



- **The Birth of St. John the Baptist**
- **Circumstances surrounding his birth, Oprah's birth, my birth and yours**

Today is the feast of John the Baptist, one of three birthdays that our Church celebrates. The other two are the birthdays of Jesus and Mary. All other feast days are celebrated on the day of death of the saint—his/her birthday in heaven.

Circumstances surrounding John's arrival into the world

On this feast of the birthday of John the Baptist, it might be interesting for us to reflect on the circumstances surrounding our own arrival into the world. But first, let us ponder the circumstances of John the Baptist's birth. His arrival into the world was filled with awe and mystery.

- When his mother, Elizabeth, conceived him, she was barren and beyond childbearing age. So his conception was, in a sense, miraculous.
- Because John's father, Zechariah, questioned and doubted the angel's announcement, he was struck dumb. We can only imagine what kind of reaction that caused in his home and church community. Perhaps Elizabeth rejoiced. She might have thought, "Finally, he will have to listen to me."
- We can also only imagine what kind of excitement—and perhaps apprehension—Elizabeth and Zechariah felt knowing that their child was a 'miracle child' given that God sent one of his angels to announce his arrival.
- During Elizabeth's pregnancy, her cousin Mary came to visit her with some astounding news of her own. We are told that when the two mothers-to-be met, John leapt for joy in his mother's womb.
- When the time came to circumcise the child and name him, everyone thought that the boy would be named Zechariah after his dad. But both Elizabeth and Zechariah were very clear that the child would be called John, a name which means "God has shown favor."
- All of these special circumstances caused the relatives and neighbors to ask: "What, then, will this child be?" For surely the hand of God is upon him.

- After Zechariah signed that John was to be the name, he received back his gift of speech.

Of course we all know that John was indeed a special child. He grew up to fulfill a very special role in the salvation of humankind. He became the herald of the Messiah, the one who would prepare the hearts of God's people to receive Jesus.

Reflection question: What speaks to you most about the circumstances surrounding the birth of John the Baptist?

Circumstances surrounding Oprah's arrival into our world

In July 2001, in her magazine called *O*, Oprah had an article entitled *What I Know for Sure*. She writes:

Think back for a moment on your history—not just where you were born but the circumstances that contributed to your being here. Consider what you believed about yourself based on what others told you directly and indirectly, since 93 percent of communication is through nuance and action, not words. How were you treated? That is what defined how you experienced the world—both the moments when you felt valued and wanted and the moments when you felt wounded and sure you'd never be fulfilled. Though you've probably had times when you didn't want to press on, you have survived your path. You are still here, still standing—and what an amazing journey your life has been.

No matter who we are or where we live, we all have our own journey. Mine began the moment I was conceived out of wedlock to Vernon Winfrey and Vernita Lee, who happened by an oak tree one April afternoon in 1953 in rural Mississippi. Their onetime union, not at all a romance, brought about the unwanted pregnancy that was me. Relatives tell me that my mother concealed her pregnancy until the day I was born—so no one was prepared for my arrival. There were no baby showers, none of the anticipation of delight that I see in the faces of my expectant friends who rub their swollen stomachs with reverence. My birth was surrounded with regret, shame, and hiding.

I marvel at what it must feel like to be born into a world where people lovingly greet you and celebrate your arrival. As far back as I can recall, I felt the need to show that I belonged here—the need to prove my worth. I worked hard. I got A's. I became an orator, won speaking contests, earned scholarships. The words I heard Jesse Jackson say at an assembly when I was 16 became my mantra: "Excellence is the best deterrent to racism. Excellence is the best deterrent to sexism. Be excellent." I was in my mid-thirties before I realized that just being born makes you worthy enough to be here. I had nothing to prove.

Even if you lived through a childhood more challenging than my own, there is one irrefutable law of the

universe: We are each responsible for our own life—no other person is or even can be. Like me, you might have experienced things that caused you to judge yourself unworthy. It's important to know why and how you were programmed to feel the way you do so you can do the work of changing the program. That is one of the most important challenges of your life—to heal the wounds of your past so you don't continue to bleed. Until you do, you are literally dragging the weight of your past into your present. And that makes it nearly impossible to move forward.

