

Nativity of St. John the Baptist
Cathedral of St John the Baptist, June 19, 2016

It is a privilege today to deliver this sermon as Diocesan Bishop here at this Cathedral of St John the Baptist as this community marks its Patronal Festival, the celebration of your Patron Saint, John the Baptist. I also send Father's Day greetings to all fathers present and as we give thanks for them and for all who have been fathers in our lives in any way. St John the Baptist figures prominently in both ecclesiastical and secular history here because not only does our Cathedral, the Mother Church of our Diocese, bear his name, but so does the capital city of this province, St. John's. We are actually a few days early in our festivities because the proper day to celebrate the Birth of St. John the Baptist is June 24, also known as Discovery Day, when we mark the anniversary of the landing of John Cabot in Newfoundland in 1497.

From earliest days Christian churches have adopted the names of saints. Saints are faithful believers characterized by "heroic virtue," especially blessed by God in life and in heaven. We do not worship saints, let us be clear about that, we worship only God through his Son Jesus Christ our Lord but as members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church we believe that the saints in heaven might just have special favour with God and can intercede for us. If our prayers on this side of death are charged with faith, their prayers for us on the other side are super-charged! Churches that bear the names of saints do not do it for decoration; they do it to honour the saint, and especially to honour the God who inspired that saint.

It is a worthy and spiritually fruitful exercise for all churches named after saints to reflect upon their patronage from time to time. That exercise for you, here at this great Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, will not be an easy one if you are to be true to the life and witness and death of the one whose name you bear. For John the Baptist can be a rather troublesome Saint of our Church. His story is found across four Gospels and the Book of Acts and merits a brief survey this morning. And although this day it is his nativity we celebrate – his birth – I particularly want to consider the rest of his life.

Mark's Gospel presents John as a messenger sent ahead, and a voice crying out in the wilderness. John is described as wearing clothes of camel's hair, living on locusts and wild honey, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. John says another will come after him who will not baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit. According to Mark, Jesus comes to John, and is baptized by him in the river Jordan. As Jesus emerges from the water, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends on him "like a dove." A voice from heaven then says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Later in the Gospel of Mark there is an account of John's death after John had condemned the Tetrarch Herod Antipas for marrying Herodias, the ex-wife of his brother. Herodias demanded John's execution, but Herod, who "liked to listen" to John, was reluctant because he feared him, knowing he is a "righteous and holy man." The daughter of Herodias then danced before Herod, who was pleased and offered her anything she asked for in return. When the girl asked her mother what she should request, she was told to demand the head of John the Baptist. Reluctantly, Herod ordered the beheading of John, and his head was delivered to her on a plate. John's disciples took the body away and buried it in a tomb.

In Luke's Gospel John's story began with the angel Gabriel telling John's elderly father, Zecharia, a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son. Considering Elizabeth's advanced age, there would be something of the miraculous about this birth. Luke tells us that John grew into a fiery preacher

who taught and baptized. He would eventually gather a group of his own disciples by the time that Jesus approached him to be baptized.

The Gospel of John describes John the Baptist as "a man sent from God" who "was not the light," but "came as a witness ... to the light, so that through him everyone might believe." John describes himself as the "voice of one crying in the wilderness" and announces that Jesus is the one "who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." John professes "... that [Jesus] is the Son of God" and "the Lamb of God". The Gospel of John also reports that both Jesus' disciples and John's disciples were baptizing and that a debate broke out about purification. In this debate John argued that Jesus "must become greater," while he (John) "must become less." I still remember sitting in this Cathedral with Kathy before I was ordained and listening to Dean Edward Rusted, the priest who married Kathy and me 30 years ago this August right here, preach a sermon on this text and in his distinctive accent quote John repeatedly, "Jesus must increase, I must decrease." When the Messiah drew near, John knew his place.

