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Seasoning the Seasons™

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Nativity of Saint John the Baptist

Nativity of Saint John the Baptist: June 24

Do you remember what you were doing six months ago? You were probably lighting your Christmas tree for the first time at sundown Christmas Eve, to let everyone know that you were celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Light of the World. That's why we have Christmas lights! Think back to how early the sun set in December. It may have already been dark outside when you were eating dinner. Each day after Jesus' birth our daylight hours got longer and longer, and now it's light out until almost 10:00 o'clock at night.



But do you know what? Each day now our daylight hours will get shorter and shorter until once again we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Today is one of the days in the year when we have more hours of sunlight than any other day! And today we celebrate another birth in our Church Calendar, the Birth of John the Baptist. This is a very important day, because in our entire Church Calendar, we only celebrate three births: Jesus (December 25), his mother Mary (September 8), and John the Baptist (June 24).

Saint John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. The story of his birth is very interesting. You can read this story in the Bible (Luke 1:5-25,57-80). John's father, Zechariah, was a Jewish priest and his mother, Elizabeth, was a cousin of Jesus' mother, Mary. Zechariah and Elizabeth were older, maybe as old as your grandparents or great-grandparents. They were sad because they didn't have any children of their own.



One day, it was Zechariah's turn to enter the sanctuary at the Temple to burn the incense. While Zechariah was tending the incense, and the people outside were praying, the archangel Gabriel

appeared to Zechariah. Gabriel told Zechariah that he and his wife, Elizabeth, were going to have a baby boy and that they were to name him John. But at first, Zechariah didn't believe Gabriel, and because of this he wasn't able to talk until the baby was born.

When Elizabeth had her baby, her friends and relatives came to visit her and Zechariah and celebrate with them. The baby was eight days old. Jewish people name their babies when they are eight days old. Everyone thought the baby would be named Zechariah after his father. But remember what Gabriel told Zechariah in the Temple? Zechariah still couldn't talk, because he hadn't believed Gabriel at first. So Elizabeth told everyone that they were going to name the baby John. The people asked Zechariah what he wanted to name the baby. Since Zechariah still couldn't speak, he asked for a tablet of paper, and wrote down that the baby's name was John. Immediately Zechariah was able to speak! And do you know what the first thing was that he said? He began blessing God. In fact, the prayer he said is called *The Canticle of Zechariah* or the *Benedictus*. (See Luke 1:68-79.) A canticle is a song, and *benedictus* is the Latin word for *blessing*. To this day, every time we pray Lauds, or Morning Prayer, we sing this Canticle of Zechariah.



The Naming of St. John the Baptist
Fra Angelico, 1434-1435
Museo di San Marco, Florence



John lived in the desert. He ate locusts and wild honey, and wore clothes made of camel's hair. He told people about the Kingdom of God, and he baptized them. (See Matthew, chapter 3.) That is why we call him John the Baptist. One day he even baptized Jesus. We celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord in January. It is the last day of the Christmas Season.

John the Baptist told everyone about Jesus. John knew that God had not sent him so that everyone would think how important John was. No, God sent John to tell others about Jesus, so everyone would know how important Jesus was. John said Jesus needed to become more important, and John himself less important. (See John 3:30.)

Think back again to six months ago, on December 25, when we celebrated the

birth of Jesus. Remember how early it got dark? But each day after Christmas, it stayed light a little longer. Now, on June 24, we are celebrating the birth of John the Baptist. It's not going to get dark until really late this evening. But each day from now until Christmas, the daylight hours will get shorter and shorter. It's almost like John the Baptist is telling us that he isn't as important as Jesus. Jesus is the true Light of the World!

Just as we celebrated Jesus' birth by turning on our Christmas lights for the first time on sundown Christmas Eve, light is important for the celebration of the birth of John the Baptist, too. Since June 24 is one of the longest days of the year (it doesn't get dark until really late), people try to keep it light all through the night. How do you do this? With big outdoor bonfires! For centuries and centuries people all over the world have had big Midsummer bonfire celebrations for the birth of John the Baptist. These bonfires can be lighted on Midsummer's Night Eve (June 23) or on June 24, the Midsummer Nativity.



These Midsummer Bonfires usually last all night long! Maybe your parish community celebrates the Midsummer Nativity with an all night bonfire. You might even be able to camp out by the bonfire all night long! Or if your parish doesn't have a bonfire, your family could do this at home or with a neighborhood group. Always make sure your parents and adults are there with you.

During the evening, you can sing songs around the bonfire, and roast hotdogs and marshmallows. You can have water balloon tosses to remind you of John the Baptist baptizing people with water, and to remind you of your own baptism. You and your family can learn more about John the Baptist by working on John the Baptist scripture searches, scavenger hunts, and playing John the Baptist bingo!

So, on June 24 celebrate the Midsummer Nativity...and remember it's only six more months until we celebrate the Nativity of the Lord, Christmas, on December 25!



Saint John the Baptist
14th Century
Decani Monastery, Serbia