What I know for sure is that your life is a multipart series of all your experiences—and each experience is created by your thoughts, intentions, and actions, to teach you what you most need to know. Your life is a journey of learning to love yourself first and then extending that love to others in every encounter. How can you travel on that road without fear? Whenever I'm faced with a difficult decision, I ask myself: What would I do if I weren't afraid of making a mistake, feeling rejected, looking foolish, or being alone? Remove the fear, and the answer comes into focus.

If you're holding anyone else accountable for your happiness, you're wasting time. You must be fearless enough to give yourself the love you didn't receive. Begin noticing how every day brings a new opportunity for your growth. How buried disagreements with your mother show up in arguments with your spouse. How unconscious feelings of unworthiness appear in everything you do and don't do. All these experiences are your life's way of making itself whole—sometimes whispering, often screaming. Pay attention. Every choice gives you a chance to pave your own road. Keep moving. Full speed ahead.

Oprah's story is pretty marvelous considering her beginnings. As I reread her story in this column, I think that if abortion was legal in 1953, there is a good chance Oprah would never have seen the light of day. One wonders how many marvelous lives were never allowed to share their gifts with the world since the legalization of abortion.

Reflection question: What spoke to you most about Oprah's story?

Circumstances surrounding our arrival into the world

I am sure people could tell interesting stories about their arrival into the world. Some of the stories would be like John's, filled with awe and mystery, while others would be consumed with pain and sadness like Oprah's.

My mother had five children. Four of her pregnancies were not just difficult but life-threatening. After the birth of her second child (my older brother), my mother received the last rites and her doctor told her: "If you

conceive another child, don't call me!" In those days in Ireland, no one used any form of birth control other than the rhythm method. I sometimes wonder what my mother must have been thinking when she allowed herself to conceive three more children: myself, my younger sister, and brother. She died four months after the birth of her last child. In a very real way, she sacrificed her life that we would be born.

My sister, a widow at 45, has raised four great kids. Until her retirement, she was a super dedicated nurse with great compassion for the poor. My youngest brother is a devoted physician. He was the editor of a prestigious medical journal for seven years and travels the world giving lectures on his area of medicine. Then there is myself—just trying to be a good pastor to a large and great congregation.

If my mother had lived today, I wonder if she would have done something to avoid having more children after the birth of her second child. Who knows? What we do know is that God has a plan for our lives. What we also know is that his ways are sometimes very strange and can seem very awful. God's plan for Jesus' life, especially for its last week, was pretty awful. Yet in some strange way, it leads to the salvation of all who open their hearts to God and his strange ways. Trying to get on board with God's plan may be one of the most difficult challenges of our lives.

One of my favorite one-liner prayers is: "*Holy Spirit, help me to discover and become the person you created me to be.*" What can help us to discover and become the person God wants us to become? Two helps: (1) prayerful reflection on the events and circumstances of our lives, asking the Holy Spirit to help us understand the meaning of past and present encounters and experiences; (2) spiritual direction, counseling, or talking to a wise and insightful friend who can help us to see our lives in a way that we are not seeing them.

Reflection questions:

What about you? What were the circumstances surrounding your birth? Were you planned or a surprise? Was your pregnancy an easy or hard one for your mother? Were you conceived inside or outside of wedlock? Were you welcomed and celebrated? What are other circumstances surrounding your birth that you may never have shared with another?

Raised for life being a Christian, if you do it right, it isn't comfortable.

I love articles written by Annmarie Scobey. This is an article about young adults spending time setting aside a year or two of their lives to help those living on the edges of society.

The following article appeared in the May 2018 edition of *U.S. Catholic* magazine.

The official tagline of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps is "Dare

to Change.” The unofficial motto, used by those who have completed a year or two of service with the organization is “Ruined for Life.”

The Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC) is the largest lay Catholic full-time volunteer program in the world and has been a pioneer in the service landscape for about 60 years. More than 10,000 men and women—mostly new college graduates—have served within hundreds of communities worldwide. Jesuit Volunteers work full-time in both Catholic and secular organizations focused on social justice and service to the poor and vulnerable. They live in a community with other young adults, exploring their faith through a framework of Catholic, Ignatian values. JVC provides housing, insurance, food, a small stipend, and regular retreats.

