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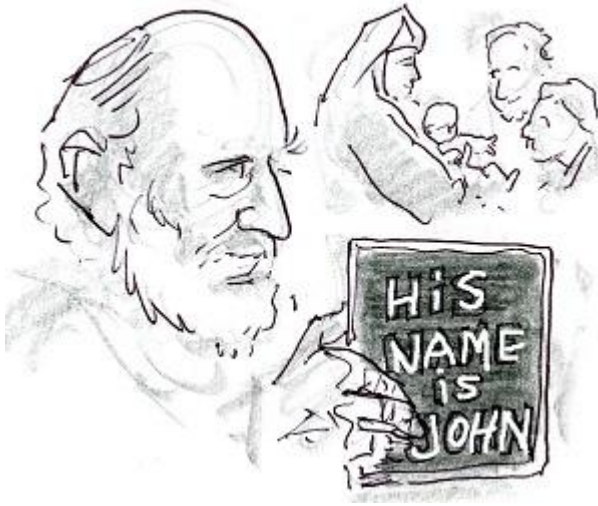
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December 22, 2020

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“He will be called John” (Luke 1:61).

2 Sam 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14b, 16; Luke 1:67-79

Today’s Gospel continues the theme of transition between old and new. Zechariah and Elizabeth are models of perfection under the Law but still barren, unable to conceive and have a future. When the angel appeared to Zechariah during his sacred duties in the temple, it marks a leap in the continuum. Something utterly new, more than obedience can merit, is happening. Zechariah cannot even conceive of the promise being made to him, and he emerges from the sanctuary mute.

As promised, Elizabeth conceives, and when she gives birth the name proposed for the child has no precedent in their family line. He will not be named after his father but be called John, which means “God is gracious” or “gift of God.” What was not possible under the Covenant of righteousness is possible because of Grace. When Mary visits the house, the unborn John quickens in Elizabeth’s womb. John is the last of the prophets under the Law, but he leaps to signal the presence of the new dispensation of Grace. John is God’s gift preparing the way for the ultimate gift of Jesus, whose name means “Savior.”

So, we are brought to the threshold of Christmas. Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and his tongue is freed to proclaim the final canticle known as the *Benedictus*. Blessed be the Lord for keeping the promise made to Abraham all the way down to David to liberate and show mercy on his people. Like the relatives and neighbors who are left in awe to ponder the birth of John, we may also ask what all these promises mean for us.

The Christmas story is about Jesus, but it has also been called the best kept secret of the Christian faith. With the coming of Jesus into the world, the Incarnation leaps into humanity itself as the Gospel of divine life. Our nature and destiny are opened to the life of God; the union of divinity and humanity in Jesus is the Atonement (at-one-ment) that heals the estrangement between God and us caused by sin. Reunion is not the result of any effort on our part, but is pure gift, Grace.

If we celebrate Christmas without claiming this promise of divine life, we will still be living in the shadow religion of fear, in despair or indifference or trying to accumulate enough merit to save ourselves, to work out the failures that burden us with guilt while we anxiously await judgment. Jesus instead reveals that God loves us while we are still sinners, loves us unconditionally, not because we are good, but good because God loves us. This intimate exchange of love initiated by God is evidence of the divine image in us, the holy breath that sustains us in existence. May our hearts leap for joy to receive the new life God gives us in Christ.

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