



SUNDAY BEFORE EPIPHANY

January 2

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



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in awe,” and that we “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.

In the Old Testament book of Malachi, which Apostle Mark quotes here, we read, “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me.” Malachi goes on to add, “‘And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come into His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, whom you desire. Behold, He is coming,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Malachi 3:1). Malachi was the last prophet of the Old Testament and wrote during a time when the people of Israel had returned from exile in Babylon and felt that even though they were home once again and the temple was being rebuilt, there was still something missing. John, as the prophet of the New Testament, tells the people what – or rather Who – was missing; namely, Jesus Christ. In this way, Malachi and John form a link between the Old Testament, which deals with God’s promise to man and the hope of our salvation, and the New Testament, which deals with the fulfillment of that salvation.

The words of God recorded by the Prophet Malachi were being fulfilled here, over four hundred years later. The Lord, who is Jesus Christ, has come into His temple – that is, He has come to His creation and His people. He is the Messenger of the New Covenant, which announces the incarnation of the God of Love and the impression of that love on our hearts. He is the One who fulfills all human aspirations, all of our hope, and His cousin John the Baptist is “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.” John is also called the “Forerunner” because he went before Christ, preparing the way for His coming. In quoting this passage, Mark seems to refer to the prophecy of Isaiah (40:3), in which we also hear how, after their captivity in Babylon, God would restore the fortunes of Israel, bringing them back to

their land, and sending them the Messiah. The fuller context of this passage – perhaps one of the most beautiful in all the writings of the Prophets – reads: “‘Comfort, yes, comfort My people,’ says God . . . for Jerusalem’s [Israel’s] humiliation is ended, her sin is pardoned; for she received from the Lord’s hand double for her sins. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of our God. . . . The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God; for the Lord has spoken’” (Isaiah 40:1-5). Mark quotes that passage and applies it to John and Jesus because the time had come, the Lord was being revealed, and all people would see the salvation of God.

When Israel was delivered from Egypt by Moses, during the time of the Exodus, the people of God were, in a sense, “baptized” in the Red Sea, as Saint Paul says (1 Corinthians 10:1-14). Similarly, John was baptizing in the Jordan River while the people were in the wilderness. A New Exodus had come. Entering the water signified dying to the old life of captivity, and coming out from the water meant living again in freedom, that is, in a new life. The ultimate story of redemption was unfolding! Saint John the Baptist – he is called “the Baptist” because he baptized Christ – is that voice crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord by preparing the hearts of God’s people and announcing repentance as the way to meet the Lord.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we read that when John started his ministry, he preached in the wilderness of Judea, saying, “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2). The way of the Lord is prepared in our hearts through repentance. The Greek term for repentance, *metanoia* (μετάνοια), denotes a change of mind, a re-orientation, a fundamental transformation of one’s outlook and one’s vision of the world and oneself. In Christianity, it is also known as a new way of loving and knowing God and others – a spiritual conversion. This was the significance of the baptism of John.

As 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). 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.

John was the greatest of the prophets, as Jesus said, “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 as-

ceticism 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 sin 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).

Now, John the Baptist comes “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17), eating locusts and wild honey, dressed as a prophet who lives in the desert, prefiguring the Desert Fathers. John’s way of living was characterized by complete dependence on God, withdrawal from worldly concerns, and sincere repentance. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem says, “You may mention Elias the Tishbite who was taken up into heaven, yet he is not greater than John: Enoch was translated, but he is not greater than John: Moses was a very great lawgiver, and all the Prophets were admirable, but not greater than John. It is not I that dare to compare Prophets with Prophets: but their Master and ours, the Lord Jesus, declared it: ‘Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John’: He saith not ‘among them that are born of virgins,’ but of women.’”

John 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 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 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 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 the Lord Jesus 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. Even in the Old Testament, God had promised, “I will give water to the thirsty who walk in a waterless place. I will put My Spirit upon your seed and My blessings upon your children” (Isaiah 44:3). Jesus baptizes us with the “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 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 celebrated 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 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 Jesus 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, and 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.