Our oldest son, Jacob, chose JVC after graduating from college last May. He lives in Atlanta with his community of five other Jesuit Volunteers and works as a case manager with the International Rescue Committee, a global nonprofit assisting refugees in navigating U.S. social service systems.

Because I spent a year in service after college with an organization similar to JVC, I understand what former JVs mean when they say they’ve been “ruined for life.” Spending a year not only working with the poor but also living with others committed to examining social problems through the lens of the gospel changed me as a young adult. The immersion experience of that year of service tilted my heart and mind toward those at the margins. It affected the way Bill and I have approached our marriage; it informed our decisions regarding fostering and adopting children; it eventually led to my career in corporate social responsibility. The other adults I know—now in their 40s—who gave a year of service after college have similar trajectories. My friend Andrea, who was part of the Catholic National Evangelization Team (NET), is a social worker focused on serving children in foster care. Lisa Marie, also a NET veteran, works as a hospice social worker. Lisa Marie’s husband, Dan, an attorney who did two years of JVC, now leads the nonprofit Disability Rights Wisconsin. Amy, who served with me at Chicago’s Amate House, is a partner in a law firm where she brings in more pro-bono work than all the other attorneys combined.

Christina, a volunteer in my son’s community, articulates well the changes that take place within a volunteer. She teaches English as a second language with Catholic Charities and has found that JVC has propelled her to recognize both her own privilege and the lack of diversity she encountered in her day-to-day life before becoming a Jesuit Volunteer.

“I attended private high school and college, went on family vacations every summer, and continue to have my cell phone bill and insurance paid for by my parents,” she says. “Along with these privileges, my life experience has been overwhelmingly white. As crazy as this sounds, I can confidently say that in the past six months I’ve spent in Atlanta, I have had more interactions with people of color than I have had throughout my 24 years.”

Christina’s experience is causing her to reframe some of her thoughts on race and socioeconomic status.

“Until I lived in Atlanta, I had never known what it felt like to be the only white person in a room, a feeling the black students in my high school probably felt every day,” she says. “Before my year with JVC, I also had never truly

budgeted my spending—and even the limited budget my housemates and I are provided with is more than what people who live at or under the poverty level have. You could be an extremely educated person with endless knowledge about institutionalized racism and poverty, but until you live among people who actually experience these things daily, that knowledge means very little.”

Volunteers are “ruined for life” in that at the moment when they are just learning how to be adults, they are presented with the responsibility that comes with being a Christian. And being a Christian, if you do it right, isn’t comfortable.

For us, going to work meant living out the 25th chapter of Matthew—we went to our places of employment, and often our job was to make sure people were fed, clothed, welcomed as strangers, and visited while ill or in prison. As we defined ourselves as adults, we were given the instruction to find a “mission worthy of our lives.” We felt no pressure to find a job of high status, to secure a career that would allow us a big house, designer clothes, and expensive cars. Instead, we had the opposite pressure. What would we do to bring about the kingdom of God? We were told to be careful not to let the temptation of money and status get in the way of the preferential option for the poor. We were instructed to wade into the muck of life where nothing is clear and the real work needs to be done. “Come on in, the muck is fine,” says one of our leaders, who worked with youth in the Chicago housing projects.

And now Jacob is in the middle of his year of service. He’s in the muck. One of his recent clients was a man who was one of the 40,000 orphaned during the second Sudanese civil war in the late ’90s. A lost boy of Sudan, he is now a lost man, struggling with disease and poverty. Jacob called us shortly after meeting with him, having found for him a few resources, a bit of food, and some bus tickets, but knowing he was unable to lift the man to any measurable degree. I listened to Jacob’s story, unable to find words to give Jacob hope that maybe the man would indeed be just fine. Part of working in service is entering into Mother Teresa’s wisdom: “God does not require that we be successful, only that we be faithful.” As a mom, I wanted Jacob to feel that his work and faith could change even the most dire situations. As a fellow Christian, I knew Jacob had to learn that a part of service was simply the act of walking into the muck to be with another person.

Jacob is halfway through his year of JVC. Halfway done with a year that will give him a different perspective than what may be popular or easy. He’s halfway through a year that might ruin him for life.

I am so thankful.

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Have a blessed week,



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