

Reflection

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“John is his name.”

This is the clear affirmation of Zacharias regarding what his son’s name is to be. Of course, Elizabeth had already said, no, he is not to be named Zacharias, “He will be called John.” That pretty much finished the discussion ... but the word of Zacharias was needed. When he wrote the name John, Zacharias was no longer mute, as he had been since he expressed doubt in the temple.

After Zacharias recovered the gift of speech, his hearers began to remember what had happened before. Now their question was more profound: “What, then, will this child be?”

Mary and Elizabeth knew a bit more than the rest. We are told in the account of the visitation that Mary’s arrival caused Elizabeth’s unborn son to “leap” within her. They were cousins to some degree, but we don’t know to what extent their sons knew one another in their youth. John was six months older than Jesus and did not live in the same place.

Later, when John was preaching and baptizing at the Jordan, Jesus came to be baptized by John. John objected but did baptize Jesus and witnessed the theophany testifying to Jesus’ identity.

Later, when John was in prison – Herod could not deal with John’s criticism of his immoral life – he sent disciples to question Jesus. The question is clear: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” Jesus’ mode of responding expresses trust in John’s ability to understand. He doesn’t refer to the manifestation of his glory, which John had seen. Rather he says: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.”

John’s Gospel portrays John the Baptist even more clearly as the precursor, the one who seeks to prepare the way for the Messiah. When asked, John insisted, “I am not he. I am the voice of one crying in the desert, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

The Gospel text we read today is obviously about the birth of John, but reflection takes us to the mission for which he came into the world – six months before his cousin Jesus. It is the message many of us brought to children, teaching them about the One who was coming.

How can I prepare the way of the Lord in myself?

How might I help someone else prepare, in these unusual circumstances?

How can I realize John’s challenge: “He must increase; I must decrease?”