

Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – June 24, 2018
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Birthdays help us to put things in perspective. When we're young, a birthday is usually one more step into a future that seems so wonderful. I can't wait to get older so I can ride a bike, start school, drive a car, leave for college, get a job. Eventually, of course, as the birthdays pile up and those milestones of life are achieved, we begin looking less at the future and more toward the past. You know, though I remember whining that I was bored, having three months off in the summer wasn't such a bad thing after all. Yes, when we celebrate a birthday, we are usually either looking ahead to the future or remembering the past – so much so, that at times we forget to celebrate the present.

We put aside the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time this year to celebrate the Birthday, the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. John is one of those figures who cause us to look both ways. Though he appears at the beginning of the New Testament, John the Baptist is really the last prophet of the Old Testament. He helps God's chosen people, helps us to draw to a close salvation history and to open our eyes to salvation in the flesh, to the incarnate Son of God. John follows in the tradition of Moses and Samuel and Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah. He brings us a prophetic message from the living God. But John also points us to the future. He is the great "forerunner of the morn," as we sang in our opening hymn. It was John who first invited us to "Behold, the Lamb of God," John who, even in the womb, recognizes Jesus as the eternal Son of God. Yes, John stands on the shoulders of the great prophets of the past. He points us to the bright future offered in Jesus Christ – but John's true ministry was in the present. His conception brought surprise and joy to Elizabeth and Zechariah. In his encounter with the angel in the Holy of Holies, Zechariah truly felt the grace of God present and active in his life. And when he began to speak after John's birth, the community gathered around Elizabeth and Zechariah were astonished at all that was taking place in their midst. Yes, John is a figure of the past who points us to the future, but even his message was primarily directed at the present. He called Israel to repentance, to prepare the way of the Lord – not in the past or in the future, but in the here and now. Now is time to be baptized. Now is the time to turn your lives around and to listen to the voice of the Lord.

All of us, from time to time, are caught between the past and the future. We spend time looking backward – usually wearing rose-colored glasses. In the past, our memories tell us, things were so much better – life was simpler, we had more time, more energy, more money. And when we are not looking backward, we are looking to the future – waiting for something to occur. I'll get around to cleaning

my house when I have company coming. Of course, I haven't invited anyone into my home since the Reagan administration, but I'll get around to cleaning some day. Too often we are waiting for something to occur in the future to spur us into action. And if that anticipated event never happens – well, I guess I'll just sit here and remember the good old days. We are, it would seem, caught between the past and the future – and, if we are not careful, we run the risk of missing God who always encounters us in the present.

The temptation to live in the past or in the future can be particularly appealing when we are celebrating important events – baptisms, weddings, funerals, even class reunions. While it is natural to remember and share a laugh over the good times, some of us mistakenly believe that the God who was present and active in the past has somehow abandoned us in the present. Oh, we used to have such fun doing this or that – you fill in the blank. Things just aren't the same now, kids don't even write in cursive anymore. When John the Baptist stopped being the toddler running around the house and began wandering out into the desert wearing camel's hair and eating honey and wild locusts, we can imagine that Elizabeth and Zechariah spent some time remembering their son before he seemed to lose touch with reality. Of course, John was being led by the Holy Spirit, his time in the desert accomplished the divine will – but it is easy to imagine that his parents and their neighbors were probably unconvinced. It is also easy to imagine that many of those attracted to John for his message of change, of hope were also turned off by his call to repentance. I'm here for the good times, I'm here to be entertained – I'm not here to work. I want everyone else to change – they're the problem, not me.

Brothers and sisters, please don't spend too much time looking backward. Remember the people who touched your lives, the events that shaped you, the love that you encountered in Jesus Christ forty or fifty years ago. But the past cannot sustain you. And don't just look to the future, putting your life on hold until something else happens. If that event doesn't happen, you will have wasted your life. If celebrating the Nativity of St. John the Baptist reminds us of anything, it should remind us to live in the present. Elizabeth could have been stuck lamenting her inability to bear children rather than being open to the blessing of a child. Zechariah could have dismissed the will of God and stubbornly named his son Zechariah, Jr. John could have heard the stories of his miraculous birth and thought so highly of himself that he closed his ears to the Holy Spirit. Yes, Elizabeth and Zechariah and John encountered God in the present. The great call of John the Baptist – Prepare the way of the Lord – began in the past and reaches its fulfillment in the future, but the work takes place in the present. Open your eyes and recognize the presence of God in your midst.