

# John the Baptist

## Significance

Christians have long interpreted the life of John the Baptist as being a preparation for the coming of [Jesus Christ](#), and the circumstances of his birth, as recorded in the [New Testament](#), are just as miraculous. According to the [Gospel of Luke](#), John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were without children and both were beyond child-bearing years. While Zechariah was offering incense in the Temple, the angel [Gabriel](#) appeared to him and announced that he and his wife would give birth to a child they should name John. However, because Zechariah did not believe the message of Gabriel, he was rendered speechless until the time of the child's birth; at that time, his relatives wanted to name the child after his father, and Zechariah wrote, "His name is John" and could speak.

When Gabriel later appeared to Mary to inform her that she would become pregnant with Jesus, the young girl fled to the home of Elizabeth, her cousin, who was already six months pregnant. Luke's Gospel recounts that the baby "leapt" in Elizabeth's womb at the greeting of Mary.

See Further: [John the Baptist in the New Testament](#)

## Liturgical Celebrations

The Nativity of John the Baptist is part of the Christmas cycle since its date falls exactly six months before (or after) Christmas, thus being celebrated on [June 24](#) as a fixed festival (unlike the moveable festivals related to [Easter](#)). Luke's Gospel records that Gabriel announced the impending birth of John six months before he announced Jesus' birth to Mary. This places the annunciation of his birth on September 23, though the annunciation of his birth is not celebrated in the same way that the announcement of Jesus' birth is. The [Catholic Encyclopedia](#) admits that the traditional date for John's birth is probably incorrect as there is little historical evidence for it having taken place on this date. However, the purpose of the festival is not to commemorate the exact date of his birth per se, but rather to commemorate his birth at all and to do so in a way related to the birth of Jesus, which is commemorated in December.

The Nativity of John the Baptist is not a widespread holiday. It is kept in Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic churches, and with varying degrees of observance. However, unlike the Reformed and free churches, this particular celebration is at least nominally a part of the calendar, even if it is not observed in practice.

In all Christian churches, commemorations of individual saints are kept on the date of their deaths, or "heavenly birthdays." The Nativity of John the Baptist is one of two exceptions to the rule in that the primary commemoration is the birth of the saint rather than the day of his death. The other exception is the Virgin Mary. It should also be noted, however, that the date of Mary's death ([August 15](#)) is also kept by all of the above mentioned churches, though the date of St. John's death is not similarly widespread. In the case of Lutherans, Mary's birth is not widely commemorated so that John the Baptist is the only individual who is remembered liturgically on the date of his birth.

In addition to the birth of John the Baptist (who is also called the forerunner because his the purpose of his ministry was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus Christ), the Orthodox Church also has the following commemorations of the life of John the Baptist:

- [January 7](#) - The Commemoration of St. John the Forerunner (main feast day, immediately after [Epiphany](#) on [January 6](#))
- [February 24](#) - First and Second Finding of the Head of St. John the Forerunner
- [May 25](#) - Third Finding of the Head of St. John the Forerunner

- [August 29](#) - The Beheading of St. John the Forerunner
- [September 23](#) Conception of St. John the Forerunner and the Commemoration of Sts. Zechariah and Elizabeth

Of those listed above, Anglicans and Roman Catholics only celebrate the Beheading (Decollation) of John. Some Lutherans only commemorate Zechariah and Elizabeth, although their commemoration is [September 5](#) rather than September 23. January 7 is also used in Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic churches to celebrate John's baptism of Jesus, while Lutherans and Anglicans generally commemorate the baptism in a separate festival on the Sunday following Epiphany.

The nativity of John the Baptist is one of the oldest festivals of the Christian church, being listed by the Council of [Agde](#) in 506 as one of the principal festivals for that region. The day was required to be observed with rest and, like Christmas, was celebrated in the West with three masses: a vigil, at dawn, and at midday.

## Timing

The question would naturally arise as to why the celebration falls on June 24 rather than [June 25](#) is the date is to be precisely six months before Christmas. It has often been claimed that the Church authorities wanted to "Christianize" the pagan solstice celebrations and for this reason advanced Saint John's feast as a substitute for the former pagan festival. This explanation is obviously erroneous because in those centuries the solstice took place around the middle of June due to the inaccuracy of the Julian calendar. It was only in 1582, through the Gregorian calendar reform, that the solstice fell on June 23.

