**Homily** **for the Solemnity of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist** *Rev. Francis D. Kim*

        The observance and celebration of the birth of John the Baptist goes back many centuries. It is placed on June 24th because this date is six months from Christmas. John was conceived six months before Jesus, so this date was selected. In the Middle Ages, it was called the ‘summer Christmas’ and  had a very elaborate liturgy assigned to it.

        There is another cultural marker associated with the birth of John the Baptist. June 24th was usually the time of the full moon. It was the signal for beekeepers to begin extracting honey from their hives. For this reason, it was called the ‘honey moon’ much like the ‘harvest moon.’ Since June was a popular month for wedding even then, a couple would spend the ‘honey moon’ getting to know each other.

        John the Baptist is a marker for the Church in another, more profound sense. Today’s Gospel provides us with information regarding the birth of John the Baptist. When Elizabeth, the mother of John, gave birth to her son, the fulfillment of time had arrived. The last prophet had been sent by God. What was unique about this prophet is that while others spoke of the coming Messiah, John the Baptist personally knew the Messiah and prepared His way. And, he was the last of the prophets. There were no more prophets after him.

        Today’s feast celebrates a life that starts small, but eventually, by way of God’s loving initiatives and the free response of persons, emerges as one of the key figures in sacred history. So, to celebrate this special life, the church has drawn on a key Servant song from the Prophet  Isaiah, then the great Psalm about being nurtured in the womb, then a summary of the Good News of God’s mercy from Saint Paul in Acts of the Apostles, and finally, the celebration of John’s birth in Luke’s Gospel.

        Taken together, this collection can be a powerful meditation on the mystery of vocation: John’s, and eventually ours.

        In the first reading, Isaiah’s song about the Servant speaks of God’s forming him for a mission with worldwide consequences, first to restore the scattered tribes of Israel, and then, as Israel, to be a light to all the nations. We recognize that prophecy to be fulfilled ultimately in the person, words, and work of Jesus, and furthered in the life and mission of the church, including us.

        The verses from Psalm 139 echo Isaiah’s language in a song of gratitude, which proclaims in wonder, “I was fashioned in the depths of the earth,” a powerful metaphor for the mysterious, hidden fertility of the psalmist’s mother. “You knit me in my mother’s womb.” What a perfect reading to celebrate the healing of Elizabeth’s infertility, whose fruit was baby John.

        In the second reading, Saint Paul’s speech celebrates John’s special place in God’s fulfillment of the promises made to both David and Abraham. Through John the Baptist, God had prepared Israel to receive the surprising news that the long-awaited Messiah turned out to be the rejected prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, raised to transformed life by the Father.

        Finally, Luke’s account of the circumcision and naming of Elizabeth’s and Zechariah’s child, who was so unexpectedly and appropriately named John, which means “God shows mercy.” His simple presence is the very expression of God’s merciful intervention in a situation of sterility not only biological but social, and begins the fulfillment of Israel’s long-held nurtured hope.

        Taken together and pondered prayerfully, these remarkable Scripture passages can help us all marvel at how each of us can recognize the graceful interplay of God’s loving initiatives and the opportunities for free response that make up our own emerging stories of vocation, no matter how sterile they may sometimes seem.

        At the end of his birth, people wondered what this child would become. All parents did the same as they look into the eyes of their infants. John’s parents did so and our parents did the same with us. It is only at the end of his life that we can see the strong man of faith John had become.

        We are called from birth, given an identity in our mother’s womb. God has a mission for each of us that will remain until we pass from this earth. Only at death is our missionary call over. The issue facing each of us is not the truth of our call. That call from God is part of us throughout this life. The question for us is whether we are faithful to that call.

        Every one of us has a place and purpose in God’s plan that is unique and irreplaceable. We may not be prophets. But, we are still called to testify to the Light. We are called to testify as to what Jesus did for us. And, we are called to testify as to what Jesus has done for the world by promoting His message of salvation.

        John’s greatest mission was to prepare the way for Jesus. It is also our mission and our destiny.