So there you have it, more or less, the life and death story of John the Baptist. He is a major figure of our New Testament and a major figure in the life of Jesus. He is also a major figure in the life of this Cathedral. I have already identified him as a Saint, but he was also a Prophet – one who speaks the truth to the world on behalf of God even if that truth is difficult for the world to hear. I believe John was also a road builder. Luke tells us John the Baptist called people to get ready for the coming of Jesus by quoting from the Book of Isaiah in this way: *"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

John the Baptist knew a thing or two about the need for good roads. Certainly, the Romans who controlled Palestine during his lifetime valued efficient transportation systems. Indeed, some of the roads built by the Romans over 2000 years ago are still in use in some parts of the world. But just think about the imagery John uses here. He challenges his listeners to make ready the way of the Lord by straightening paths, filling in valleys, removing mountains and hills, eliminating crooked and rough trails. Why? So that all persons could see the salvation of God. John the Baptist was a road builder himself ... of sorts. But the road he was most concerned about was no earthly road built of rock and sand and gravel. It was nothing less than the "Way of the Lord" that Jesus would follow as he entered this world and came into the hearts of all believers.

John the Baptist saw himself as a road-builder who, in his own words, was not worthy to untie the straps of the sandals of the One who was coming to bring Salvation into the world. John's role was to announce the Advent – the "Coming" – of Jesus and to make ready the hearts and minds of all who would listen so that they would prepare themselves for their encounter with Jesus – an encounter that would change the world forever. And for John, the process of preparation was one of straightening and filling and flattening and smoothing so that Jesus could come unhindered and without delay into the lives of all believers.

The implications of John's story for this Cathedral parish as a worshipping and serving community are immense. You could have picked an easier saint to live with! If you are to truly honour the name you bear, your role must be both saintly and prophetic, with a large measure of road construction thrown in. What roads are you building here so that all flesh shall see the salvation of our God in Christ?

It may even require a careful excavation of your foundation.

I recall a similar exercise in excavation some years ago when I challenged the Parish of the Good Shepherd in Mount Pearl to reflect upon its name. We explored what it meant to be a Shepherd and who the Good Shepherd was. The work of a shepherd, we realized, was to gather, protect, and feed. From that we explored what this meant for ministry if we were to be the Parish of the Good Shepherd. We too must gather, protect and feed. From that we established new ministries and today the core ministry of that parish is Christian Hospitality.

In preparation for my sermon today part of my research was not only to explore what the bible says about John the Baptist but also to read what C. Francis Rowe wrote about this Cathedral in his 1989 book, *In Fields Afar: A Review of the Establishment of the Anglican Parish of St John's and its Cathedral*. It was not enough for me to reacquaint myself with the historical saint and prophet; I also needed to reacquaint myself with the community bearing his name today. The exercise for me was something akin to the advice attributed to the theologian Karl Barth to read your bible every day with the daily newspaper in your other hand. You can only truly appreciate the purposes of God in history when you study God's world in the present.

Your formal history dates to 1699 when a group of local inhabitants petitioned the Bishop of London to send a clergyman to this place. In 1839 when we became our own diocese – the Diocese of Newfoundland and Bermuda – our first Bishop, Aubrey Spencer, saw one of the two Church of England buildings in St. John's at the time, located just about where we are today, raised to the status of Pro-Cathedral. In 1846 that building burned and was later reconstructed as a Cathedral proper under the leadership of Bishop Edward Feild, opening in 1850, and modified in 1885. Alas, Feild's Cathedral burned in 1892 and was reopened by Bishop Llewellyn Jones in 1905 as the building we have today.

And by the way, on my wall at Synod Office so that I see it every day I am there is a painting borrowed from this Cathedral of Bishop Edward Feild preaching on the coast of Labrador in the 1850s or 1860s. He is celebrating the Eucharist on a simple table in the corner of a fishing stage as people kneel before him. It is a powerful portrait of a Bishop and a Sacrament and a Gospel leaving the safe and protected environment of a church building to come to the people where they are. Feild also established a unique relationship between himself and the Cathedral Parish whereby the Bishop of the diocese was also the Dean of the Cathedral. Feild did not see any difference between the ministry of the diocese and the ministry of the cathedral. For him, they were one and the same. One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One Church, One Bishop, One Ministry.

