eternal and we live again the paschal mystery.

Focusing the Gospel

Luke 1:57-66, 80

When their son is born, Zechariah is asked what he wishes to name his newborn. Zechariah writes on a tablet, “John is his name.” Zechariah now understands what God has asked him and Elizabeth to do and resolves to accept that role. Zechariah’s speech returns and his first words are a beautiful canticle praising God’s goodness and prophesying the wonderful things that his son John would accomplish (the *Benedictus* hymn, which is omitted from today’s reading).

Throughout Luke’s gospel, the Holy Spirit is the agent of transformation and change—God is both the story and the storyteller. Through the grace of the Spirit, John goes on to realize his role in the story: to prepare a “highway” for the Lord’s coming and to point out his presence in our midst.

Focusing the First Reading

Isa 49:1-6

This is the second of the four “servant oracles” in Isaiah. It is not clear whether the prophet is speaking about the Emmanuel figure he envisions or the prophet himself. Many of the images in this reading mirror the gospel accounts of John and his preaching and baptizing at the Jordan.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Ps 139:1-3, 13-14, 14-15 (14a)

The verses of this iconic psalm celebrate the delicate care with which God creates the human body and profound and intimate relationship between God and his faithful, from the moment of an individual’s conception through his or her journey through time. This image of God’s “knowing” us “in [our] mother’s womb” is a central theme in the readings for this solemnity of the birth of John the Baptist.

Focusing the Second Reading

Acts 13:22-26

Today’s second reading is Paul’s first address to the people of Antioch, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul begins his discourse on Jesus with John the Baptist, who heralded Jesus’ coming with his preaching of a “baptism of repentance.”

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

When have you discovered God at work in your life, despite your initial doubts?

When has some unexpected joy left you without words to express gratitude, or when has a moment of sadness or grief left you speechless? In hindsight, what would you have liked to say?

What do you hear God saying to you in the depths of your heart that you try to suppress or ignore?

When was the last time you reacted to a set of circumstances in your life with the doubt of Zechariah, but were eventually able to cope with the situation with the optimism of Elizabeth?