Therefore, a more likely reason why the festival falls on June 24 lies in the Roman way of counting, which proceeded backward from the Kalends (first day) of the succeeding month. Christmas was "the eighth day before the Kalends of January" (Octavo Kalendas Januarii). Consequently, Saint John's Nativity was put on the "eighth day before the Kalends of July." However, since June has only thirty days, in our present (Germanic) way of counting, the feast falls on June 24.

## Customs

Beyond the religious commemoration, many regional customs associated with the Nativity of John the Baptist are in fact more related to the concurrent celebration of midsummer which are themselves remnants of pre-Christian pagan [midsummer festivals](#). St. Eligius warned against midsummer activities and encouraged new converts to avoid them in favor of the celebration of St. John the Baptist's birth.

# Midsummer

## Midsummer/Summer Solstice

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"Turn your face to the sun and the shadows fall behind you." -- Maori proverb

Summer Solstice falls at the precise moment when the Sun's power is at its zenith. It is the time of year when the noon sun appears to be farthest north from the celestial equator. "Solstice" is Latin for "sun stands still" (sol "sun" and sistere "to stand"). Summer Solstice is so named because to the naked eye the sun appears stationary in its northern and southern progression. The sun is directly over the tropic of Cancer at the summer solstice, at which time the sun is 23½° north. The sun travels 23.5 degrees to reach its maximum distance from the celestial equator during both the summer and winter solstice.

It is the longest day and shortest night of the year. From the moment of Summer Solstice, the Sun immediately begins to wane. The journey into the harvest season has begun.

Midsummer has been one of the important solar events throughout the evolution of humankind. It was an indicator that the year was about to begin waning, thus winter would be again returning. Although not all the ancients were as precise in the calculations from an astronomical point, you can be sure that they were keenly aware of the sun's progression, and did most assuredly know when Solstice was upon them, as the sun appeared to stand still in its northern progression.

The axis of Stonehenge, which aligns with the monument's entrance, is oriented in the direction of the midsummer sunrise. The Teotihuacán Temple of the Sun, a pre-Columbian temple located in Mexico, was also oriented to the sun's passage at the Summer Solstice. During the time of the ancient Egyptians, Sirius (the dog star) rose on the Summer Solstice (today it rises August 10) heralding the beginning of their new year, just before the season of the Nile's flooding. Richard Hinckley Allen suggests that the star is connected with the dog because it was thought of by the ancients as the "guardian of the horizon and also the solstices" (Richard Hinckley Allen's *Star Names: Their Lore and Meaning*). The impact of the sun's journey was one that traversed all the world's population throughout all time.

The ancients knew that life came from the sun, it was life giving, life supporting, without it life would be lost. The journey of the sun impacted life at every level in the course of time, only relatively recently with the advances of electricity, greenhouses, transportation networks, has human reliance on the passage of the sun been lessened. Even with this dependence lessening, in this technological age, necessity of the sun and its path is crucial to our existence, however it is not as apparent today to many.

Midsummer celebrations begin with Midsummer eve, as the Celts and many ancient groups, reckoned the beginning of day to occur at dream-time or nightfall. Through the progression of Christianity Midsummer's Eve became Saint John's Eve, but the roots of which are and were firmly planted in their Pagan origins.

Midsummer Eve is the evening of herbs. The herbs and flowers gathered this night are considered exceptionally potent. St John's wort, burdock, thorn, and nettle, harvested on Midsummer Eve are hung on doors and windows and placed around the home for protection. Houses are decorated with fennel, orpine (also known as Sedum; live forever; stone crop), St. John's Wort and birch branches. Royal Fern (Raithneach na Ri) seeds which are gathered on midsummer are said to make the

possessor invisible. They who find Royal Fern blossoms on Midsummer's eve become wise, lucky, wealthy and all around happy folk. Women wear braided circlets of clover and flowers, while men wear chaplets of oak leaves and flowers around their heads. In times past livestock were also decorated with garlands made of flowers, foliage, and oak leaves.

It is at Midsummer that the Holly King, God of the Waning Year, has encountered the Oak King and succeeded in usurping the reign of the year. In Celtic Mythology the Young God withdraws into the Wheel of the Stars and it is here he waits and learn before his rebirth at Winter Solstice. It is the time when Belenus, Belenos - the Sun god, begins to die, fir-branches; Balefires; were kindled to light his downward path, he will return again at the Winter Solstice, when the Yule logs and lit fir-braches will guide His return. A few of other deities associated with Midsummer include: Lugh, Lleu, Lugos, Aine.

