

# THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF OUR BIRTH: JOHN THE BAPTIST'S, OPRAH'S, YOURS AND MINE.

## Reflection for the Nativity of John the Baptist

Today, our church celebrates the feast of John the Baptist. This is one of three birthdays that our church celebrates. The other two are, of course, Jesus' and Mary's. All other feast days of saints are fixed on the day of his/her death - his/her birthday in heaven.

### The circumstances surrounding John's arrival into the world.

On this feast of the birthday of John the Baptist, it might be interesting for us to reflect on the circumstances surrounding our arrival into the world. But first let us ponder the circumstances of John the Baptists' birthday. His arrival into the world was filled with awe and mystery.

- When his mother, Elizabeth conceived him, she was barren and beyond childbearing age. So his conception was in a sense miraculous.
- Because John's father, Zechariah questioned or doubted the angels announcement he was struck dumb. We can only imagine what kind of reaction that caused in his home and church community. Perhaps Elizabeth rejoiced. She may have thought finally, he will have to listen to me.
- We can also only imagine what kind of excitement and perhaps apprehension, Elizabeth and Zechariah felt knowing that their child was a 'miracle child' and that God sent one of his angel's to announce his arrival.
- During Elizabeth's pregnancy her cousin, Mary came to visit her with some astounding news of her own. We are told when the two mothers-to-be met, John leapt for joy in his mother's womb.
- When the time came to circumcise the child and name him, all thought that the boy would be named Zechariah after his dad. But both Elizabeth and Zechariah were very clear that the child would be named John, a name which means "God has shown favor."
- All of these special circumstances caused the relatives and neighbors to ask. "*What, then, will this child be?*" For surely the hand of God is upon Him.

Of course, we all know that John was indeed a special child. He grew up to fulfill a very special role in the salvation of humankind. He became the herald of the Messiah, the one who would prepare the hearts of God's people to receive Jesus.

### The circumstances surrounding Oprah's arrival into our world.

In July 2001, in her popular magazine called O, Oprah had an article called *What I Know for Sure*. She writes.

*Think back for a moment on your history-not just where you were born but the circumstances that contributed to your being here. Consider what you believed about yourself based on what others told you directly and indirectly, since 93 percent of communication is through nuance and action, not words. How were you treated? That is what defined how you experienced the world-both the moments when you felt valued and wanted and the moments when you felt wounded and sure you'd never be fulfilled. Though you've probably had times when you didn't want to press on, you have survived your path. You are still here, still standing-and what an amazing journey your life has been.*

*No matter who we are or where we live, we all have our own journey. Mine began the moment I was conceived out of wedlock to Vernon Winfrey and Vernita Lee, who happened by an oak tree one April afternoon in 1953 in rural Mississippi. Their onetime union, not at all a romance, brought about the unwanted pregnancy that was me. Relatives tell me that my mother concealed her pregnancy until the day I was born-so no one was prepared for my arrival.*

*There were no baby showers, none of the anticipation of delight that I see in the faces of my expectant friends who rub their swollen stomachs with reverence. My birth was surrounded with regret, shame, and hiding.*

*I marvel at what it must feel like to be born into a world where people lovingly greet you and celebrate your arrival. As far back as I can recall, I felt the need to show that I belonged here-the need to prove my worth. I worked hard. I got A's. I became an orator, won speaking contests, earned scholarships. The words I heard Jesse Jackson say at an assembly when I was 16 became my mantra: "Excellence is the best deterrent to racism. Excellence is the best deterrent to sexism. Be excellent." I was in my mid-thirties before I realized that just being born makes you worthy enough to be here. I had nothing to prove.*

*Even if you lived through a childhood more challenging than my own, there is one irrefutable law of the universe: We are each responsible for our own life-no other person is or even can be. Like me, you might have experienced things that caused you to judge yourself unworthy. It's important to know why and how you were programmed to feel the way you do so you can do the work of changing the program. That is one of the most important challenges of your life-to heal the wounds of your past so you don't continue to bleed. Until you do, you are literally dragging the weight of your past into your present. And that makes it nearly impossible to move forward.*

