**Homily – *Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist***

Surprise! In place of green vestments today, the color is white. We hit the pause button on the cycle of Ordinary Time to celebrate a feast - the birth of St. John the Baptist.

Strangely, we know nothing about St. John’s birth. No date, no time, no place is recorded. All we know is recorded in Luke’s account of the Visitation.

It is less a story about the divine intervention of a child’s birth and more about Mary of Nazareth’s visit to a senior couple, and the same angel, Gabriel visiting the father of the child during his priestly duties in the temple. The two women, one elderly and one very young, represent the sacred fertility of their times. Zechariah silently contemplates the mystery of new life, wondrous beyond his understanding. Together, the three rejoice as they trust in God’s incomprehensible loving plans; a barren woman, in her senior years, is with child.

According to St. Luke’s gospel, we know that John came from a family steeped in Jewish faith and traditions. It wasn’t just that his parents were too old to have children, but his father, a Jewish priest, had been miraculously muted since the day in the temple when Gabriel announced that John would be born. For mocking God with his lack of trust, Zechariah was silenced.

From this point on Elizabeth, the child’s mother, herself from a priestly clan, became the spokesperson for the family. She not only broke tradition and named her child, but when she acknowledged Mary as the mother of the Lord, she and the child who leapt in her womb became the first to proclaim Jesus.

Zechariah and Elizabeth, a muted priest and a woman prophet, are signs that God’s faithfulness is fresh every day. How did this humble beginning form John the Baptist into the fiery prophet he would become?

According to St. Luke, knowing the unusual circumstances of his birth and naming, people said, “Surely the hand of the Lord was with him.” More like his mother than his father, John avoided Jerusalem and the centers of political power; remaining far from the public eye before he began his preaching career. But when he began, he did it with his whole heart and unimpeachable integrity. He was God’s sharp sword and polished arrow.

The mystery of John’s childhood formation gives me pause to ponder my own. Allow me to share a few details. I grew up in Clayton, the third of five children. Not until a popular TV show in 2000 would I identify myself as “Malcom in the Middle.” My childhood years were not the stuff of headline news. My parents were economically frugal, and passionately dedicated to passing on religious values.

I learned what it meant to be merciful when my mother took us food shopping for a family whose father was out of work. I learned what it meant to be compassionate when we gave hand- me-down clothes to a family whose house was destroyed by fire. I learned the meaning of tolerance as my father forbad the use of racist language in our home. If truth be told, we were probably one of the few white families in Clayton who welcomed black people into our house. We worshipped with them every Sunday at St. Joseph’s, we ate the eucharist from the same common table, and we played sports with the negro boys at the industrial school.

With these virtuous threads woven into my heart, I followed a call from the Lord and became a priest. Jesus has grown my heart to be merciful, compassionate and forgiving for 46 years. I have never withheld absolution from a sinner who has confessed adultery, stealing from employers, cursing children, plotting revenge against a neighbor, drinking then abusing a spouse, feeding the demon anger, committing gluttony, judging people without walking in their shoes. That’s a short list. A merciful heart does not scold people in a confessional, nor the assembly from a pulpit. I have practiced mercy while hugging a leper in east Africa, honoring the human dignity of the homeless on streets and in shelters, helping to heal families torn apart while burying a loved one, celebrating Mass with prisoners at the Vaughn Correction Center; a faith community comprised of rapists and felons. By not turning my back on any of the above, God mysteriously used sinners to grow my heart to hold more mercy for others.

Mercy makes my heart beat strong, and makes God look good. I feed it with the eucharist, daily prayer, retreats, spiritual direction. So, as a missionary of mercy, as I watch what is happening at our southern borders on TV, I don’t ask myself what is the politically correct thing to say? I am not programmed that way. My life is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the sacraments of our Church. So, I first ask myself, what is the merciful thing to say? That is the spiritual question every Catholic must ask viewing the separation of families and listening to the haunting cries of children. If you want to know where Jesus is in this mess, he is in the detention centers, he is in the cries of those children, in their tears, whispering “Be Not Afraid” into their fearful hearts, just as he whispers those comforting words when our hearts are fearful.

On the day when I will be asked by God to give an account of the stewardship of my life, my gifts, my treasures, I will not be asked if I was a registered Democrat, Republican or Independent. On the contrary, I will be asked how I put the gospel of mercy into practice. I will be asked if, like Jesus, did I stand with the poor, with orphans, refugees, aliens? They are mentioned in the scriptures 36 times, and all with reference to God being on their side. I will be asked if my values and lifestyle squared with the gospel of compassion towards them. And I will wait proudly for God to say that He saw me standing with Him at their side. Anticipating that assurance, I have no fear.

I have learned to keep a faith perspective on this political issue by remembering that when our savior was a child he migrated with the holy family to Egypt. The reason was to escape King Herod’s massacre of innocent children. He was the same monster king who had St. John beheaded.

