



a Kendall Hunt Company

Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, A-C, Catechist - RCLB Lectionary



Catechist Background and Preparation

To prepare for the session read all the readings.

Isaiah 49:1-6

Psalm 139:1-3, 13-14, 14-15

Acts 13:22-26

Luke 1:57-66, 80

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Was there a particular reading which appealed to you? Was there a word or image that engaged you?

Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need for the session.

The Word In Liturgy

Our earliest record of a feast celebrating the birth of Jesus stems from the fourth century. Not long afterward, Christians began to mark the day of John the Baptist's birth as well. It is surely not coincidental that the date assigned for Christ's birth was the winter solstice—the "birth" of the sun—while the date observed for John's birth was the summer solstice six months earlier. The Church celebrates the feast of most saints on the day of their death, when they entered heaven. We celebrate the birth of only two saints, however: the Blessed Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. Mary, by virtue of her immaculate conception, entered the world sinless at her birth. Tradition has suggested that John was also freed from original sin when he "leaped for joy" in his mother's womb upon meeting the Savior (Luke 1:41, 44); and so he, too, is regarded as having entered sinless into the world at his birth.

The liturgy chooses Isaiah's second Suffering Servant Song to be read at the Mass during the day. (The Vigil Mass also has a text from Jeremiah about being called before birth.) Scholars debate the exact origin and reference intended by this collection of poems in the Book of Isaiah that speak of a mysterious figure who will redeem his people through vicarious suffering. Most often, Christians have used the Suffering Servant Songs to understand more deeply the identity and mission of Jesus. Here, however, the vocation of the precursor of Jesus is highlighted. The application of this text to John seems dictated especially by its emphasis on the prophet being chosen from the womb ("from my mother's womb he gave me my name").

The key to a proper interpretation of Luke's infancy narratives is to remember that everything he has written in his Gospel is ultimately about the identity of Jesus as the Christ, Lord and Savior. Hence, Luke's description of the miraculous events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist is meant to contribute to the reader's conviction that a divine destiny is

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unfolding in this elaborate choreography. The intricately interwoven narratives of the birth of Jesus and of John reveal the links between their destinies as part of a single divine plan ("Was not the hand of the Lord upon him?"). Today's reading gives only a portion of the Lucan material on John, but enough for us to sense the significance of his birth as an essential step preparing for his role in announcing Jesus. John will later announce to his contemporaries what the angels proclaim at Bethlehem: " . . . a savior . . . who is Messiah and Lord." (Luke 2:11)

Catholic Doctrine

Human Cooperation with Divine Grace

The portrayal of John the Baptist's birth and his ministry in the gospel exemplifies how grace and human freedom intersect to unfold the divine plan of salvation. The birth of John emphasizes divine initiative. John's ministry represents the response of freedom.

We Catholics understand grace to be the favor of God, the free, undeserved assistance that God imparts to us in order that we might respond to his invitation to become adopted children of the Most High, to partake in the divine nature and eternal life. In a word, grace is a gift from God. And this gift is manifold. It enables us to participate in the Trinitarian life. By baptism we are incorporated into Christ and therefore as adopted children can call God our "Father," in union with the Son. In baptism we are also gifted with the life of the Spirit who breathes charity in us and who forms the Church.

Significant in an understanding of the Catholic perspective on grace is the notion that the very preparation for receiving God's favor is already the work of grace. God is the author who brings to completion the good work already begun in us.

Thus, God reaches out to us. God acts. And that action of love toward us by God invites a response.