

This feast day—the Birth of John the Baptist—occurs on June 24<sup>th</sup> because of the words that were said to Mary by the angel Gabriel. I remind you, on the day that the Holy Spirit overshadowed her, and she conceived in her womb, the angel said to her, *“Behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her”* (1:36). John was conceived six months prior in the womb of Elizabeth, and thus we celebrate his birth six months prior to the birth of Jesus.

Another way of thinking about it is that the Church in her wisdom, is warning her sons and daughters that any day now the stores will begin putting out Christmas decorations and slowly killing our souls with a water-torture treatment of holiday-themed music. *In the name of John the Baptist, brace yourselves, and quickly retrieve your anti-nausea bracelet.*

There are many things we could say about John and how he helps us to know God’s love for us. One is that he was a harbinger of light. St. John’s Gospel declares: *“A man named John was sent from God...to testify to the light...He was not the light, but came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world”* (John 1:6-9)—like a rooster announcing the light of a new day.

From a spiritual standpoint, when we talk about darkness and light, we say that Jesus—the Light of the World (John 8:12)—came to dispel the darkness. But I suspect that most of us—especially in an age of electricity and the constant glow of artificial light—we don’t think of ourselves as being in the dark.

In fact, we might even think of ourselves as enlightened. Think of all the information we have access to, just by virtue of the smartphones in our pockets. But perhaps think of it this way: *What are the things you do that you do in secrecy from everyone—even friends and family? What are the things you try so hard to hide, even on those very smartphones?* And I’m not talking about financial data or account numbers, I’m talking about other stuff—especially images, who we communicate with and how we communicate. Our mobile devices, for all their benefits and practical uses, are also powerful in the ways that they allow us to have our own little private world of darkness and secrecy. *Thank goodness it’s password protected!* Makes me think of Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Sometimes we even try to fool ourselves into believing: *If I don’t go to confession and confess this, maybe even God won’t know.*

It’s interesting, even in a culture like ours, that wants us to believe that there is nothing objectively right or wrong, nothing categorically true for all, that it’s all a matter of *your* truth and what’s right for you—that even in a culture with *that* philosophy, people still feel the need to operate in the darkness, in secrecy. So, if it’s all *okay*, why do we operate in the shadows? Be sure, that darkness and secrecy is where the devil loves for us to be. *Why?* Because it makes us feel cut-off from God. In truth, we’re never cut-off, but it feels that way. We feel shame and fear. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t operate in secrecy.

In art, you often see John with his arm outstretched, and index finger extended, pointing. That was his role in God’s plan of salvation—to point us to the Light, Jesus. While he’s calling us to the Light, he’s therefore calling us away from where we are. *So in what ways are you living in secrecy? What parts of your life are you afraid to bring into the light?* John is calling you and me to leave it. It’s darkness, it’s shadow-living. He came to tell us that if we can trust enough to leave it behind, left behind also will be our fear, shame, darkness and deception. What we will then find is warmth, light, healing, and peace. Please let me know if you’re struggling to leave it, if you feel stuck.

Just after John was born, his father, Zechariah, proclaimed these tender, yet powerful words: *“You, my child...will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace”* (Luke 1:76-79).