

## ~ The Feast of the Theophany ~

The feast of the **Theophany of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ** is part of the cycle of winter feasts that are sometimes called the "Feasts of Light". These feasts -- the Nativity, Theophany, and Meeting - have a common focus: the coming of the Messiah into the world, and the beginning of His work of redemption.

On the feast of the Nativity (also called Christmas) on December 25, we celebrated the birth of the eternal Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, as an infant in Bethlehem of Judaea:

Because the Lord Jesus was born of the holy Virgin, all creation is enlightened. Behold! The shepherds keep watch and the Magi are adoring; the angels are singing hymns of praise, and Herod is trembling; for the Savior of our souls has revealed himself in the flesh. (*Lamp lighting stichera of Vespers*)

This revelation was, in a sense, "private" - to those "in the neighborhood" - even though all creation, and all human beings both Jew and Gentile, were included at least by representatives. As we hear in the Scripture readings, and will commemorate on the feast of the Meeting on February 2, the first thirty years of the life of our Lord Jesus were hidden. His public ministry began with his **baptism in the Jordan River**, which we commemorate on the feast of Theophany:

At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. Immediately on coming up out of the water, he saw the sky rent in two and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. Then a voice came from the heavens: "You are my beloved son. On you my favor rests." (Mark 1: 9-11)

This feast is celebrated on January 6, and is counted one of the Twelve Great Feasts of the church. In the Byzantine Catholic Church, it is a holyday of obligation. In Slavonic, it is called **Bohojavlenije** ("appearance of God", i.e. theophany) or **Prosvišćenije** ("enlightenment").

## Meaning of the Feast

Theophany is very much a multi-faceted feast; among its many themes:

- The coming of the Savior as "enlightenment" and "revelation"
- Baptism - the cleansing of sin by water and the Spirit
- The regeneration of the natural world by the Savior's coming
- The revelation of the Holy Trinity

## **Enlightenment**

God began the creation with light (Gen 1:3), which contrasted with the formlessness that had gone before; light came to serve as a symbol of knowledge and spiritual vision. By contrast, sin is often seen as an absence of God's light, compounded by the use of darkness to hide one's sins. Thus, revelation is seen as the coming of light - light to see one's spiritual surroundings, and be able to walk, without stumbling, in the right direction.

Throughout the Old Testament, God was associated with light or brightness; those who saw God, such as Moses, shone with light. The coming Messiah was portrayed as the dawn, who would lead his people by God's light. Thus, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesied: "He, the Dayspring (dawn), shall visit us in his mercy, to shine on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Thus, the revelation or revealing of the Kingdom of God consists of the bringing of light - God's light - to the people "who sit in darkness". That is why our Lord said of Himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the light."

## **Baptism**

The prophet and Baptist John, a cousin of the Lord, came to prepare the way of the Lord. He did this by proclaiming a "baptism of repentance which led to the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). The word baptism comes from the Greek work for "to dip" or "to wash", and symbolic washings were used throughout the history of Judaism as an external symbol of an internal purification. John told the people that he was not himself the Messiah, but that one was coming who would baptize them "in the Holy Spirit and in fire" (Luke 3:16).

Jesus went to John to be baptized. The Lord had no need of repentance, or forgiveness of sins; in response to John's protest, He says that he wishes John to baptize Him "if we would fulfill all of God's demands." In doing so, He identifies himself with the fallen people he has come to save, and shows them the step they must take to inaugurate the new life of the kingdom of God which John had been preaching: repent of their sins, and accept baptism. John's protest makes it plain that recognizes Who it is that is coming to him, while the Lord's response makes it clear that it is not the status of the earthly minister of baptism which matters, but the will of God, and his desire to save His people from their sins.

In the early Church, baptism itself was often called "Enlightenment" - the enlightenment of the individual believer. Thus, light and water, illumination and purification, are all connected with baptism.

