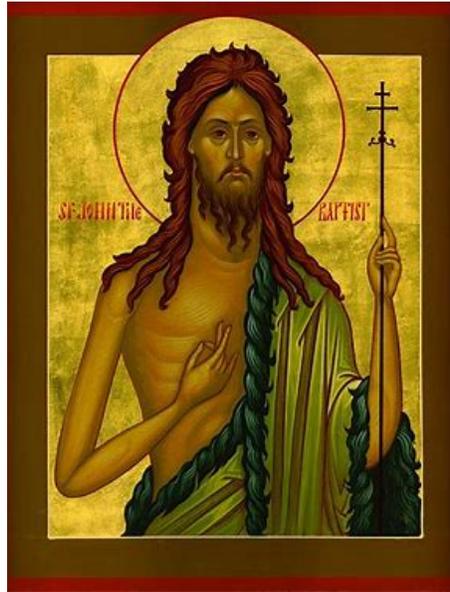


Solemnity of the Nativity of John the Baptist 2020

Parish of Holy Cross – St. John the Baptist
Midtown Manhattan



What manner of child shall this be?

His name shall be John.¹ The Baptist. John.

Extraordinary, yet elusive. Decisive, though familiar with doubt. Fiery prophet. Witness to the *light that was coming into the world.*² A voice crying out in the desert. Baptizer. [Our Patron.](#)

On June 24th, 2020, our parish of *Holy Cross – St. John the Baptist* celebrates one of our two patronal feasts. This represents 180 years of life and mission in the Roman Catholic tradition, as the first eucharist at St. John the Baptist church was celebrated on the 28th of June in the year 1840. A multi-generational witness in the heart of Manhattan to *the light coming into the world.*

John's birth arrived as a jolt. Elizabeth and Zechariah, advanced in years, far beyond childbearing days. A pregnancy that struck Zechariah speechless. The child given a name with no precedent in the family tradition – a signal of his belonging to a dominion far beyond any human authority, even the authority of an honored priest. A puzzle and provocation among his own people: *what manner of child shall this be?*³

First century Palestine. A churning time and place, most especially for those who lived in observance of the covenant of Moses. The crucial dilemma? Roman occupation.

¹ [Gospel of Luke 1:59-64](#)

² [Gospel of John 1:9](#)

³ [Gospel of Luke 1:57-66](#)

The holy memory that had made them a people was that of being set free from the grip of a foreign ruler – Pharaoh in ancient Egypt. Freed from his yoke, slaves made their way through an unforgiving desert, until they arrived in a place of forgiveness. And freedom. A life shared in divine love and justice. But now, they found that holy memory daily mocked by the grip of a different foreign ruler. Caesar. His army seizing their streets. His tax ransacking their purse.

This was not the first time they found themselves thus subjugated. In the 8th century prior to the births of John and Jesus, the time of Isaiah the prophet, they were overrun by the Assyrians. In the 6th century prior, the Babylonian exile, the time of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In the 4th, the empire of Alexander the Great reigned supreme. Now the Romans. Crisis of faith.

Does G-D keep promises? The agonizing question of faith under duress in that time. In anytime.

In 1st century Palestine, any number of competing answers were on offer as to how one might keep faith in the face of freedom denied. The *Sadducees* worked out a compromise with the palace such that the Temple might provide a modicum of freedom for faithful members of Judaism. The *Pharisees* elaborated intricate practices affording some measure of freedom in the sanctity of one's heart. The *zealots* – loosely aligned and highly disaffected – declared the only faithful response to be that of armed insurrection. Conversely, the *Essenes* fled off into the desert to live an intensely observant life until the Messiah arrived, who then surely would lead them to military victory – seizing back their land by righteous conquest.

Each of these groups shared at least one thing in common: The other guy had it wrong! Such was the Judaism of the day. A rollicking conversation. Become a debate. Occasionally, a fistfight. While Jesus of Nazareth was observant enough to appear in the temple (*sadducee*) and sufficiently fluent with the scriptures to enter the debates of the *pharisees*; while he regarded the intensity of the *zealots*, including a zealot among his apostles⁴ (shorn, of course, of sword, shield and savagery), to none of these did he extend his unstinting loyalty or unqualified assent.

Rather, all four of our canonical gospels report that it was the voice of [John the Baptizer](#) that lured him. The Baptizer's urgent message of a new power breaking into the world, the reign of G-D refashioning humanity at its heart. The call to repent of earthly power. Accept G-D's reign.

