

First Impressions NATIVITY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST
Isaiah 49: 1-6 Psalm 139 Acts 13: 22-26 Luke 1: 57-66,80
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Something is unusual about this feast: usually we celebrate the feasts of saints on the date of their deaths or the date of an important event in their lives. But today we recognize John's birth. In the liturgical year there are only two saints whose births we celebrate, Mary and John's. These two saints were key figures in Jesus' life and mission.

Ultimately the reason we have such great saints to honor is because God has done a great thing in their lives and they and we are the recipients. John is the last of the prophets of the former dispensation and through his preaching he ushers in the new age. His feast gives us a chance to honor all the great prophets who preceded him and who, like John, were signs of God's concern and care over the people of the covenant. So, it is not just John we praise today, it is both God's predilection for us and determination to enable our faithful response to God's call.

The bible shows us that it is God who chooses prophets, no one takes on the role for themselves. Indeed, as our readings show today, in the case of Isaiah and John, God chose them before their birth and named them for their future preaching role. As we meditate on these two prophets we have an opportunity to consider our own vocations as proclaimers of God's Word in our deeds and words. Through our baptism and the gift of the Spirit, God has also set us apart and called us to unique prophetic roles in our family, church and world. God continues to do for our generation what God did in Isaiah and John's times—call and set us apart to be, as Isaiah puts it, a light to the nations.

The Isaiah reading is the second of four "servant songs," it appears in the section of Isaiah called Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40-55). Today's passage was addressed to the Israelites in exile in Babylon (6th century BCE). The author is speaking not just to one person but to the nation, to encourage Israel to think of herself as God's servant. From the beginning God has chosen this people starting from its enslavement in Egypt and throughout its desert wanderings---especially at Mount Sinai, where God entered into covenant with them. God was to be their God and they God's people. They found themselves in Babylonian captivity because they

did not live up to their part of the covenant. They turned to other gods and because of their misdeeds and unfaithfulness they suffered exile.

Isaiah, speaking to this new generation of exiles, is assuring them that God would not abandon them. Israel, God's servant is in no condition to do anything for God. Theirs is a cruel situation, they are suffering as slaves in a foreign land. From all visible and measurable signs their condition is hopeless. But theirs is no puny God. The One who first called them into existence, who created a nation from nothing, is now creating again. And more. Just as God first called them out of Egypt, God will perform a second exodus for them. There is a subtle dialogue going on here: God speaks, but the servant looks at the present miserable conditions and says, "I thought I had toiled in vain and for nothing uselessly spent my strength."

The servant Israel is looking to what is past tense. But God has new plans and the servant is waking up to them, "...yet my reward is with the Lord, my recompense is with my God." The past is over, God is doing a new thing, "For NOW the Lord has spoken..." "My God is NOW my strength." We might wallow in the past and see no way out in the present. But notice how active God is in this reading. All the action verbs belong to God, while the passive verbs are the peoples', they are on the receiving end of God's creative activity. "The Lord called...made of me a sharp-edged sword...concealed me... made me a polished arrow." God has offered us many favors in the past and we may have missed them. God has called us to be God's faithful witnesses in the world and we may have either ignored the call or answered only half-heartedly. We have, like Israel, gone off into one exile or another because of our blindness and deafness. We live half lives overwhelmed by work; the allure of the malls; the enticing television shows with their unreal "reality" programs; the violence, suffering and deceit of war, etc.

The servant is at first hesitant, even resistant, pleading exhaustion in the face of God's call. Who knows what the cost of response will be? Prophets don't fare very well in either testament. We too are asked to be "a light to the nations." What will be asked of us to be such witnesses in the world? That's a legitimate question, but there is a prior one: how will God's empowering call make a difference in our lives? What will God's Word enable us to do? We are at Eucharist and we hear a call that was once made to a dilapidated people over 1,500 years ago. But "NOW" is the key word for us, as it was for Isaiah. NOW God is

choosing us again. NOW a new creation is happening. NOW God is forming the church and each of us who are a part of it, to witness “to the nations.” NOW we are being made faithful servants. On our own? No, this is not a gymnasium where we perform physical exercises to strengthen body and spirit to serve God. We are gathered instead in church to celebrate and remember that just as God called Isaiah, John the Baptist, the great prophets and Israel herself. God has called us through our baptismal birth to proclaim with all of our lives the God who: notices a defeated people; creates a new people out of nothing and sends us out again, this week, to witness to the world. Just as God is calling all Israel to faithful servanthood, so God is calling all Christians to be witnesses to our belief in Jesus Christ. The Word and eucharistic meal will strengthen us for this task.

