



SUNDAY AFTER NATIVITY

December 31

THE GOSPEL READING

Mark 1:1-8

[John: Forerunner of Christ]]

The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophets, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' John was baptizing in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

THE SERMON

The *beginning* of the Gospel in Mark is the coming of Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry. He has been born, He is God with us, and now He comes to encounter His people. We encounter Him as Jesus, the One who saves us from our sins. This encounter, however, is not casual, nor is it a trivial matter. It is an encounter with God, and this requires that we prepare ourselves. It requires that we "stand aright," that we "stand in awe," and that we



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“lift up our hearts” to Him, as we say in the Divine Liturgy. This means standing before God in a disposition of reverence and love. We ought to soften our hearts in order to receive the Light of God, and we prepare to receive that Light by practicing repentance.

What begins here is the *Gospel*, which means the “Good News” or “Good Message” (which is, in Greek, καλή ἀγγελία). This “Good News” is that God is among us and has come to save us from death and spiritual decay. Jesus not only speaks this Good News but demonstrates it in His life and earthly ministry. The Good News is that God has come, that the whole cosmos is being made new by His presence, and especially that in His taking up and uniting human nature to Himself, He heals it. The Good News is the message of Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection; His coming as Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, Who is the Son of God, and Who fulfills what was written in the Prophets. This fulfillment includes not only the content of the prophecies in the Old Testament, but also the manner of God’s working towards the salvation of the human race. As God sent His Word through the Prophets in the Old Testament, so now God sends John the Baptist to prepare the way of the Lord and to announce the coming of Jesus — the One who takes away the sins of the world.

As Saint John announced the coming of the Messiah, the people whose hearts were being prepared came confessing their sins and receiving a ceremonial washing in the Jordan River. This was not the Trinitarian baptism yet as Jesus instituted that later in His own baptism, which we celebrate in the Theophany. Saint John was using a Jewish ritual of repentance and ceremonial cleansing of sin. By using this kind of baptism, John the Baptist was proclaiming the need of all people to repent and turn their hearts to the Lord. As it was then, so it is now, for we also are called to turn our hearts to the love of God every day of our lives.

A life of repentance is a life continually reoriented to the love of God. The Greek term for repentance is *metanoia* (μετάνοια), which denotes a change of mind, a reorientation, a fundamental transformation of one’s outlook and one’s vision of the world and of oneself. In Christianity, it is also known as a new way of loving and knowing God and others, that is, a *spiritual conversion*. This was the significance of the baptism of John.

Saint John was the greatest of the Prophets, as Jesus says, “Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11). We read that he was clothed with camel’s hair, had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey; he lived an ascetic life, and even today is considered among the greatest models of asceticism and monastic life. He was dressed as the great Old Testament Prophet Elijah, who also encountered God in the desert and called the people of Israel to repent from their sins and return to God. He was described as “a hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist . . . Elijah the Tishbite” (4 Kingdoms 1:8).

John the Baptist lived the angelic life — that is, a minimalist life, free of worldly preoccupations — as monastics also seek to do. Church Fathers, such as Saint John Climacus, say that the light of the faithful are the monastics, and the light of the monastics are the angels. The desert had always been the place where God had taken His people to reveal His power and teach them. Recall that as Israel went out to the desert, led by Moses, God revealed Himself on Mount Sinai. It was also through the desert that He guided His people to the promised land. Therefore, it was not by accident that John the Baptist was in the desert; it was a *sign* that God was once again moving among His people to restore them and reunite them with Himself.

John the Baptist was preaching, “There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose.” Unlike the baptism of John, the Trinitarian baptism that we receive — in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — is not only for the forgiveness of sins, but through it, Christ also unites us to Himself by giving us the Holy Spirit, and bringing us to God the Father. Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit living in us is also the presence of the Father and the Son in our hearts.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus makes us participants of His divinity and children of God. Jesus baptizes us with “the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:17). As Saint Basil the Great says, “The baptism of the Lord surpasses all human powers of comprehension. It contains a glory beyond all that humanity hopes or prays for, a preeminence of grace and power which exceeds the others more than the sun outshines the stars.”

This union with God always presupposes repentance and turning to God. As Saint Ambrose of Milan says, “Repentance does not avail without grace, nor grace without repentance; for repentance must first turn away from sin that grace may blot it out. So then John came baptizing for repentance, while Christ came to offer grace.”

The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is that He has come, has become incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary (as we celebrate on the Feast of the Nativity), and He is working in the world and in our hearts for our salvation. John the Baptist, the Forerunner, was the catalyst for the encounter between the people of God and the Son of God. That is why the Church recognizes John the Baptist as having a special place in the unfolding of redemptive history. We also share in his ministry by preparing ourselves so that Christ will also be born in our hearts and work in our lives, both for our own salvation and the salvation of others.

Let us each day announce the Good News of Christ in our own lives, realizing, in this way, a daily renewal of our own baptism. We have the Holy Spirit Whom we have received from Christ. In His power, with our daily repentance, we prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts. We have the love and grace of God dwelling in us, which both enables our repentance, and rewards it with even more grace. Let us by love also prepare

the way of the Lord in our families, in our communities, in our Church, and in the world. By surrendering our hearts and lives to His love, we can live in constant reorientation of our whole beings, individually and collectively, in communion with Him who loves us.