

Today, we celebrate the Nativity of John the Baptist. And it is amazing that the story centers on the naming of John.

Are you surprised to see the relatives of Zechariah and Elizabeth disagreeing over what to name their newborn child?

The father, Zachariah, was muted after his vision. And so Elizabeth takes the initiative and names their son "John."

Why was the naming of the child so important, and so emotional?

Naming a son after his father implied that this child would "walk in the steps of his father," that he would carry on the father's name, and thus his work as well.

Had John been named "Little Zach," he would have been expected to grow up as a priest, just like his father.

To be named by any other name would have implied just the opposite. John would NOT follow in his father's steps. He would not learn to do what his father did.

This, of course, was precisely the case here, and thus the reason for the name, John. God is making a statement, loud and clear. The child is not "Little Zachariah or little Zach."

God was interjecting himself into our history, and for a reason. He would soon send his own son into the world. Religion, at this time, had become a corrupt and meaningless burden, hard to carry.

It had made them feel they were exclusive and superior to everyone else, with a right to hate their neighbors, Samaritans, despise the weak and to condemn and stone the sinful to death.

Religion was all about external observances. I would say religion had lost its soul, and it had become heartless.

In the absence of love for their neighbors, compassion for the weak and the vulnerable, God decided to enter our lives.

He wanted to claim back His own identity among the people. He wanted to re-define religion in terms of graciousness.

For this to happen, He did not need more Zachariahs who would spend their days and nights in the temple engaged in rituals alone, but detached from the joys and sorrows, pain and suffering of His people. God wanted a John, a name which means God is gracious. Yes, John is his name. He is the graciousness of God.

God wanted, not a Zachariah, but a fiery preacher... a prophet, John, who would become the mouthpiece of God to speak truth to power; He spoke the hard truth to Herod.

When Herod had taken Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, to become his own, John had said to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."

John would expose the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders.

He called them a "brood of vipers." It is a loaded term. Where as religious leaders should create an ambiance of love and graciousness, they have, like vipers, injected the poison of hatred, division and pride.

John would challenge people from every walk of life.

To the soldier who asked him what he should do, he said, "Extort from no man by violence, neither accuse any one wrongfully; and be content with your wages."

To tax collectors, he said, "collect no more than you are authorized to do."

To everyone he replied, "Whoever has two tunics should share with him who has none, and whoever has food should do the same."

We need less Zachariahs and more John the Baptists, men and women like you, anointed with the Holy Spirit who will stand truth to power, expose the hypocrisy in each of us and will build a community of love and compassion.

Government cannot seem to solve real challenges faced by brothers and sisters, especially the most vulnerable in our midst.

And people like me, men of the cloth, continue to inject the poison of hatred and division. It is said that the measure of a society is in how it takes care of those who are in need.

We are surrounded with people in need who deserve a fair and human response. Yes. John is his name. It is beautiful. It is deliberate. It is powerful.

God wants to claim back His own identity and define religion in terms of love and compassion.

Let it be our collective prayer that the legislative process will produce a just immigration system, of which our nation of immigrants, and we Christians, a people of immigrants, can be proud.

Let me conclude with a story. Alexander the Great conquered most of the then-known world by the age of 33.

One of the reasons for that was the iron discipline that he insisted on among his troops. That's why a young soldier was terrified as he was hauled into Alexander's tent to answer for charges of cowardice and desertion in battle.

The general was seated at a table, and the accused soldier stood before him. Alexander said, "Soldier, you've been accused of deserting during a battle- guilty or not?"

"Guilty," he replied almost audibly. The general followed up then by asking, "What's your name, soldier?" The answer came back- "My name is Alexander, sir."

It was at the point that Alexander the Great leaped to his feet, reached across the table, grabbed the soldier by the collar and shouted, "Either you change your life, or you change your name!"

We call ourselves Christians or Catholics. That is our name. That is our identity. We must either change our lifestyle- become more Christ-like in our demeanor and attitude, and bring in the courage, fortitude of John.

Or we must change our name.