## **The renewal of creation**

The hymns of the feast speak of the Lord's baptism as a victory over sin, and also the effects of sin in creation. It is not only mankind which is enlightened, but the natural world as well. The Lord's baptism in the Jordan leads to the cleansing and blessing of the very waters of the Jordan, and outward to the entire created world.

## **The revelation of the Trinity**

Christ's baptism was immediately followed by a voice from heaven, and the descent of the Holy Spirit, as we hear in the Troparion of Theophany:

At your baptism in the Jordan, O Lord, worship of the Trinity was revealed;  
for the Father's voice bore witness to you, calling you his beloved Son,  
and the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed the truth of these words.  
O Christ God, you appeared and enlightened the world. Glory to you!

This is considered by the Church fathers to be the first clear revelation to mankind of the Triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This revelation is a continuing theme of the feast.

## **The River Jordan**

The river Jordan flows south through Israel and Judea, from Galilee south to the Dead Sea. It is this river that the Israelites crossed over to enter the Promised Land. In fact, Moses himself was not permitted to cross over Jordan; it was not until after his death and burial that his assistance Joshua (whose name means "salvation", and is the Hebrew form of the Greek name "Jesus") led the people of Israel across the river. When the priests, carrying the Ark of the Covenant, stepped into the water, the river itself ceased to flow, so that the people could cross "as on dry land." This is commemorated in Psalm 113:

When Israel came forth from Egypt,  
Jacob's sons from an alien people  
Judah became the Lord's temple,  
Israel became his kingdom.

The sea saw and fled; Jordan was turned back.  
The mountains leapt like rams  
and the hills like yearling sheep.

Why is it, O sea, that you fled;  
O Jordan, that you turned back?  
Mountains, that you leapt like rams;  
hills, like yearling sheep?

Tremble, O earth, before the Lord,  
in the presence of the God of Jacob,  
who turns the rock into a pool  
and flint into a spring of water.

And again, the Jordan parted to make way for the prophets Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2), and it was in Jordan that Elisha commanded Naaman the Syrian to wash, if he wished to be cured of leprosy (2 Kings 5).

Thus, the river Jordan represented a boundary that had to be crossed in order to enter a land special to God; a boundary involving purification, and a river which itself responded to God's presence. In the hymns of Theophany, we will see that it is not only John who protests at the Lord's coming for baptism, but the river as well, as a symbol of the natural world. Yet once accomplished, both man and nature hail the resulting advent of salvation.

## **Preparation for the Feast**

There is no preparatory season of fasting before Theophany, as there is before the Nativity; fasting is limited to a single day, the vigil (see below).

On January 1, we commemorated the Lord's circumcision, and his hidden life in Nazareth. On the days from January 2 through January 4, we sing the Troparion of the Pre-feast of Theophany:

Zebulon, make ready; Naphtali, prepare yourself.

O River Jordan, stand and leap for joy to receive the Master coming to be baptized.

O Adam, rejoice with the first mother, Eve, and do not hide yourselves  
as once you did in Paradise.

For, seeing you naked, Christ has appeared to put on the first robe.

He has appeared to renew all creation.

(Zebulon and Naphtali are territories near Capernaum, where our Lord would go to live following the arrest of John the Baptist; it was here that he would begin his preaching, in accordance with the prophecies of Isaiah; see Matthew 4: 12-17.)

There are also special readings for the Saturday and Sunday before Theophany, if these fall on the days from January 2 through January 5. At the Divine Liturgy on these days, we read from the letters of Saint Paul to Timothy about the Lord's coming appearance, and Paul's eagerness to behold it; and we hear the Gospel account of the ministry of John the Baptist.

January 5 is celebrated as a solemn vigil (related to similar vigils on the day before Christmas and Pascha). A strict fast is held, accompanied by the singing of the Royal Hours recounting the prophecies of the Messiah and the Gospel accounts of the events surrounding His birth. (This fast day, and the Royal Hours, are anticipated on the preceding Friday if January 5 falls on a Saturday or Sunday.)