The Parish Profile created by your Parish Consultation Committee appointed to meet with me regarding your new Rector had this to say about your history:

The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist is located in downtown St. John's, the capital city of the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. It is most commonly referred to locally as the "Anglican Cathedral" to avoid confusion with the nearby Roman Catholic Basilica which is also dedicated to St. John the Baptist. Founded in 1699 as a parish church, the Anglican Cathedral is the oldest Anglican establishment in Canada. The present building was opened for worship in 1850, was subsequently expanded in 1885, but then largely destroyed by fire in 1892. It was ultimately rebuilt and reopened in 1905.

After hearing all of this you might be forgiven for claiming that this Cathedral Parish got its beginning in the 19th Century in St. John's with Bishops Spencer and Feild. But truthfully (and to borrow from the opening crawl of the movie, *Star Wars*) the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist really began, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." Your beginning can be traced back far earlier at least 2000 years to an itinerant preacher in Palestine named John the Baptist whose name and mission you carry. But John, by his own admission, was not the One but proclaimed the coming of the One who would teach us all how to live and even how to die. Through John your beginning can be traced to our Lord himself. Your road is a long one.

The community that Jesus formed around himself would later become the church of today. And even though what we have today may be radically different in shape and form from anything that existed in Jesus' time, the foundation of our church today is the very same as the foundation of that community Jesus formed 2000 years ago. And that foundation is Jesus Christ. Even though the upper building may look different from place to place and from age to age, the foundation has not changed. We are not called to lay down new foundations – we are called to build on our foundation in Jesus Christ. And this Cathedral Parish continues to build.

In worship you maintain the best of Anglican tradition. And it's a broad and tolerant tradition. In this service we celebrate with the Book of Common Prayer, a rich liturgical tradition that must continue here. Earlier this morning at 9:15 we worshipped with the Book of Alternative Services.

And despite your venerable age of 2000 years or so you continue to discover new ways of being the Church in the World. You continue to build some new roads. I hear great things about your new Godly Play program and the life it is bringing to this community, not only with our little ones but with our big ones also. Last Sunday Kathy and I were pleased to gather with you for your Parish Picnic and join with you in games and fellowship. Yesterday we joined you for your Patronal BBQ and Auction. And next Saturday, in a Cathedral Visioning Day, we will come together to reflect upon our life and ministry as we take counsel for the Body of Christ in this place in the present and in the future. You have already made a bold decision regarding the future of your Parish Hall.

In service you freely give of your time and talents and treasure in service to your church and to the community around and beyond to assist those in need. I think of the Emmaus Food Bank in particular. As I reminded you last week at the Parish Picnic, churches are at their best when they gather not only for worship but outside of worship for service and fellowship.

You have been a remarkably stable community over time and I believe that stability as a parish comes from your awareness of the true foundation upon which you were built and upon which you continue to build – Jesus Christ our Lord. His is the only true foundation for the Church, and if we do not build upon him, we will be like that house in Jesus' story that was built upon sand. "And it fell; and great was the fall of it." We are but the most recent workers upon that foundation. There are many who have gone before us in the faith. There are many who will come after us. May we take care to build wisely upon the foundation that has been handed to us so that those who come after will inherit a house that is both strong and stable, built upon the eternal Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A careful exploration of your roots and foundation will lead all the way back through buildings and fires and bishops and saints to the one true founder of this place, Jesus Christ. But there is one more thing to ponder today. You are no ordinary parish in the life of the wider church. You have a vital and central role in the life of the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador. You are our Mother Church and it is to you we all look for leadership and inspiration, for challenge and hope. The Cathedral is called to be nothing less than the beating heart of our diocesan family.

And so today as we ponder the history and heritage and future of this great place of worship and service let us embrace once more our one true foundation in faith, Christ Jesus our Lord.