

St. John the Baptist

FIRST CENTURY

PROPHET AND MARTYR

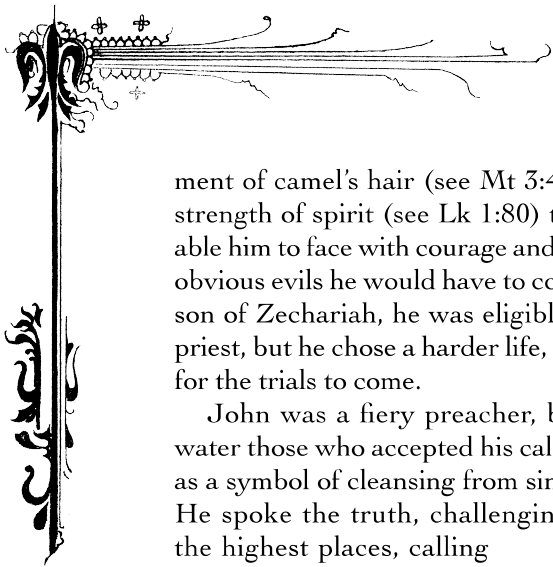
FEAST DAY: JUNE 24 (BIRTH) AND
AUGUST 29 (BEHEADING)

IN EACH OF THE GOSPELS, the emergence of St. John the Baptist from the desert is *the* sign that the public life of the Savior is about to begin: “*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John*” (Jn 1:6).

John the Baptist, the last and the greatest of Israel’s prophets, was born in the old age of his parents Zechariah, a Jewish priest, and Elizabeth, also born to the priestly line. He was a man with a mission. He was born for no other purpose than to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Even as an infant, just over six months in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, he responded with a leap of joy at the sound of the voice of Mary who, newly pregnant with Jesus, had come all the way from Nazareth to participate in the birth of her Son’s predecessor (see Lk 1:44). John was freed from original sin at that moment (and so the Church celebrates his birth as well as his martyrdom).

John is no ordinary saint. It was Jesus himself who declared the special grandeur of his cousin, Jesus himself who set John apart as one of the greatest of all saints. “*I tell you,*” said Jesus, “*among those born of women none is greater than John*” (Lk 7:28). John’s greatness was not dependent upon privilege stemming from birth. Jesus proclaimed him great because of what John had made of himself, in response to God’s grace, so that his work in life would be fruitful. John made himself a fit instrument, which enabled him to measure up to what God expected of him. At an early age, he went into the desert where, through prayer and fasting, eating only locusts and wild honey and wearing only a gar-

*Greatest of Men,
by Timothy Schmalz*



ment of camel's hair (see Mt 3:4), he built the strength of spirit (see Lk 1:80) that would enable him to face with courage and conviction the obvious evils he would have to confront. As the son of Zechariah, he was eligible to serve as a priest, but he chose a harder life, to steel himself for the trials to come.

John was a fiery preacher, baptizing with water those who accepted his call to repentance as a symbol of cleansing from sin (see Mk 1:4). He spoke the truth, challenging evil in even the highest places, calling King Herod and his consort Herodias adulterers who gave scandal to their subjects (see Mk 6:18), and calling the religious leaders a "brood of vipers" (Mt 3:7) because of their hypocrisy. He never minced words. Yet he declared that he was not the Messiah, but only a voice in the wilderness (see Mk 1:3), a precursor of the Lord not even worthy to loosen the strap of his sandal (see Lk 3:16), a man who must decrease because his cousin, the Messiah, must increase (see Jn 3:30). John understood his place before God and humbly accepted it. His denunciation of Herod's adulterous "marriage" was more

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than the king would tolerate. John suffered for months in Herod's dungeon (see Mt 14:3) and surrendered his life upholding the sanctity of marriage (see Mt 14:6-11).

John became what he had to be to complete his life's work: he was fearless and self-sacrificing — virtues that enabled him to confront evil and openly condemn it before king and Pharisee, to preach penitence to a culture that preferred sin and corruption, to boldly announce the coming of the One who was to save the world from sin. In so doing, the herald suffered the same fate as the one true God whose coming he had announced.

Each person has a mission, a purpose in life to which he or she is called by God. Few are as dramatic as the mission of John the Baptist, but life has special meaning and each is necessary for the building up of the Kingdom of God. Each person must do his or her best through prayer, the sacraments, growth in virtue, and wise guidance from others to discover God's intent and to obediently and with dedication follow his will, as John the Baptist did to the end.