Fire is an important aspect to Midsummer celebrations. The balefires, bonfires on hilltops, at crossroads, or any place where folks could gather reaches far back through the progression of time. The fire of Midsummer is traditionally kindled from the friction of two sacred woods, fir and oak. Nine different types of herbs are thrown upon the Midsummer fire. These consist of mistletoe, vervain, St. John's Wort, heartsease, lavender, and a choice of four others chosen from herbs typical of this season such as yarrow. Folks would feast, dance and jump the fire for luck and fertility. The herds were driven through the embers in days long ago to purge disease and illness from them. When the fires had burned down, folks would carry ashes back to their homes to sprinkle on fields, the four corners, and lay embers on the hearth. Ashes bring powers of protection, health and luck.

Water is the other important aspect of Midsummer. In times past folks swam in waters that flowed towards the rising sun as it climbed in Midsummer morning sky. Bathing in springs and rivers on Midsummer brings healing, cleansing and protection. The dew of Midsummer is said to bestow health to whomever drinks of it. Especially powerful is fetching running water of Midsummer morn and mixing it with ashes from the bonfire, sprinkling it around the house, yard and on oneself bestows protection and luck.

Midsummer is the time of sweet strawberries, blueberries, cherries, blackberries and more. New potatoes, lettuce, peas, carrots, radishes and onions are ready for picking. Tarragon, chamomile, sweet woodruff, St. John's wort, hyssop, lovage, mint and other herbs are fresh and delightfully robust. Bee balm, phylox, oxeye daisies, roses, lily of the valley, calendulas, St John's wort, marigolds and others are in bloom, it is a time of olfactory abundance. Foods and decorations center around what nature has bestowed, rich, colorful and flavorful - mint iced teas, dandelion salads, strawberry shortcakes, geranium leaf sorbet, berry pies, daisy chains, lavender wreaths, rosemary garlands. The pure enjoyment that only summer fresh foods, sweet summer flowers and joyful company that only midsummer can bestow.

Midsummer is the time when everything is abundant and flourishing. Flowers smell their sweetest, colors are their most vibrant, trees are their greenest, berries are their sweetest, and faeries are their most playful, it is the time that nature's lavishness has reached a pinnacle point. It is said that during a full moon on Midsummer Eve a mortal may witness fairy dances and celebrations. Be sure to leave an offering for the fey on Midsummer eve, so they may think fondly of you and yours.

The passion at Midsummer has escalated from the playfulness of Beltane to a more fervent intensity. Couples who handfasted the year before at Beltane, tend to marry in a more formal handfasting at Midsummer or Lughnasadh. Divination on matters of love are especially powerful Midsummer's eve. In Scandinavian countries, the night before Midsummer, every young girl places a bunch of flowers tied with nine pieces of grass or nine flowers under her pillow, upon which she will sleep and dream of her future husband. In Ireland the young lasses place yarrow under her pillow to dream of her mate.

The moon of Midsummer have a few names one being the Honey Moon, as this is a time when the hives are been rich in honey, which gathered and fermented into a drink known as mead, customarily, drunk at wedding parties. Mead is rumored to be an aphrodisiac; thus we can observe the roots of modern day marriage practices and "honeymoons", in their Pagan soil.

This being the season of passion, will, strength and surprisingly that of soothing love - Midsummer is the perfect time to understand the dynamic aspects of passion, will, strength and the need of the corresponding gentle aspects that love can bestow. The Sun and fire, akin to the Spirit upon which we ride, is coupled with, the Soul, the softening Lunar and water influence. Spirit without Soul is ego in a frenzy whereas Soul without Spirit languishes, there needs to be a proper balance between Fire and Water; Sun and Moon; Spirit and Soul. For it is only through understanding these dynamics, acknowledging our deep pounding passions, our intense sense of will, and the strength united with the gentility of love that is bestow upon us can we utilize them correctly. Giving us a sense of purpose, a direction, a heartfelt and determined course upon which we can set sail. For these passions, will take us to heights unseen, will fuel our creativity, and bring us into realms unrealized in the mundane mind and life.

It is through this season that we can see the beauty of life, the intensity of being, the rapture of passion, the exhilaration of awareness, possibilities of creation and the surprising tenderness of love. For it is passion and love that have driven humankind to realize some of its greatest treasures and its most extreme violations. It is only through awareness and conscious action that passion can bring us to the zenith of existence. This is the time to experience our passions and the force within, to be conscious of how we use them and the gifts they can bring and experience our own true power.

Blessed Midsummer to you and yours!