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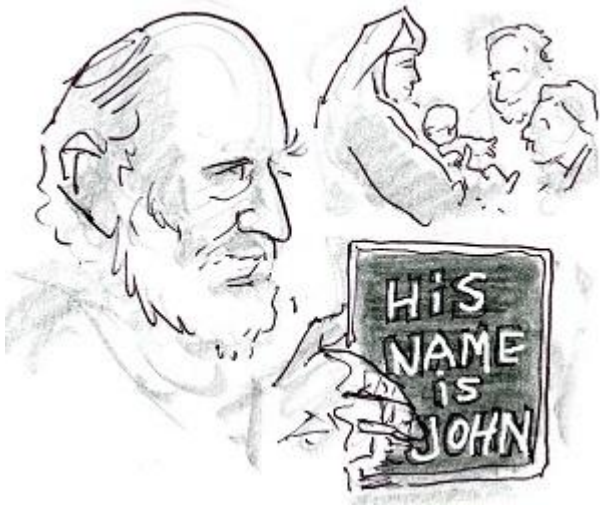
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“He asked for a tablet and wrote, ‘John is his name.’ and all were amazed” (Luke 1:64).

Because the evangelists were so intent on showing seamless continuity in the plan of salvation, John the Baptist received special attention as a transitional figure between the first covenant and the appearance of Jesus. Something new is happening, and the story of his birth in Luke is rich in imagery that shows both fulfillment and the surprising contrasts between old and new.

Though his parents were devout in the Law, they were sterile. Zechariah’s service in the temple does not prepare him for the angel’s visit, and because he doubts he is rendered mute. When Elizabeth encounters Mary, the child in her womb leaps. His conception and birth are a leap of faith. At his circumcision, instead of receiving a traditional family name, the child is named John, which means “gift of God.” Grace makes possible what the Law and tradition could never merit or conceive.

John is set apart in his role as precursor. He is the last of the old covenant prophets, but he will usher in the new covenant. He is the greatest person ever born, but less than the lowliest disciple in the Kingdom of God. His preparation takes place in the wilderness that recapitulates the void out of which a new creation will be summoned. He is not the messiah, but he will baptize him in the waters of regeneration, the birth of a new people passing in exodus from old to new.

What a strange and lonely vocation John fulfills, in between, neither there nor here, announcing Jesus, then doubting him from his prison cell, languishing in the dark until he is dispatched headless into the light of the new life he had blindly served.

John is for us the patron saint of transition, our own gradual growth by faith and doubt, leaping and languishing, never sure but feeling our way forward from wilderness to baptism. We celebrate his birth to renew hope in our own. We are part of some larger plan we will never understand until it is complete and we stand in the light of God's unfailing love.

Despite our best efforts, rule-keeping and careful attention to our own spiritual autobiographies, most of us make a mess of life because we don't get a straight-line narrative. Instead we face a long and winding road with unknown challenges, contradiction and confusion around every corner. God's mercy is the only continuity we can be sure of, and so we learn to be grateful that this gift, not our own wisdom or discipline, is what will get us home.

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