

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Nativity, or Birth, of St. John the Baptist. All of us are familiar with the story of his birth. Zechariah and Elizabeth were older but had had no children because Elizabeth was sterile. One day when Zechariah, a priest, was ministering in the temple, the Angel Gabriel appeared to him and announced that he and Elizabeth were going to have a child. Because Zechariah doubted, he was unable to speak until John's birth.

When we hear the story of John's birth, we have to remember that the Old Testament was filled with stories of miraculous births. Most of these were to women who were overage or sterile. Each of these births was significant for two reasons.

First, each of these births was a sign of God's presence and power in human history. Each was also a sign of God's favor both to the family and to the community of Israel. As we heard in today's Gospel, Elizabeth's *"neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her."*

The second reason each of these births was significant was that each of the children born had a special vocation or calling from God. John the Baptist played a unique role in salvation history. We might say that he was the last prophet of the Old Testament and the first prophet of the New Testament. Therefore, he was the bridge or the link between the two testaments, the two covenants.

More importantly, John was the Precursor of Jesus. The word *precursor* comes from the Latin word *praecurere*, which literally means *to run before*. In other words, he was literally the "forerunner of Jesus." John both announced the arrival of the Messiah and baptized Jesus.

However, from the beginning, John the Baptist was very clear that he was not the Messiah. Referring to Jesus, John said, *"He must increase; I must decrease"* [Jn. 3:30]. The Church's calendar is interesting. On June 24, we celebrate the Birth of John the Baptist, and six months later we celebrate the Birth of Jesus. Citing this verse from John's Gospel, Saint Augustine found today, a day so close to the summer solstice, an appropriate day to celebrate John's birth. Daylight will now start decreasing. After Jesus' birth so close to the winter solstice, daylight will increase. John said, *"He must increase; I must decrease."*

My brothers and sisters, today's feast suggests two truths. Picture, for a moment, a newborn baby. I would suggest that every birth is a miracle and that every newborn baby is a sign of God's presence, power, and favor. I would also suggest that this helps explain the Church's commitment to protecting all human life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. As long as a person lives, that person is a miracle of God's love.

The miracle of the birth of John the Baptist and the miracle of our own births remind us that we each have a unique vocation from God, a unique part to play in God's plan of salvation that no one else can play. Each of us is called to make a difference in the world. Every person whose life we touch, every person whose life intersects with ours, will have been affected by us for better or for worse.

In 2006 a man a few years younger than I was on the brink of death. After his near death experience, his whole perspective on life changed. He started asking himself what God wanted him to do with the rest of his life. We might ask ourselves the same question. Instead of asking what we want to do with the rest of our lives, perhaps we should be continually asking ourselves what God wants us to do with the rest of our lives. What is God's plan for us? What difference does God want us to make in our world today?