*What I know for sure is that your life is a multipart series of all your experiences-and each experience is created by your thoughts, intentions, and actions, to teach you what you most need to know. Your life is a journey of learning to love yourself first and then extending that love to others in every encounter. How can you travel on that road without fear? Whenever I'm faced with a difficult decision, I ask myself: What would I do if I weren't afraid of making a mistake, feeling rejected, looking foolish, or being alone? Remove the fear, and the answer comes into focus.*

*If your holding anyone else accountable for your happiness, you're wasting time. You must be fearless enough to give yourself the love you didn't receive. Begin noticing how every day brings a new opportunity for your growth. How buried disagreements with your mother show up in arguments with your spouse. How unconscious feelings of unworthiness appear in everything you do and don't do. All these experiences are your life's way of making itself whole-sometimes whispering, often screaming. Pay attention. Every choice gives you a chance to pave your own road. Keep moving. Full speed ahead.*

### **Reflection question:**

*What spoke to you most, in the Oprah article? Does it care for any action on your part?*

### **The circumstances surrounding our arrival into the world.**

I am sure that some people could tell interesting stories about their arrival into the world. Some of the stories would be like John's, filled with awe and mystery and some of the stories would be filled with pain and sadness like Oprah's.

My mother had five children, four of the pregnancies were not just difficult, but life threatening. After the birth of her second child (my older brother), my mother received the last rites and her doctor told her: "If you conceive another child don't call me." Of course, in those days in Ireland no one used any form of birth control, other than the famous rhythm method. I sometimes wonder what my mother must have been thinking when she allowed herself to conceive three more children, myself, my younger sister, and my brother. She died four months after the birth of her last child. In a very real way she sacrificed her life that we would be born.

My sister, a widow at 45 has raised four great kids. As I write, she and her youngest daughter are on a mission trip in Kenya. My sister is a super dedicated nurse with great compassion for the poor. My youngest brother is a dedicated physician. He was the editor of a prestigious medical journal for seven years and travels the world giving lectures on his area of medicine (Pulmonary). The money side of medicine means absolutely nothing to him. Then there is myself-just trying to be a humble pastor to a large congregation. I assume that if my mother lived today, she would not have had the three of us. "God's ways are not our ways."

What about you? What were the circumstances surrounding your birth? Were you planned or a surprise? Was your pregnancy an easy or hard one? Were you conceived inside or outside of wedlock? Were you welcomed and

celebrated?

No matter what the circumstances of our birth we can and should know for sure that we were intended and planned by God. Each of us was born to bring a unique message into the world. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, John Cardinal Newman, Oxford professor and convert to the Catholic Church wrote a famous piece called:

### **I HAVE A MISSION**

God has created me  
To do Him some definite service.  
He has committed some work to me  
Which He has not committed to another.

### **I HAVE A MISSION**

I may never know it in this life  
But I shall be told it in the next  
**I AM A LINK IN A CHAIN**  
A bond of connection between persons  
He has not created me for naught  
I shall do good-I shall do his work  
I shall be an angel of peace  
A preacher of truth in my own place  
While not intending it If I do but keep his commandments  
**THEREFORE I WILL TRUST HIM**

Whatever I am,  
I can never be thrown away.  
If I am in sickness,  
my sickness may serve Him.  
In perplexity,  
My perplexity may serve Him.  
If I am in sorrow,  
My sorrow may serve Him.  
**HE DOES NOTHING IN VAIN**  
He knows what he is about  
He may take away my friends  
He may throw me among strangers  
He may make me feel desolate  
Make my spirits sink  
Hide my future from me-still  
**HE KNOWS WHAT HE IS ABOUT.**

To fulfill God's mission for our lives all that we have to do is 'bloom where we are planted'. Each day be the best person we can be exactly where we are. If God wants us to be somewhere, we can assume that he will show us the way.