

My Beloved Ones,

This year, The Nativity of the Forerunner St. John the Baptist falls on this coming Sunday, June 24th (one day from 6 months to the Lord's Nativity). Indeed, we are blessed to be able to celebrate this annual feast with our fellow parishioners and family in Christ; but, what are we to learn from it?

John the Baptist was born, as so many other holy persons were, to parents who were of an advanced age: Zacharias was a priest of the Temple, and Elizabeth, descended from Aaron, was a cousin of the Theotokos. From the time of the creation of the world, those who were unable to bear children were often put to shame by their neighbors, and this was the case with John's mother, Elizabeth.

I preface these things so that you might understand how great a miracle was the Nativity of the Forerunner. Zacharias was serving in the Temple, undertaking his responsibility to burn incense—when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to him, announcing that God had heard their prayers, and would give Elizabeth a child, a son, who they would name John. More importantly, Gabriel told Zacharias, *“And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth; for he will be great before the Lord... and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”* (Luke 1:14-17) Though Zacharias was astonished at the Archangel's words, his mind would not allow him to understand the Will of God, asking instead for a sign to prove these words. As a result of his disbelief, Gabriel struck Zacharias dumb, telling Zacharias that he would not regain his speech until all these things occurred.

Eight days after the birth of the Forerunner, it came time for the circumcision and naming of the boy, and during all this time, Zacharias was still unable to speak. Relatives who had arrived for the celebrations insisted that the child be named Zacharias, after his father, over Elizabeth's objections that he be named John. In the middle of all this discussion, Zacharias asked for a tablet, writing, *“His name is John”* (Luke 1:63) All were astonished when Zacharias was able to speak. They were further astonished when he prophesied, *“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”* (Luke 1:76-79) The Gospel tells that John grew in spirit in the wilderness, until the day when he revealed himself to Israel.

We can see clearly that the story of the Baptist's conception and Nativity is a reminder that we should always hold fast to our faith in God, rather than our own understanding. Zacharias, in spite of his duties as a priest in the Temple allowed himself to doubt the power and the promise of God. In spite of this human weakness, let us instead follow the example of another person who received a visitation from Gabriel, months later. Our Lady, the Theotokos, did not allow human logic to make her stumble before the miracle of God—a miracle that Zacharias himself was able to foretell. After his mouth was open, so too were his eyes and his heart. Let us pray to the Forerunner for strengthening in our faith, now, and always.

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Metropolitan of Atlanta

