SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
January 9

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

After John the Forerunner had appeared in the desert preaching repentance, Jesus came to him to be baptized. When Jesus was baptized, which we commemorate on the Feast of Theophany (meaning the “manifestation of God”), the Trinity was revealed, for “the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’” (Matthew 3:16-17). The Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together – three Persons, one God, one will – was manifested in this moment, through God’s love for us, at the very beginning of the Son’s earthly
ministry. This is one way we might understand the “great light” mentioned in the Gospel reading, for here we see the Triune God revealed with astounding clarity and glory.

It is interesting to note that when Jesus heard that John the Baptist was put in prison, He departed to Galilee. Why would Christ leave when His cousin, the Prophet whom He called the greatest born of women, was arrested? Would it not be more natural to help someone you love? There are three reasons for this. First, because it teaches us that we are never to seek out persecution (which Christ would likely have incurred), but rather endure it if it comes to us. As Saint John Chrysostom says, “Why does He depart? . . . [He was] instructing us not to go to meet temptations, but to give place and withdraw ourselves. For it is no reproach, the not casting one’s self into danger, but the failing to stand manfully when fallen into it.” Second, because it teaches us that discernment – that is, spiritual insight – is a gift that helps us understand the will of God, and in this case, the preaching of the Gospel was the clear priority. The Forerunner’s work was accomplished, but Christ was just beginning His ministry; being arrested at this stage might have undermined His mission. Third, because the transition from John’s mission to Christ’s mission signified a shift from spiritual preparation to the arrival of the very Kingdom of God. John himself knew this, and so he said, “This joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:29-30).

The entire ministry of Christ was the preaching of the Gospel, both by words and deeds, in a journey that would lead to the Cross in Jerusalem and finally culminate in the Resurrection. This journey is connected thematically to a series of journeys Christ made from Galilee to Jerusalem. While the Lord visited different areas, and journeyed to Jerusalem at least three separate times for the feast of Passover, His ministry was always based in Galilee, where He was raised. Towards the end of His ministry, we read in Luke that “it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Now as He begins his ministry, Christ withdraws to Capernaum (by the Sea of Galilee) and fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah: “O country of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, and the rest dwelling along the seacoast and parts of Judea, and the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, a people who walk in darkness, behold a great light; and you who dwell in the country of the shadow of death, upon you a light will shine” (Isaiah 9:1-2).

The people who sat in darkness and saw a great light are, ultimately, all of us because the Light of our lives is the Lord Jesus. Without fellowship with Him we lack hope, life, peace, and light. The region of Galilee had many non-Jews, called Gentiles, who were not worshippers of the God of Israel. They served many different deities and had many pagan practices, so there was the darkness of ungodliness throughout the region. These Gentiles were ignorant of God, and the Jews were under the shadow of the Old Covenant, and their combined spiritual circumstances likewise constituted a kind of spiritual darkness. However, when the “Sun of Righteousness [arose] with healing in His
wings” (Malachi 3:20), God commanded light to shine out of darkness, and “shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Even though Christ was sent first to the Jewish people, in Galilee there were many former Gentiles, recently converted to Judaism, who were particularly receptive to the Gospel. He therefore shone the light of His presence among those emerging from the darkness of sin. As Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (John 8:12). Likewise, we read: “In Him was life, and life was the light of men” (John 1:4). This is the light that was revealed by “the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10).

From that time, Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). In Holy Baptism, the Lord has given us rebirth, and He has sealed us with the grace of the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption (Ephesians 4:30). However, just as birth is only the beginning of our life story, so our rebirth is only the beginning of our spiritual journey. Our continual repentance and growth in Christ is how we participate in the redemptive work of God, which begins at our baptism. We grow into the likeness of God, such that we come to imitate or resemble Christ in His virtue and love. Through repentance and by the power of the grace of God, we no longer bear the image of mortality – that is, we are no longer mere humans doomed to die – but we begin to bear the image of immortality, of the heavenly Man, the Son of God (1 Corinthians 15:49).

Similarly, the preaching of repentance by Christ is His continuation of the work of John the Baptist. The first words that the Forerunner said when he “came preaching in the wilderness of Judea” were “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:1-2). Now, the first words of the ministry of the Lord Jesus are the same. Repentance is how we enter the Kingdom. 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 – though not in the same sense that we will live there in the life to come. In this way, there is both an “already” and a “not yet” in our lives, for the Kingdom is already with us in Christ, but it is yet to come in Christ’s Second Coming; when the eternal day will dawn, and all things will be transformed by God into the New Heaven and the New Earth (Revelation 21:1; Isaiah 65:17). We experience that coming glory perhaps most profoundly in the Divine Liturgy, where we are present with Christ in a particularly intimate way. However, what first introduces us to the Kingdom of God is the ministry of Christ. John 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.

Repentance, from the Greek word “metanoia” (μετάνοια), means a change of heart, a change of mind, a transformation of our purpose, our vision, and a reorientation towards loving others and loving God more fully. As 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.” It is a departure from selfish love, which falsely exalts the sinner and objectifies others; it is a rejection of “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life,” (1 John 2:16), which are the very things with which the enemy tried to tempt our Lord during His forty days in the wilderness. Christ’s will was not shaken, as the Son of God cannot and does not sin, unlike ourselves. However, it is by union with Him, and by yielding ourselves to the Holy Spirit, that we too receive His grace to turn away from sin and anything that keeps us away from God. Repentance is a continuous reorientation of our path toward greater closeness and deeper friendship with Christ, Who has loved us and gave Himself for us (Ephesians 5:2).

We should 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 with one another, as we receive His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. This union with God through Jesus Christ continues in our daily lives through our faith, love, prayers, and service. It continues as we open ourselves to the love of God through repentance. A great Light has shone in the world and in our hearts – let us be diligent to never hide this light “under a basket” (Matthew 5:14-16). You are the light of the world! Put your light on a lampstand – that is, make it visible! – so that it can shine for all to see. Let our light so shine before others, that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.