Our local newspaper (Raleigh’s “News and Observer,” June 5, 2007) has an article today on the names parents give their children. Some celebrities have given their children very odd names like Apple, Kal-el and Moxie Crime Fighter. Most have chosen more traditional names. In recent years new names have become popular. But the most popular boys’ names for 2006 are familiar: Jacob, Michael, Joshua and Ethan. For girls, the most popular were: Emily, Emma, Madison and Isabella. In our family a niece is expecting and, as usual, we are all making suggestions. When it comes right down to it though, my niece and her husband will make the final decision, they are the parents. They are in charge.

It wasn’t so different in biblical times. Parents named their children. From today’s gospel it seems that boys were named at their circumcision, when the male child became a member of the people of God. The reading also suggests that the rest of the family and neighbors has some suggestions to make. This inclusion of others in the naming process suggests that the child was not only born into a family, but into a community as well. The name that is chosen, John, surprises everyone but his parents. Through the angel, God has named this child, for God has big plans for him. John (the name means “God has shown favor”) like the servant in Isaiah, has been called by God, “from my mother’s womb.” This future prophet and herald of the Christ is under God’s rule and purpose. God is making the important decisions. His name befits a servant of God who will announce Jesus’ coming, Jesus, who will declare a “year of favor from the Lord” (4:19).

John, like the prophets who preceded him, is set apart for God’s service. God has chosen him because God is concerned about us humans. We too are specially

chosen. Have you even looked up the meaning of your name? Some of our names are quite significant and challenging: Albert means admirable, noble; Jason means healer; Joseph, “God will give more.” Mary/Miriam means, “Wished for”; Sophie is “knowledge” or “wisdom”; and Dorothea means “God’s gift.” Not all our names have such noble meanings. But all of us who are baptized and gathered at Eucharist are named “Christian.” It is our identity and our call; we are to be other Christ’s in the world. It’s a hostile and often indifferent world, so if we are to live up to our name as Christians we will need what God gives us at this Eucharist, the life-giving Spirit of Jesus.

QUOTABLE

**Even after all this time
The sun never says to the earth,**

"You owe me."

**Look what happens
with a love like that,
It lights the whole sky.**

-Hafiz

JUSTICE NOTES

“To us this word of salvation has been sent”.

(Acts 12:26)

Prophets are people who see clearly and speak honestly, calling others to live life with integrity and passion. “Our Christian faith and Biblical tradition extend an extraordinary invitation to each of us to become agents of God’s compassion and healing in a wounded world. The Good News announced by Jesus, (and heralded by Saint John the Baptist, whose feast we celebrate today), is both a comfort and a promise for the poor and, at the same time, a call to those of us who are not poor to be linked with God’s vision of justice and reconciliation. The Church’s history shines with examples of the courage and commitment of those who dedicated themselves to the needs of their most desperate sisters and brothers.”

“JustFaith Ministries strives to provide faith formation processes and resources that emphasize the Gospel message of peace and justice, Catholic social teaching and the intersection of spirituality and action.”

“The aim of JustFaith Ministries is to enable people of faith to develop a passion for justice and to express this passion in concrete acts of social ministry”

“JustFaith is a thirty-week justice formation process with a focus on poverty. Meeting weekly, groups employ books, videos, lecture, discussion, prayer, retreats and hands-on experiences. The intent is to provide a tapestry of learning opportunities that emphasize and enliven the remarkable justice tradition of the Church”.

“Participants are exposed to not only a substantive and demanding course of study but are also afforded the privilege of becoming community with other participants and sharing a journey of faith and compassion that is both life-giving and challenging.” (www.justfaith.org)

What Can I do?

Pray for those who are considering making the JustFaith “journey” this year. Ask God to help them be open to God with peace and courage.

Consider whether God is inviting you to make the **JustFaith** journey. If there is no JustFaith formation process in your parish, suggest one be started

----- (Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

----- ("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you

to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Christopher Roseboro #0352024 (On death row since 8/29/97)

Roger Blakeney #0033802 (9/10/97)

Marcos Mitchell #0488288 (11/4/97)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A."** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org
5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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