

Nativity of St. John the Baptist

I haven't seen one of these first hand, but I've heard tell that the newest thing in the greeting card business is the "half-birthday" card. It's a card you give to someone on the day they become half a year older than they were on their last birthday.

I don't fault any of you for not remembering my 12half-birthday on June 13th. I didn't even remember it myself!

The birthday of St. John the Baptist is set up in the church's calendar to take place exactly six months before the birthday of Jesus. And there's a lot of symbolism in that date.

St. Luke has carefully put together the story of St. John the Baptist's annunciation and birth to demonstrate that John is the doorway between the old and the new.

St. Luke records comparable details about the births of John and Jesus, with Jesus being the greater and John being the lesser. John's birthday is celebrated at that time of year when the amount of daylight begins to decrease.

Jesus' birth is celebrated when the amount of daylight begins to increase. John, the highpoint of Israel's prophetic tradition, gives way to Jesus, whose primary function is not only to speak for God, but to initiate us into the life of the Holy Trinity.

Nativity of St. John the Baptist

The circumstances Luke presents about John's birth symbolically indicate that God's ancient promises are being fulfilled and something radically new is beginning.

From the Christian vantage point, Elizabeth and Zechariah are the end of the old, the final chapter that began with Abraham and Sarah.

But Elizabeth already begins the celebration of that new thing God is doing by proclaiming Mary as the mother of the savior and taking the lead role in celebrating the Good News.

Zechariah, because of his unwillingness to believe the angel's message, has to go to the sidelines, mute, until he can affirm Elizabeth's statement that the baby will be named John.

When he recovers his speech, he breaks out into praise of God and announces that his little child will be called prophet of the Most High, and will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, spreading the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins.

The story ends with a question that runs through the first half of the Gospel: What will this child be?

That question persists as a larger question about what God is doing among us at any moment. It's a challenging question to answer.

For one, we have to believe that God is doing something. It's easier, actually, to believe in a God

Nativity of St. John the Baptist

who is not currently active, but there to put things right at the end of time. That leaves us with a lot of room to operate and hope for the best.

But if God is actively involved, and we profess to be followers of His Son, then we have to be about the task of paying attention and trying to read the signs of the times in the light of His Spirit. Only then can we cooperate and make real our prayer to the Father that “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

It’s interesting that John the Baptist is one of a few figures from the Christian Scriptures whom we call saints even though they were not, strictly speaking, followers of Jesus.

John heralded wonder and mystery. He called his people to prepare their lives and hearts for what was to come, but he couldn’t proclaim a mystery that was yet to be revealed.

John may be just the saint we need for our times. While we know the Christ he could only hope for, we, too, live in a time when many aspects of our world are changing or ending.

The most we know about the future is that we cannot imagine it. And yet, John knew God to be faithful to the promises He had made. John knew it was not about him—he had to decrease so that the Lord could increase.

So it is with us. As we move forward into God’s

Nativity of St. John the Baptist

future we are called upon to give up our petty projects and must become more and more attentive to what God is doing. And in discovering that, to invest in it. It really isn't about us. It's about God and God's desire that the world be saved.

John the Baptist gave himself over to God's great plan of salvation. He had a role to play in it. May God show us our role, too, and may we embrace it!

Nativity of St. John the Baptist