

# Opening Convocation Homily

## He Must Increase; I Must Decrease

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Happy Vigil of the Feast Day of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist! Although this great feast day is relatively unknown in many ecclesial communities today, it has been a solemnity, a major feast day of primary importance in liturgical traditions since the early 6<sup>th</sup> century, making it one of the oldest



festivals in the Christian calendar. Why is it such an important day of celebration? We cannot fully comprehend who Jesus is and what his mission is all about unless we first pass through the mission of John the Baptist. All of the Gospel writers knew that, which is why John the Baptist appears numerous times in all four Gospels as a sort of crucial Elijah prelude to the story of Jesus.

This prophetic forerunner carefully held to his mission. John the Baptist declared that he was “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’ ” (John 1:23), quoting from today’s Isaiah reading. He was a preparer, an Israelite prophet of repentance above whom there was no greater, according to Jesus himself. In his life and martyrdom, he summed up the history of Israel. But also, he prepared the way for the One whom he would declare to be the definitive “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,” the definitive fulfillment of Israel’s deepest Messianic longing, the ultimate sacrifice and the final, perfected Temple.

John’s mission was to reveal Christ, to prepare the way for the Messiah as a kind of forerunner. Even John’s name reveals his mission. His father Zechariah thought he should carry on the family name “Zechariah,” which means “God remembers.” Certainly, this would have been appropriate given the Jewish priestly tradition and the fact that Zechariah’s wife Elizabeth was barren and beyond child-bearing years. The moniker “God remembers” would have been most fitting for this miraculous child. But the angel Gabriel declared, “You shall call his name John.” John means “Grace of God.” By Gabriel’s decree, by Elizabeth’s insistence on obedience to that decree, and by the eventual acquiescence of Zechariah to the naming of John, witness was given to the mission that God gave to John. That

mission was to prepare the way for the coming of the ultimate grace of God in Jesus the Christ.

By the way, the name Elizabeth means “God is my oath.” In the song of Zechariah, called the “Benedictus” from Luke 1, Zechariah proclaims that God remembers his oath, combining the names of John the Baptist’s parents: God is my oath, God remembers. What oath? Sure, God remembered his promise of a child spoken by Gabriel to Zechariah and Elizabeth. But John the Baptist, whose very name is “Grace of God,” revealed the ultimate oath that was being fulfilled: God’s oath is to “raise up a mighty savior in the house of his servant David, . . . to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. . . . To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” The oath that God remembers is the enlightened restoration and peaceful reconciliation of humankind through His only begotten Son, Jesus the Christ.

The passage that was presented this evening from the Acts of the Apostles emphasizes John’s role in announcing the coming of the fulfillment of the Davidic dynasty. John the Baptist stands at the intersection between the Davidic promise and its fulfillment by grace. This is why John the Baptist states in John 3:30, "He must increase, and I must decrease." In other words, the preparatory work of Israel is completed, and now the Messiah will reign forever.

There is much we can say about the importance and significance of John the Baptist. Let’s look at what is perhaps the strangest and most vexing event in his ministry, the baptism of Jesus.

Biblical scholar Dr. Scott McKnight states that every pericope, or coherent narrative unit in the Gospels contains the Gospel in micro form. That certainly applies to the baptism of Jesus, which appears explicitly in the three synoptic Gospels and implicitly in the Gospel of John. Christ the Lord, the Messiah, the incarnate Son of God, the sinless Lamb who himself will take away the sins of the world, appears before John to receive the baptism of repentance from sin. Why? As Robert Barron points out, even John the Baptist is confused. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” The truth is, in his baptism, the mission of Christ is being revealed.

In the baptism of Jesus by John we see Jesus fulfilling all righteousness, as St. Matthew wrote. But this was not just jumping through hoops, as we now may refer to this phrase. Rather Jesus fulfilled all righteousness by his full identification with

sinners, standing shoulder to shoulder in the muddy waters of the Jordan with all of us who are sinful, scattered, rebellious, dis-integrated, broken, and lost, identifying fully with our condition in order to reconcile us back to God. This is the sinless Lamb of God assuming the full dysfunction of the human nature (yet without sinning) in order to redeem humankind. Church Father Gregory of Nazianzus stated, “That which he has not assumed he has not healed (redeemed).” In his submission to baptism Jesus assumes the dysfunctional human condition in order to heal it. That, brothers and sisters, is fulfilling all righteousness!

Furthermore, in the baptism of Jesus by John we find a theophany. Here God the Father proclaims, “This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased!” as God the Son descends into the depths of sin, degradation, humiliation and God-forsakenness, always tethered to the Father by God the Holy Spirit, who descends on Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism. So, there is this great theophany of the Triune God affirming the condescension of Jesus in his incarnation to reconcile the entire created order, and in particular, humankind. That is the Gospel in summary, in micro form.

In Christ, God himself lays aside his glory, empties himself, and humbles himself in full identity with all that it means to be human. Though he is the sinless Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, slain from the foundation of the earth, Jesus the Christ stands with us sinners in the murky Jordan, assuming to himself our human condition so that we may be fully and finally redeemed. In this act and his entire life of self-abnegation, culminating in the cross and resurrection, God in Christ brings about the redemption of the entirety of creation. And John the Baptist was the human agent of this great narrative and this great humiliation.

In tonight’s Gospel reading there is this passing reference: “Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, ‘What then will this child become?’ For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.”

The hill country of Judea was significant in the life of Israel. When David brought into Zion the Ark of the Covenant, the icon of God’s presence, the procession commenced from the house of Obed-edom, located in the hill country of Judea. The ark had been held there for 20 years, first in the house of Abinadab, then Obed-edom. Bringing the ark to its rightful place at the center of Israeli worship was a crucial moment in the history of God’s people. King David danced with joy before the ark with all his might all the way to Zion. More than a millennium later, following the annunciation of the angel Gabriel, Mary fled to Elizabeth’s home in

that same hill country of Judea. And how did John the Baptist react? Like David, he danced for joy in the womb of Elizabeth before Mary, the new and definitive ark of the covenant, who contained within her own womb the incarnate Word of the Father, the perfect and eternal high priest, and the bread of life for the life of the world. John spent the rest of his life making straight the way for the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant in Jesus the Christ and testifying that He alone is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and He alone is the Son of God.

John paid the ultimate price, laying down his life in a gruesome and unjust beheading, having run his race by pointing the way to Jesus.

In John 3:30, John the Baptist proclaimed, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Let me ask you what I ask myself: Are you allowing yourselves to be agents of Christ, proclaiming like John the Baptist the coming of the Messiah to save us from the degradation of sin and rebellion? Are you decreasing so that Christ may increase in you, making the cosmos into praise and thanksgiving to the Creator and Redeemer? If so, may God sustain you in that. If not, may God place that in your heart and empower you by his Holy Spirit.

A final but interesting coincidence of applied theology and the Christian calendar. The birth of John the Baptist is celebrated just after the summer solstice as the sun begins to decrease in the sky. The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ is celebrated just after the winter solstice as the sun begins to increase in the sky. Even the heavens bear witness to the wondrous truth, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” May it be ever so.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Almighty God, by whose providence your servant John the Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of your Son our Savior by preaching repentance: Make us so to follow his teaching and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and, following his example, constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.