

As we celebrate this Solemnity of the birth of John the Baptist, we hear a powerful story in the Gospel today. But we can appreciate that power of this story even more if we back up 9 months. St. Luke's Gospel begins with the announcement of the birth of John. Zechariah and Elizabeth were a devout and pious couple - righteous in the eyes of God - but they had been unable to conceive a child and now they were advanced in years. But as Zechariah was in the temple fulfilling his priestly duties, the Archangel Gabriel appeared to him with the news that they would conceive a child. But unlike Mary's response to Gabriel, Zechariah doubted and would not believe. As punishment he was made speechless and unable to talk until that son would be born. This is why at John's birth, it was Elizabeth who first announced that his name will be John. And as soon as Zechariah confirmed that name - John - his tongue was loosened and he spoke blessing God.

The words that Zechariah spoke were not included in the Gospel today, but they are some of the most beautiful in all of Scripture; and they are recited daily in Morning Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours - the Benedictus. This is how his great prayer of blessing ends:

“You my child shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare His way, to give His people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

This sums up beautifully the mission of St. John the Baptist - he is the one chosen to go before the Lord to prepare His way. He is the one chosen to point to the rising sun, Jesus Christ, who was coming into the world. “The dawn from on high shall break upon us to shine on those who dwell in darkness...” This is the message that John proclaimed: Prepare your hearts for the coming of the Messiah, the Savior! John was not the light, but he came to testify to the light: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world!”

This is a message that never grows old. This is a message that, in this world, is always needed. On this side of heaven, there is always darkness, a darkness that can threaten to overcome the light. This darkness takes so many forms: that darkness can be our own personal sins which separate us from God, that darkness can be the injustices that we see around us. This week, we are faced with the darkness of the terrible news involving our parish.

And so we ask ourselves, how do we respond to the darkness of this life? Today, as we celebrate the birth of St. John the Baptist, the prophecy of Zechariah rings out in the darkness: “the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” As Christians, we put our faith in the Rising Sun, Jesus Christ. He is the One who has come to scatter the darkness. The grace and the love and the forgiveness that He brings allows us to overcome the darkness that threatens us. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

And so how do we respond to the darkness? We put our faith in the light, we keep our eyes fixed on that light, and, like St. John the Baptist, we point others to that light with faith and joy and love.

When St. John the Baptist saw Jesus walking along the Jordan River, he cried out, “Behold the Lamb of God!” In a few moments, I will repeat those words as I hold up for you Jesus in the Eucharist: “Behold the Lamb of God! Behold Him who takes away the sins of the world!” In Holy Communion the Lamb of God strengthens us, the Light of the World fills us with light. In the face of darkness, may we open our hearts to that light. May the dawn from on high break upon us to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace.