



## **EVE OF THE THEOPHANY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST**

**January 5**

### **THE HYMN**

**Apolytikion, January 5**

*Jordan River once turned back when Elisha struck its stream with his mantle in the wake of Elias's ascent; and the water was parted to the one side and to the other. And thus the fluid stream became a dry way for him, a symbol and truly a type of Baptism, by which we now pass over the streaming passage of the present life. And Christ appeared at the Jordan River to sanctify the waters.*

### **THE SERMON**

**The Jordan River Turned Back**

On the eve of the Feast of the Theophany of our Lord and Savior, the hymns of the Church introduce us to the deeper essence of the Feast. Christ comes to be baptized in the Jordan River in order to pave the way for our own restoration from the sin of Adam. Holy Baptism is presented as a means of defying the fallen world and reuniting ourselves with the God of love.

Within the hymns for Theophany, we hear verses from the Psalms of David declaring that "the Jordan turned back." The Jordan River starts from two main springs, *Ior* and *Dan*. This why the River is called *Jordan* (*Ior* + *Dan*, in Greek means *Ιορδάνης*). These two smaller rivers join to form the Jordan River which eventually flows into the Dead Sea. Saint John Chrysostom explains that the Jordan River symbolizes the beginning of humankind, with Adam and Eve representing the tributaries (a river or stream flowing into a larger river



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or lake). Their collective path leads to death which is represented by the Dead Sea. But Christ comes, and with His Baptism, the flow is reversed. Humanity no longer moves toward death, but away from it, on the way to the incorruptible and the eternal.

The hymn refers to the Old Testament figures of Theophany and Baptism. Within the person of Jesus Christ and the life of the Church, the Old Testament is fulfilled. When Israel passed through the Red Sea, the body of water was split in two. Israel crossed as if on dry land: “The sea saw them and fled.”

When again the Ark of the Covenant containing the sacred relics of God’s glory (the tablets with the ten commandments, the rod of Aaron and the manna of the desert) together with Israel reached the Jordan River, the river “turned back,” and once more the people of God were able to cross with the Ark as if on dry land.

When for the third time the Prophet Elijah wanted to cross the Jordan River, he struck it with his mantle, and the river was divided. The water left, it turned back, and the Prophet Elijah together with his disciple Elisha crossed as if on dry land.

These three great miracles serve to reveal to us how it is now *our* turn; as the New Israel, led by Christ Himself, to pass from sin to virtue, to go from deceitfulness to incorruptibility, to become God’s adopted children instead of being spiritual orphans, to advance from delusion to truth, from darkness to light. Our passage takes place through Baptism where our old self dies. We are born again in newness according to Christ. We also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the life-giving power of God. The Holy Spirit is God who comes to dwell in us and abide with us forever.

Paradoxically, while the Jordan River “turned back” when the Ark of the Covenant or the Prophet Elijah crossed — its waters were not divided when God Himself entered them in order to be baptized. The theological tradition of the Church teaches that the Jordan River, emblematic of the fallen nature of the world, recognized its Creator and longed to embrace Him, to receive His blessing, to be sanctified. The Baptism of Christ sanctifies and renews all of Creation, not just humanity. Also, just as the water embraced the Body of Christ and was itself sanctified, so the water of the baptismal font at our Baptism embraces our body. Through the sanctified water of the baptismal font, we become sanctified and can finally reunite ourselves to our Creator.

On the eve of the Theophany of the Lord, our Church prescribes a day of fasting to better prepare for the celebration of the great Feast not only spiritually but also physically. Sisters and brothers, with the love of Christ in our hearts, let us fully prepare ourselves to participate in the celebration of Theophany with faith and reverence. Let us receive the sanctification of both soul and body. With the light of Christ, let us glow brightly just like at our Baptism. Let us glorify the Triune God who descends into the Jordan River to embrace us all.