When I was little, one of my favorite times of the day was after baths and before bed. We would gather on the sofa with either Mom or Dad and be read a story. I must admit, one of my least favorites was Aesop's fables… at 4, I just didn't get it! Aesop tells the fable of a frog who wanted desperately to escape the confines of his small pond, to see the larger world, to climb to new heights. So one day the frog asked a stork standing at the edge of the pond if he could hitch a ride with the stork on the bird’s next flight. The stork agreed, but as they tried to fly away from the pond, the frog soon discovered that he could not grip the stork’s body tight enough with his small hands, and he fell back into the muddy water every time. Finally the frog came up with the idea to hold on to the stork’s skinny leg with his mouth, and this time when the stork took flight, sure enough, the frog’s bite held firm, and soon they were flying high over the earth, soaring with delight at the sight of the earth’s splendor and diversity. What a strange looking pair they must have been, this stork with a frog clamped on to his leg! But as they flew over some bird watchers, the frog heard them exclaim, “What an ingenious pair! Have
you ever seen such a sight? How very clever they are! I wonder which one of them came up with that idea?” To which the frog, swelling with pride at their compliments, and wanting to claim credit for the cleverness, blurted out, “I DID!"

Of course, he realized too late that when we opened his mouth to speak, he also lost his grip on the flying stork. And so Aesop finished the fable with the well known phrase: “Beware, pride goeth before a fall.”

It’s hard to be humble, isn’t it? And especially if you are genius (Pause…..) like the frog. Yet the great lives in human history are usually marked by humility, aware that they got where they are by the joint effort of many others, who are uncomfortable accepting the accolades and praise heaped upon them by the adoring crowd. Listen to the star athlete (The Most Valuable Player) as she shares the credit and the glory of victory with the rest of her team, or the powerful and successful businessman who treats the lowest person in the organization with
respect and dignity because he never forgot how the business was built on the hard work of so many employees, or his own humble origins before he sat in the corner office.

Our Scriptures today gives us a glimpse into profound humility resident within one of great and unusual giftedness. We go back to the story of John the Baptist, this time a page from his life. Unlike Mark’s Gospel which we read last week, who emphasized the scruffy appearance and rough-hewn preaching style of John the Baptist, the story in today’s Gospel emphasizes the humility of the Baptizer. With the whole country pouring out to his wilderness camp meeting, with his popularity soaring in the polls, it was only natural that a groundswell of curiosity began to swirl around him. People wondered if he was the prophet foretold by Malachi at the close of the Old Testament, one whose coming would usher in a new golden age of God’s reign. For over four centuries the people of Israel waited and hoped for that magical day—a day when God would speak with fresh and direct power to His people again, a day when Israel would be restored to her former
glory, a day when all of their national nostalgia and religious hopes could come together again. And so the rumor mill was operating at full tilt, asking the question, “Could this rugged desert preacher be ‘the One’?”

How tempting it must have been for John to just accept the adoration of the crowd, to be crowned as the long-awaited Prophet, the one who would usher in the Kingdom of God! All he had to do was say, “yes,” (or perhaps just remain silent to the question, and allow the speculation to continue to build and swirl). He had power and glory, comfort and adoration, served up to him on a platter. All he had to do was accept it. *(How many of us would be able to resist that temptation?)* From politicians to corporate bosses to adolescents just trying to fit into a new school, we are tempted to sell our souls for a chance at the offer given to John the Baptist.

“Who are you?” they asked. John simply and consistently pointed beyond himself to the Christ who was coming. I am merely a
forerunner, a trumpet announcing the arriving King, a voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. For all of his immense popularity, John said he still could not imagine even being worthy to stoop at the feet of the real Messiah.

Where does humility like that come from? How could we get more of that? Wouldn’t the world be better, (wouldn’t we be better), if there was more of John the Baptist’s humility and less of the unbridled hubris and pride we see all around us (and sometimes within us)? There seem to be two sources of this humility, and we would be well served to draw from these same two wells.

First, John never forgot that his true identity (and affirmation!) had to be anchored in God Himself. The opinion polls of humanity are fickle. So the wise person learns to hold the adoration of the crowd at arm’s length, to keep from being sucked into the syrupy trap of sweet—(but temporary) applause. Rudyard Kipling advised his 12 year old son, “When you meet with Triumph and Disaster, … treat both those imposters just the same . . .” Nothing is more addictive, able to create a
lifetime of dependency, than the allure from the applause of the crowd. But though the crowd applauded John the Baptist, he kept his ear attuned only to the applause of heaven, and allowed that to drown out the sound of all others.

The second source of John’s humility was his absolute clarity of his identity and place in the world. No matter what titles the world tried to hoist upon him, John was always clear about his role. He was the *announcer*, not the *main act itself*. He was the *opening act*, not the *headliner*. He was the *appetizer*, not the *entrée*. How many times do we see someone who shines in their appropriate role, using their gifts and graces as God intended, and because they do that role well, are tempted to accept a “promotion” to another role the world says is due them, only to fail because that new role demands skills and gifts to which they are not suited? They may move up the corporate ladder, they may receive a more impressive title on their business card, but along the way they lose their first love, their joy, and their sense of purpose. (Don’t we so recognize this that we have a name for it: “The Peter Principle”?) They
have become a shepherd boy trying to fight Goliath in a king’s armor, when all they needed was a humble slingshot and smooth stone.

35 years ago tomorrow, I was ordained. “Could you please tell me why you chose this date?” my mother asked with her life filled with all that comes with a family of 6 children, and Christmas just 10 days away! Fruitcakes to make, cookies to bake, gifts to shop for and wrap, now hours at the sewing machine making dresses for the girls! “Are you nuts?” she must have thought! I was somewhat embarrassed at the question, but the reason is today’s main character. It was my goal never to forget that it is my job (and ours?) to prepare the way… not to be the messiah! It is a crazy season, but 35 years later, I stick with my choice and look to John the Baptist as the model for my ministry.

Remember the lesson of the frog and the stork; there is no limit how high one might fly, or how far they might go, as long as we don’t mind who gets the credit!