Like St. John, I will be asked, as a priest, on the day of my judgement, if I obeyed my conscience and used my voice to speak prophetically about upholding Catholic values and ethics. Roman Catholics in America are now 25% of the population - 80 million of 360 million.

-2-

How quickly we forget that our history in this land began with unchecked persecution. Ask the great grandchildren of Irish immigrants how they were treated as the scum of the earth when they arrived in NYC. Ask them how they were blocked from dignified and humane work because they were Irish and Catholic. Ditto for the Polish, Lithuanian and German Catholic immigrants. Google the history of the construction of the cathedral in Philadelphia. Learn why anti-Catholic hatred in the late 1800’s forced the placement of the stained-glass windows 40 feet from the ground. Ask Catholics in Boston how the Protestants kept the Archbishop from building a cathedral in the city center and why it is located in south Boston.

Our persecuted ancestors rose above all that anti-Catholic prejudice. They took seriously the call of St. John the Baptist to a radical conversion of heart. Roman Catholic moral theology does not support the theory that the oppressed have a right to become oppressors. Our Catholic ancestors had hearts bigger than their persecutors. That freed them, to build a Catholic school system that is enviable. Our nuns built an orphanage and health care system that treated patients rejected by for-profit hospitals.

St. Katherine Drexel, of Philadelphia, took her fortune, founded a religious community of nuns who taught uneducated African-American children in the south and native American children in the west. The KKK burned down one of her schools. She traveled by train to Mississippi and defiantly rebuilt it. St. Damian helped lepers in Hawaii to die with dignity. Mother Mary Alfred of the Sisters of St. Francis built St. Mary’s Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota. Today, it is now the Mayo Clinic. These were Catholic trailblazers formed in the prophetic, courageous character of St. John the Baptist. We are a Church built on their blood, sweat, courage and their spiritual DNA to practice the gospel mandate: *pray for your persecutors*.

Roman Catholics have always shown compassion for the poor and the needy. Catholic Charities is now a billion-dollar social outreach agency that does not turn its back on anyone. That is because we believe in a God who does not turn his back on anyone. Catholic cemeteries respect the dignity of life by burying the dead that high end serenity gardens turn away.

When family separation at any foreign border is viewed through the eyes of faith, and not the social media, it is immoral and cannot be defended by the Catholic pro-life ethic. My conscience stirs me to say: We are not a smorgasbord religion. Catholics can’t choose to defend the unborn and not care about crying children placed in cages. Roman Catholic morality does not sanction this, because it dehumanizes human beings. Likewise, you can’t feel sorry for victims of gun violence and still support capital punishment. These are all life issues and Popes John Paul II, Benedict and Francis, our divinely chosen leaders, have spoken loud and clear in upholding the Catholic teaching that God is the master of life and death and not us, nor any state.

-3-

Our Church is bigger than small and punitive politicians. They too will be held accountable to a higher authority. On the day of their judgement, God will not care what political party they supported. But God will care whether their political views frustrated or advanced the gospel of mercy. When politicians feed our vulnerabilities with fear, we can click on the tradition of sacred scripture. Today, the angel Gabriel gives us access to our ancestors like Zechariah who received the comforting words, *Be not afraid.*

BE NOT AFRAID are sacred words for people of faith, keeping us from losing our Catholic dignity when we are tempted to spiral into a mob mentality. When we allow these three words to rule and guide us, then we stand tall against labeling, prejudice and discrimination. BE NOT AFRAID is the spiritual antidote when our hearts are broken, hurting, or conflicted. These three words give God a chance to speak to us, calm us, heal us, convert us and empower us to make choices that are life-giving and life-sustaining.

The birth of St. John the Baptist became the story of a man, separated from his family by God to speak truth to power. He was beheaded for it. But, our church has canonized *him* the saint and not King Herod. This is the feast day of a martyr, not an arrogant ruler.

In the first ready, when Jeremiah rebuked God for choosing him as a prophet at a young age, God replied, “Have no fear. I will place my words in your mouth. I will deliver you from people who make fun of me.” There’s that inner program for our souls, again. HAVE NO FEAR, BE NOT AFRAID, the great “Fear-Nots” for people trying to grow trusting hearts, This 3-word program for our souls is mentioned in the Bible 365 times. When we ignore this good news, we mock God. When we think our civil leaders are better than the God whose body is broken, whose blood is shed every time the Eucharist is celebrated on this altar, to save us again from our prejudices and false alliances, we fool ourselves. We become people of those lesser Gods.

That’s when “Be Not Afraid” helps us become a church of mercy, living, in prophetic ways the amazing grace we celebrate and become in the sacraments and traditions that nurture our Catholic identity. Today, God reminds us that Jeremiah, St. Paul and St. John the Baptist are three role models and companions who can show us how to turn away from sin, again and again, and conform our hearts to the merciful heart of our savior, Jesus Christ. Shortly, we will taste of that mercy in the mystery of the eucharist. Afterwards, in the words of St. Augustine, may we become what we receive; a blessing for others.

Amen.

-4-