

Daniel & the Three Youths

On December 17 we remember Daniel & the three youths in Babylon who refused to bow down and worship the king's idol. Unlike St. Nicholas' feast this day is a conscious choice to connect the feast with Nativity. We are reminded that from ages past those who follow the will of God will sometimes suffer. This same image is connected with Pascha. The church sees the youths in the fire as a symbol for the time spent by Christ in the tomb. We read this story in scripture on Holy Saturday and the lector sings the hymn of victory of the youths to close the story. In celebrating this feast in December we see another connection between Christ's birth and his Resurrection.

In the story of the youths the king sees a fourth person in fire with them. Judaism sees this as the angel sent by God to protect the faithful ones from the flames. Christianity identifies this fourth person as Jesus. He came to save us the same way he saves the youths from the king's wrath. The church's liturgy uses this story as the basis for two of the nine matins canons, odes seven and eight. This central image of Christ's saving grace is seen throughout the year.

The power of fire has often been used as an image for God, especially the destructive power of God's wrath. God asked the Jewish people to sacrifice animals. The summit of those sacrifices is a holocaust offering, an animal burned whole. Fire is the image of our own purification in the letters of Paul. We can expect to be saved as running through a house on fire. The quality of our own work in building that house will protect us from the flames.

God revealed his holy name to Moses from the fire of the burning bush. Here we saw a special nature of the fire of God, flames without the tree being destroyed and consumed. We can pass through the fire without harm, just like the burning bush, just like the youths cast into fire by the king of Babylon. Mary is the first to experience this. Mary is the burning bush. She takes the presence of God, the fire of God, within herself but she is not destroyed. The hymns of our liturgy constantly equate the Mother of God to the burning bush of old. Just as God came upon the bush and revealed his name to the people, God came upon Mary and revealed his name, Jesus, to us.

“The dew-moistened furnace was the image of an incomprehensible wonder. It did not burn the youths entrapped there, just as the fire of the Godhead did not consume the Virgin's womb in which He dwelt. Therefore, let us praise God, saying: Let all creation bless the Lord and exalt Him above all forever.”

Nativity Canon Ode 8

Steve Puluka

Phillipian Fast

The Winter Pascha

Week Two



Although created in the image of God, humankind fell from the divine and higher life, and through transgression became entirely subject to corruption and decay. But now the all-good Creator fashions human nature anew; for this reason, we glorify Him.

Nativity Canon Ode 1

Saint Nicholas

Saint Nicholas is perhaps the most closely linked saint to the Christmas season by popular culture over the years. His life of gift giving and firm defense of the faith connect him with the spirit of Christmas for us. But this connection is almost an accident of history, if the arrangement of the feasts of the church could be called accidental. Saints days are on the calendar for the day the saint fell asleep in the Lord. On December 6 we remember Saint Nicholas. The proximity of his feast day to the feast of the Nativity is the “accident of history”. At the same time the Nativity was set

“We journeyed through all Jerusalem, duly fulfilling the words of the prophecy; for we had heard that God threatened to search her; and by the star we went around desiring to see a great judgment; but it was not found, because the Ark had been taken away, the ark with the beautiful things of old it contained. Ancient things were set aside, and all things were renewed by a newborn babe, the God before time.”

Magi in
Romanos'
Kontakia

for December 25 in Rome to help counteract the pagan festival of the God Saturn. This feast was celebrated by the exchanging of gifts. As with many non-Christian customs, the church took over the festival and the customs and gave them a new meaning. Saint Nicholas gave of his wealth to help others throughout his life. Connecting this giving to the feast of the Nativity and the pagan custom of gift giving was an easy transition.

On Saint Nicholas' day we again sing the canon of the Nativity. We link the celebrations. Saint Nicholas is the model for all Bishops. His hymn of praise becomes the one we use for any bishop on the calendar. His generous actions make him a strong reminder of the call of Christ.

We are quick to call people good in this day and age. We often here people who have committed terrible acts or horrible crimes referred to as “good” people. We don't want to offend anyone. During his ministry Jesus called us to a higher standard in his encounter with the Pharisees in Matthew 18. “Why do you call me good? none is good except God.” In all the good that we do as Christians we acknowledge the source of that goodness, not ourselves. Nicholas exemplified this behavior. His acts of charity were done in secret.

Immediately after our Baptism we are anointed with the Chrism, myrrh. This anoints us into our vocation in the Christian people. The oil is full of fragrance that fills the air all around us. Our presence for that day brightens the room. Everyone is reminded of the blessings that come from God and the good gifts given to us, symbolized by this fragrant oil. During the feast of Nicholas we connect this fragrant myrrh with our ACTIONS as Christians. Our lives must reflect the office granted us after our Baptism. Our deeds become the oil that anoints others.

“O Bishop and Father Nicholas, while alive in Myra, you manifested yourself as a learned man anointed with spiritual myrrh. You made the world fragrant with the myrrh of your miracles. You continue to pour out your myrrh, both through the fragrance of your words and through our continual remembrance of you.”

St. Nicholas Sessional Hymn

“O Anne, the One who made waters gush forth from a rock bestows as a fruit of your womb, the ever-virgin Lady. Through her, our salvation will come. Because of this you were delivered from shame. No longer will you be on earth as a fruitless soil, for you have produced an earth which will bring forth the Tree of Life. According to his will, He delivered the human race from all shame when he became man out of his compassionate mercy.”

Conception of St. Anne Vespers

Conception of Saint Anne

In the fullness of time God sent his Son, born of a virgin in a miraculous way. But long before the Nativity God prepared the way by making the mother of God's birth miraculous as well. Anne was barren and advanced in years, well beyond the normal age for bearing children. But God intervened for the couple to prepare the way for the incarnation. God promised Sarah she would bear children but she did not have any until she was advanced in years beyond child birth. This sign, bearing a child out of time, heralds great people in scripture.

Our journey to the feast of the birth of Christ is an orderly progression during the fall. We see Mary born on September 8. She enters the temple on November 21 and Christ is Born on December 25. Just before the Nativity we are reminded of the special manner that Mary was born to prepare us for the even more wonderful manner that Christ was born. The other pattern of time we see is the nine month cycle from conception to birth. Jesus is God incarnate, a perfect man. He is born exactly nine months after his conception. But Mary is still human, she is born one day less than nine months later.

Mary is of the created earth, but she is the perfect vessel of creation. We link her to the temple, God's dwelling place, since she carried God in her womb. But we also see the miracles of the exodus as an announcement of Mary's role in salvation. The rock that gave water in the desert, the very earth that gives life itself, are types of Mary. The Church sees creation gone wrong in Adam and Eve while Jesus becomes the new Adam and Mary the new Eve to show us the way to God's salvation.

“What!” said Mary to the faithful Magi, ‘Did you pass through all Jerusalem, that city which slays prophets? How did you come without harm through a city which mistreats all? And how did you elude Herod the godless one, who inspires murders not laws?’”

Mary in
Romanos'
Kontakia