

Happy birthday to me . . . Happy birthday to me . . . Happy birthday, dear John . . . Happy birthday to me! I'd like to personally say thank you for throwing me this birthday party today—the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. You could've held a locust luncheon in my honor, or thrown a fabulous camel's fur fashion show for me, but instead you've given me this special feast—from the bottom of my heart, thank you! Y'know, most years a lotta people in the Church seem to forget my birthday—and I keep telling myself, *Now John, this is just not something to lose your head over*—which is why it's nice that you all remembered this year.

I'm not surprised my birthday does get overlooked though. After all, I'm the only saint whose birthday gets on the Church's calendar. Most other saints, it's only their death day—the first day of their new life in heaven—that gets remembered. Oh, I have one of those too come August 29th—it's so pleasantly called The Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist. But Jesus is the only other one who gets a birthday in church. He's also got a death day—Good Friday—but every year you also celebrate the day He was born—Christmas! So today, my nativity, is almost like Christmas in July—well, *almost*. And that's why you're celebrating my b-day today, it's exactly six months before Christmas Eve, and as Luke the Evangelist will tell you, I was about six months older than my cousin Jesus (Luke 1:26).

Y'know, I guess it's okay if people don't celebrate my birthday sometimes—I never really wanted much attention to begin with. I was always pointing to another—putting the spotlight on Him. “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,” I'd say. It was His sandals whose strap I was unworthy to untie. It was Him who must increase, but me, I must decrease.

After all, that's why my birthday comes around this time of year, the Summer Solstice, after which the days get shorter. Instead, His birthday comes about the time of the Winter Solstice, when it starts to stay daylight longer. Jesus might've called me a “burning and shining light,” but He was the greater light, at best I'm the lesser (John 5:35). Which is why many churches have the tradition of lighting a “St. John's fire”—a bonfire—for my birthday—I guess that's like the candles on my cake. But that doesn't hold a candle to the big bright star Jesus got when He was born, enough to catch the eye of some wise men from out East. So, it almost sounds strange to make a big deal out of my birthday, when it's not about me anyway but really about Jesus.

But y'know something, maybe that explains how my birthday got on the calendar in the first place. Before service today, I was thumbing through your hymnal, and I noticed something kinda funny. When I got to the page with all the feasts and festivals of the Church's year, I noticed that today's feast—The Nativity of St. John the Baptist—was in italics. Looking at the bottom of the page, the footnote said that all feasts in italics are principal feasts of Christ, and are to be observed when they fall on a Sunday. Well, at first, it sounds like today's about me, but, being a principal feast of Christ, apparently it's really about Jesus. That means that to this day I still decrease so that He may increase. If whenever you think of me, you can't help but think of Jesus, then my work is done!

You see, my whole prophetic career was spent out in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord. People from all around would come hear me preach about repentance—turning away from sin—and getting their hearts ready to meet their Messiah. I even baptized them, washing them—making them pure and clean—so nothing stood in their way when the Savior did finally arrive. Everything was about Jesus, nothing about me—I gave my whole life for His cause. And my guess is that's why when you remember me, it's really Jesus you remember.

Just think, what if I wasn't in the picture, what if I hadn't ever prepared the way for the Lord? What if I never preached repentance or baptized in the Jordan River? When Jesus did finally come on the scene, would anyone have noticed Him? Or would they have missed Him entirely? Would Jesus Himself be overlooked?

You'll remember another prophet, Noah. He was sent to preach repentance before the flood. Sure, most wouldn't listen, and eventually got swept away. His faithful family did, however—and eight souls in all were saved. But what if Noah never came? What if Noah never warned them? What if Noah never had a chance to tell them about the fresh start God

was about to give them, the new creation they'd have when the waters subsided, if they'd only trust in His mercy? Imagine if I, John, weren't still given a voice during Advent, or even this day, calling you to repentance before the great Day of the Lord, when He comes again in glory to judge the nations. Would you be ready?

It sounds like even today, 2,000 years later, I'm still the forerunner of Christ, preparing a way for Him when He returns. To this day, I'm still the forerunner, warning you to turn from sin—whatever it is. Atheism and unbelief. Love of money; lust for flesh; the hunger for more, more, more, that can never be satisfied. Apathy toward those in need, indifference toward the hurting, unconcern for your fellow man. Your excuses for your actions, your rationalizations for your inaction. All of your idols, your security blankets, your self-delusions. Wake up—WAKE UP!—and get rid of it . . . give it all to Jesus.

Turn instead to your Savior. Embrace Him who bears your sins away. Receive Him who gives you His clean slate, His perfect record. Let go of everything else, and cling to Christ alone. Don't let anything come between you. One day, any day, maybe today, He'll come back—if you don't go to Him first. He offers you life—perfect life, never-ending life, life with Him. So, turn away from sin, from rejection, and fall into His arms. Let nothing get in the way of that.

I, John, am the forerunner, still here paving the way of the Lord, blazing a trail for Him. Getting everyone ready for the day they will finally meet Jesus. For you, I hope that's a happy thought. Don't let sin frighten you anymore, but, while you wait for His coming, the forgiveness and new life of Jesus should fill your heart with joy. Repentance, after all, is a wonderful thing. It means literally *to turn around*, to turn your back on sin—on all that is darkness and death—and instead face the bright future shining before you in Jesus, your light and your life.

Now, join me in being a forerunner, a little light always pointing to Christ. Help prepare the way of the Lord in the lives of everyone you know. Show them how sad and destructive sin really is, and point them to the beautiful and good gifts that are theirs in Christ Jesus. Make sure nobody is left out, that nobody has to go even another second without Him lighting up their lives. Together, let us decrease so that He may increase in this world.

But even more, know that while you are, with me, a forerunner of His second coming, Jesus is also a forerunner of sorts. He came long ago to prepare the way for you. He has gone on ahead to prepare a place for you in His Father's house. Laying aside His glory, emptying Himself, making Himself nothing, taking the form of a slave, humbling Himself under the cross, He has decreased so that you might increase. Becoming too unworthy even to untie your shoelaces, you are now exalted to the highest places—His—all things are under your feet. Now, it is *you* who shines brightest—you are the light of the world, a city set on a hill. By Baptism, you are now children of light. And as the book of Daniel says, the day will come when you "shine like the brightness of the heavens, and . . . like the stars for ever and ever" (12:2-3).

So, as you celebrate my birthday today, you're really celebrating Christ. And as you celebrate Christ, know this—you're really celebrating you. You're celebrating who you are now in Christ Jesus. For you—big, bright, spectacular you—today and every day is worth celebrating.