[John's baptism](#) was profound and perilous. John drew men and women into the *desert*. Leading them from one bank *through waters of the Jordan* to the other bank. A symbolic ritual reviving their holy memory. *Passover*. Shackles of the slave shed. Freedom in G-D's power. Life.

What manner of child shall this be?

Surely, such a dramatic, subversive ritual would not escape the notice of ruling power. So it is that John did, indeed, suffer severe scrutiny. The prophet had been publicly criticizing Herod Antipas for divorcing his first wife, the daughter of the Nabatean king, Aretas IV, in order to marry Herodias, the wife of his brother Herod Philip I.⁵ Publicly shamed, the Nabatean king massed troops on Herod's border, eventually inflicting stinging defeat upon besieged Antipas.

While Antipas wanted to kill the Baptizer, he feared the people, who revered John as a prophet, and chose to imprison him instead. It was from that prison that John utters his agonizing

⁴ Simon, the Zealot. *Gospel of Matthew* 10:4

⁵ *Gospel of Matthew* 14:1-5; *Josephus Antiquities* 18.5.1

question: *Are you the One, or do we look for another?*⁶ Does G-D keep promises? Decisive. Doubt. Is there anyone among us unfamiliar with the experience? Was I mistaken? Trust misplaced?

Herod would move to squelch the voice of the Baptizer. With casual cruelty. Beheading. But it is precisely the silencing of the Baptizer that provokes Jesus into discovery of *his* voice. *Repent. The kingdom of G-D is at hand.*⁷ John's witness to the *light that was coming into the world* complete.

Jesus' life, message, mission, crucifixion and resurrection are the *light* to which John witnessed in *his* life and death. G-D's reign – unmasking earthly powers reliant upon death and threat of death. Unmasking forces that seek to enslave, rather than enliven. Revealing G-D's reign.

In its advancing history, St. John the Baptist parish – now *Holy Cross – St. John the Baptist parish* – has shared in the Baptizer's vocation of testifying to *the light coming into the world*. 19th century German immigrants were instrumental in its beginnings and construction. At the turn of the 20th century, with the construction of Penn Station, a good many were dislodged. In their stead, railroad workers at first, then swarms of commuters flocked to the church for its rich prayer life.

The social, cultural dislocations of the 1960's and 1970's brought forth reshaped ministry deeply steeped in social outreach, social justice. The *Bread of Life* food pantry begun. A multicultural gathering emerging: American, Caribbean, Spanish, Filipino. Colorful devotions. In the dead of night – vigils. In the light of day – divine mercy. Festive celebrations of Padre Pio and Our Mother of Perpetual Help. And throughout its entire history, generous provision of the sacramental celebration of Reconciliation and Penance – *repenting of earthly powers*.

Our parish development as a *witness to the light coming into the world* continues apace – a mere five years into the project of merging, along with the parish of Holy Cross, into one vivacious community of faith. Dared to expand. Yet again. Growing into an even wider gathering of Catholic life and witness in midtown Manhattan. Beckoning not only commuters from the bowels of Penn Station, but those emerging from the halls of Port Authority. Feeding the hungry in the vicinity of 42nd street as well as 30th street – *Bread of Life Food Pantry, Crossroads Food Pantry, Harvesters Soup Kitchen*. Faithfully gathering in the Sunday Assembly at both of our worship sites for the Eucharistic celebration that transforms us into the Body of Christ.

Christ in the City.

Whatever challenges lie ahead – surely there will be many – our mission remains the same. To show forth [*Christ in the City through our worship, our witness, our welcome*](#). In the year 2020, amid the 3-fold torment of pandemic, racial tensions and financial distress, we witness to the triune G-D revealed in Jesus of Nazareth and witnessed to by [*John, the Baptizer*](#).

Father. Son. Holy Spirit. Source of our hope and our strength. Our origins. Our destiny.

On this feast of John, the Baptist, we offer thanks. For 180 years of Catholic life and witness in our parish. Generation after generation witnessing to the *light coming into the world* amid the distinctive challenges of their time and place. May we so witness in the days ahead given us.

What manner of child shall this be? What manner of people shall we be? Christ in the City.

⁶ Gospel of Matthew 11:3

⁷ [Gospel of Mark: 1:14-15](#).