

*One warm summer's night I stood outside my observatory in a glade in a forest in North America looking up to a display of the Northern Lights. Tall pillars and fiery glows of red and green marched and shot across the sky. Much closer, fireflies were sparking in the undergrowth all around, a flash from one triggering a response from another. The fireflies stimulated each other into a frenzy. To my great astonishment, I saw that the fireflies had started to respond to the aurora, a bright surge in the sky triggering the fireflies to flash back en masse. The fireflies were responding to the cosmos.*

This is Cambridge astronomer, Paul Murdis, introducing a book on the universe seeking to explore how human beings have, in their turn, responded to the cosmos. And it put me in mind of our need and ability to respond to the aurora of God, to the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, promptings of God's spirit and this, especially, on a day when we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist, last in a line of prophets able to read and signify the coming of Christ. This is a man of prayer, in search of God and able then to resonate with God's will for Israel and, indeed, for all of us, in the mould of such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. It's an awesome prospect and one can imagine John at some point hesitating, just as his forbears did before him, not least his father, Zechariah. Zechariah and Elizabeth are meant to invoke memories of Abraham and Sarah and it's instructive to note that both of these initially 'laughed' at the idea of becoming parents again. But, fortunately, all eventually accede to God's vision and will for them. It's no different for us now: for the holy lineage to continue, we too need to read and signify the 'signs of the times', like fireflies in tune with the greater cosmos of God's love.

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