

Feast Day of St. John the Baptist (almost)
June 22, 2008
St. John the Baptist Church, Linden Hills
John Bellaimey

St. John's celebrates our Patronal Feast today. The early church began a tradition of having a Patron Saint for every parish, and our forebears selected St. John the Baptist, perhaps because the lake suggested a good place for baptisms, or maybe because they liked his pioneer spirit.

They certainly did not suggest John because he was their role model. The guy did not own a house or a suit of clothes. He ate a bizarre diet of locusts and wild honey. And although he was a preacher's kid, he was not exactly a chip off the old block.

Maybe the founders of St. John's, Linden Hills, were all rebels and doomsayers, but I doubt it. Maybe they all abandoned organized religion and went down to the river to pray for merciful deliverance, but if they did, we never hear that story. And anyway, people who wanted to be just like John would have never invested their money in a nice stone church building with stained glass windows.

The man with his name on our sign was not a happy man. He was not even a Christian, if by that title we mean someone who follows Christ. As we are reminded in today's story, he had a pretty amazing birth, too. His dad was a very important priest who ought to have known an angel when he saw one, and was silenced for nine months as a result of not knowing. That is a terrible punishment for a priest.

But when the boy grew up, rather than inheriting the priesthood, he became a wanderer. He moved out of the city to the wilderness, where people have always gone to find the voice of God. Jesus no doubt spent some time with him there as a young man, and maybe after having gone home to the carpentry shop, decided it was time for him to make the decision John was preaching about: "repent!"

So Jesus showed up, asking to be baptized. This was before there was anything called Christianity, so it wasn't like he was joining a new religion or anything. He just wanted forgiveness. Maybe he wanted to let everyone know that he was proud to be John's follower.

"Repent" means "turn yourself around again." "Penting" means orienting yourself, setting your course in the proper direction. Those little GPS navigation devices in new cars, when you miss a turn, immediately recalculate how to get you back on course. They wouldn't be far off if instead of saying "recalculating," they said "repenting."

If you already pented once, double back. Do a 180. Quit going in the wrong direction and start going God's way. John thought Jesus had already pented just fine. In fact, he wondered if Jesus had anything to repent of. He then suggested that his younger cousin baptize him instead, but Jesus bowed to John and, as he was coming up out of the water, saw and heard God smiling and speaking as if human: *this is my son. I love him. I am very pleased.*

When we baptize people, we officially welcome them to the Christian family. Sometimes they have chosen to repent and start going in God's direction. Most of the time, they are too young to have done much to repent for, which is why Baptists and others prefer for people to do what Jesus did and choose the time of their baptism.

In the Episcopal Church, we don't hurry people into baptism, and if a young person comes forward like my student Laura did last Easter, it's wonderful and very meaningful. She chose it for herself. This morning, we baptize young children, and even if the choice is a lot simpler, it is still a wonderful moment of happiness.

A hug and kiss mean one thing to a three-year-old and another thing to two nineteen-year-olds, and yet another to two long-lost friends. Baptism means a lot of things. It can mean, "dear little one, this church is your home, and we hope you will discover that following Jesus is a good thing." It can mean, "Oh my God, help me out of this selfish mess I am in, and don't let all these people forget me, either." Baptism can mean, "Now I believe that you are my savior, even though I used to make fun of the idea. Thank you, Jesus." It can mean, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." And it can mean, "Hey, everybody, we had a baby! Let's have a party!"

The gloomy man whose name adorns our church invented a very unglorious ceremony, which we get to repeat today. Like all men who have ever been the tiniest bit jealous that we cannot ourselves give birth, John puts us back into the waters and invites us to imagine being born again. We ask the women in the room not to roll their eyes too much at this little sprinkling being compared to an actual birth. It's symbolic, okay?

To our newest members, we offer our love, and our prayers that they will learn to follow Jesus a bit better and more easily than we did. Whether they will choose an easy or difficult path--or whether an easy, or difficult, or some other kind of path will *choose them*, we cannot know.

We know, somehow, that God will go with them, through penitence and repentance, and, when the time comes, we pray they will know it, too. Amen.