LEAVETAKING OF THE THEOPHANY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST
January 14

THE GOSPEL READING
Matthew 4:12-17
[Repentance and the Kingdom]

At that time, when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

THE SERMON

Repentance is the key that opens the door to the Kingdom of God. It is the narrow road that leads to eternal life, to the land where there is no sorrow, no sighing, no pain. It is the beginning and middle of our journey, and it is the gate of Paradise. It is no accident that Saint John the Baptist and Christ started their respective ministries with the words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

After Saint John the Baptist had appeared in the desert preaching repentance, Jesus came to him to be baptized. On the Feast of Epiphany (from Greek Ἐπιφάνεια, meaning “manifestation”), also called Theophany (from Greek Θεοφάνεια, meaning a visible “mani-
festation of God” to humankind), the Trinity (the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit) was revealed. The heavens were opened, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove upon Christ.

The voice of God the Father came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” The Holy Trinity was manifested at this moment, through God’s love for us, at the very beginning of the Son’s earthly ministry. The Father speaks, and the Holy Spirit comes upon the Son — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; three Persons existing as one God and being manifested and revealed to us for our salvation.

After the Incarnation and before the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the ministry of Christ consisted in preaching the Gospel by words and deeds. Jesus grew up in the area called Galilee, where Nazareth and Capernaum were neighboring towns. This is north of Jerusalem, and it took several days’ journey to travel between them.

While the Lord visited different areas and journeyed to Jerusalem at least three separate times for the feast of Passover, His ministry was based in Galilee. Nazareth and Capernaum, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, and the holy sites in that area, are still there and can be visited today, as well as several monasteries.

That area called Galilee was the place where the ancient Jewish tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali were established. During the time of the Old Testament, many people still practiced pagan religions there. There was a mixed population of Jewish and non-Jewish people who did not worship the God of Israel. As such, Christ’s ministry, from the beginning, brought the light of the Gospel to those areas. As Prophet Isaiah says, the people walking in the darkness of paganism saw a great light, which shone upon the shadow of death.

In the Gospel, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life.” The appearance of our Savior Jesus Christ abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. As He appeared and began His ministry, He taught us to embark on the road to repentance. It is a road that leads us away from selfishness and toward God.

Repentance, from the Greek word “metanoia” (μετάνοια), means a change of mind, a change of heart, a transformation of our purpose, our vision, and a reorientation towards loving others and loving God more fully. Saint Gregory Palamas says, “Repentance means hating sin and loving virtue, turning away from evil and doing good ... being penitent before God, fleeing to Him for refuge with a contrite heart, and casting ourselves into the ocean of His mercy.”

As we celebrate on Theophany, in Holy Baptism we are reborn, which is the beginning of our life story. The Holy Spirit comes upon us, and in a very real sense, God the Father says, this is my son, or my daughter, in whom I am well pleased. Repentance is the compass that leads us to the right destination. It is our spiritual journey. The light of Christ begins to shine in our hearts, like the light of creation, and the light that illumined Zebulun and Naphtali. Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, shines in and through us.
Turning to Christ is how we participate daily in God's redemptive work. As we grow into the likeness of God, we begin to imitate or resemble Christ in His virtue and love. We begin to bear the image of immortality, of the heavenly Father. This is done through prayer, through constant awareness of the presence of the Lord who loves us, and participation in the sacramental life of the Church.

Christ is the incarnate Word of God, so it is fitting that He begins His public ministry with the words of eternal life. The “Kingdom of Heaven,” which we also call the “Kingdom of God,” is present in Christ, and to live in the presence of Christ is to live in that Kingdom. In this way, there is both an “already” and a “not yet” in our lives. The Kingdom is “already” with us in Christ, and we enter in it in our spiritual life with Him, especially in the Divine Liturgy and the Eucharist. At the same time, we expect the “not yet,” that is, the second coming of Christ, both for us and for the world. Saint John the Baptist announced that the Kingdom of Heaven was coming, and now Christ says the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. It is here, and it starts with Him and with us in Him.

Repentance is a journey, so it is not something that we fully achieve and finish at some point in this life. It is a constant striving, a life-long opening of the heart to Christ and others, and a rejection of selfish and sinful things. Even the great Saints of God often realized that they had only begun to repent.

Saint Maria of Paris, on the occasion of the grief she experienced with the death of her sister, said, “I still do not know the meaning of repentance, but now I am shocked at my own insignificance . . . I want an authentic and purified road . . . No amount of thought will ever result in any greater formulation than the three words, ‘Love one another,’ so long as it is love to the end and without exceptions. And then the whole of life is illumined.”

We always rejoice in hope, for Christ is with us and has brought us into His Kingdom. He brings us into that Kingdom every time we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, which is why we begin with the words, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.” The Kingdom comes to us — that is, Christ comes to us — and we mystically enter the Kingdom in the Liturgy, which culminates with our union with Christ and one another as we receive His Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

Our union with God through Jesus Christ continues in our daily lives through faith, love, prayer, and service. It continues as we open ourselves to the love of God through repentance.

We are like the people of Galilee, Zebulun, and Naphtali. A great Light has shone in the dark regions of the world and in our hearts. The Uncreated Light of God, that is, His own love and power, shines upon us, shines in us, and shines through us. It transforms us. Let us be diligent not to hide this light “under a basket,” as the Lord says (Matthew 5:15). We are the light of the world, and it is our joy and privilege to let our light so shine before
others so that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.