## **Liturgical Services of the Feast**

The service of Vespers on the afternoon or evening of January 5 marks the transition from the pre-festive days of Theophany to the feast itself. When this day falls on a weekday, Vespers is combined with the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil, which thus forms a fitting ending to the fasting of the day of Vigil. (The Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil is not only the older liturgy of the city of Constantinople, home of the Byzantine Rite; its prayers recount the whole history of salvation, making it particularly appropriate on the eves of the great feasts of our redemption, Christmas, Theophany and Pascha.)

During the evening of January 5, the service of Great Compline is held. This service of Psalms and hymns, with its great liturgical hymn God is with us, is accompanied by litija - a procession to the narthex or "porch" of the church, where prayers are said for the well-being of the whole world.

Traditionally, the service of Matins is celebrated immediately after Compline, to form a night-time vigil, like that of Christmas. The hymns of Great Compline and Matins are particularly rich in imagery and theology.

On the morning of January 6, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated - of Saint John Chrysostom if the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil was used the previous evening, and of Saint Basil otherwise. The Communion Hymn at this service summarizes the meaning of the feast: "The saving grace of God has appeared to all. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

The Great Blessing of Water - one of the most solemn blessings of the Church year - is also part of the celebration of Theophany. The Typikon actually appoints that this blessing be performed twice: on the eve of the feast, after Vespers, water is blessed in the church; and on the morning of Theophany, after the Divine Liturgy, priest and people make their way to a body of "living water" - a river, stream, or lake - to bless the water there. The water thus blessed is called "Jordan water", and the blessing, "the blessing of Jordan."

Among Ruthenians in Europe, the feast of Theophany (like most Sundays and great feast-days) was concluded with the Vespers of the following day (in this case, January 7, the Synaxis of Saint John the Baptist). The celebration of this service in the late afternoon or evening was also kept by the Russian Orthodox "Old Believers" [more properly called "Old Ritualists"]

## Popular Customs

On the evening of June 5, after Vespers and before Compline, it is traditional to hold a Holy Supper (*Svjatyj Večer*) which is meatless but festive. If such a supper was not held at Christmas, having a parish supper at Theophany might be a good way to bring the congregation together to continue the celebration of the winter feasts.

After the Great Blessing of Water, the faithful may drink some of the newly-blessed Jordan water, and take some home for use in blessings, or to give to anyone who is ill during the year. After Theophany, pastors usually bless the homes of the faithful, using the Jordan water blessed in church.

## The Post-festal Period

From January 5 through January 14, the Church celebrates post-festive days of the Theophany.

**January 7** is the **Synaxis of Saint John the Baptist** - one of those days immediately following a great feast, on which we commemorate a figure closely associated with it. In this case, the feast

of the Theophany is followed by a day to commemorate and consider the role of John the Baptist in the inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

On the **Saturday after Theophany**, we hear the Gospel account of the temptation of Christ in the desert, which immediately followed his baptism (Matthew 4: 1-11). The Epistle reading (Ephesians 6:10-17) exhorts us to "stand firm against the tactics of the devil" and resist temptations in our own lives.

On the **Sunday after Theophany**, the Gospel account (Matthew 4: 12-17) mentions the arrest of John the Baptist, and the beginning of the Lord's preaching ministry.

January 14 is the **leave-taking**, or last post-festive day, of the Theophany; the Divine Liturgy for this day repeats most of the hymns of the feast.

## Recommended Reading

- *The Byzantine Rite Celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord, with the Traditional Blessing of the Water and the Blessing of Homes*. Byzantine Leaflet Series, No. 9. (Pittsburgh: Byzantine Seminary Press, December 1977).
- Father Thomas Hopko. *The Winter Pascha*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984). An excellent account of the feasts of the Nativity and Theophany.

[http://www.metropolitancantorinstitute.org/liturgy/Theophany\\_1.html](http://www.metropolitancantorinstitute.org/liturgy/Theophany_1.html)