

John the Baptist

John the Baptist is the central human figure from the Baptism in the Jordan and is commemorated on January 7, the first post-festive day. John is the figure prophesied in Isaiah, the voice crying out in the wilderness “Prepare the way of the Lord.” He took on this role of preparation even before his birth. When Mary came to visit Elizabeth, John leapt in the womb with joy at the visit from Jesus. We are to prepare for the coming of the Lord in the same way today. We are to proclaim the joy of the Lord’s arrival this Nativity season. Just as John asked every Israelite to look at their own life and prepare for the coming of God, we must do the same. Israel was occupied by foreign armies and conquered by forces against the will of God. America is under siege by those who tempt us to abandon our faith. Do we prepare and hope in the coming of the Lord this Nativity, or do we surrender and acquiesce to those against God’s will?

John dedicated his life to prayer and fasting in the desert experience of God. He called people to share in that special relationship that Israel once had with the creator in the desert. For forty years the people wandered in the desert led from place to place by the presence of God. They followed God. This was the preparation to become stewards of the land. John calls us to follow God. The experience the silence of the desert and encounter the living God in that special and intimate way. In the Eastern Christian tradition the Poustinia is this encounter with God. We go to the wilderness with bread, water and the Word of God. We pray, fast and live on God’s word. We participate in the desert experience of Israel before the Holy Land. Jesus did the same, after encountering John, Jesus goes to the desert for forty days and faces temptation.

But we don’t stay in the desert forever. We “prepare the way of the Lord”, just as John did, and we return to the “promised land.” In the promised land we are given gifts, authority and power. We are stewards for God’s creation and prophets calling others to God. When John left the desert he called everyone in the nation to believe in the God of Creation, to practice a good life. Some take up the invitation and follow his example, some refuse to hear the word of the Lord and continue in their evil ways. One of the latter is Herod. John does not shrink from the dangerous, and ultimately fatal, task of proclaiming God’s hatred for evil.

“O luminary in the flesh and Forerunner of the Savior, o offspring of the barren one, o friend, by leaping in the womb you adored the One who is born of the Virgin; and you baptized Him in the waters of the Jordan. O prophet, we pray to you: Implore Him that we may escape the future torments.”

Vespers January 7

Steve Puluka

Phillipian Fast

The Winter Pascha

Week Six



Jonah had dwelt like a babe in the womb before the sea monster spew him forth; the Word dwelt in the womb of the Virgin, taking flesh from her. Although born from her, He kept her all-pure. Since Christ himself was not subject to incorruptibility, He kept his Mother free from the same.

Nativity Canon Ode 6

Mother of God

The day after major feasts in the Church we commemorate the secondary figure of the feast. On December 26 that is Mary, the Christ Child is the central figure of the Nativity and Mary is the most important other person. The incarnation of Christ is God’s second attempt to mold humanity in the image and likeness of God. Mary stands ready to make the choices eve should have made. Christ follows the way that Adam could not manage. Eve is the mother of human creation; Mary is the mother of our new creation. Mary hears the word of God and obeys; Eve heard the word of God and choose her own path. Eve shares her bad choices with Adam; Mary offers her

“With these words, Mary as lover of mankind, cheers Eve and her husband. Going to the crib, she bows her head and entreats her son as she says: ‘My son, since Thou hast exalted me through Thy condescension, my poor race, through me, now beseeches Thee. For Adam, lamenting bitterly, came to me, and Eve joined him in his complaints. The serpent is the cause of this, since he despoiled them of their honor. Therefore, they are begging to be covered, as they cry to me: Mary, full of grace.’”

Mary in Romanos’ Kontakia

son for all and shares the New Life with all creation.

Mary is proclaimed by the Church as the God-bearer. In a miraculous way she carries the very Word of God in her womb. The birth of Christ is miraculous and wonderfully. The event is foretold in the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 “Behold the virgin will be with child and you will call his name Emmanuel.” In ages past the prophets proclaim what God will do. This prophecy was uttered at a time of occupation and conquest in the land of Israel. Isaiah saw that it would not last and God did deliver his people. But temporal delivery from kings was doomed to be repeated. In Mary, we are delivered once and for all from the ultimate enemy, the evil one. We no longer seek the earthly kingdom, but the one that is to come.

In the birth of Christ Mary carries paradise in her womb. She restored the tree of life to the world. The Cherubim that guarded the tree now give her honor as she hears and follows God’s word and plan. Mary is the first fruit of the human race, she follows God’s will and provides us with the human example.

If the example is not enough, she is also our intercessor before the Lord. Mothers have a special relationship with their children. The requests of a mother to her child has a unique power in human nature. Christ shares our human nature and Mary, his mother, stands ready to be our advocate before the throne of the savior. In the Kontakia of Romanos’ for December 26 we see that scene played out at the Nativity. Adam and Eve approach Mary, on behalf of the whole human race, and ask for her intercession with Jesus. Mary complies with the request born of heartfelt sorrow and Jesus responds in kind. Jesus notes that this salvation is the very reason for his incarnation and he welcomes the change of heart of Adam and Eve.

“O Virgin Theotokos, you gave birth to the Savior. You overthrew the ancient curse of Eve. As a mother you were the benevolence of the Father. You bore in your womb the incarnate Word of God. We cannot understand this mystery, but we glorify it with one faith. We also join you in praise to say: O ineffable Lord, glory to You!”

Matins at the Praises December 26

“Shining brightly with signs, marvels, and teachings, you surpassed the assembly of the wicked. You suffered death at their hands by stoning. You prayed for their forgiveness in accordance with the example of the Savior. You handed over your spirit into his hands, O holy Stephen.”

Vespers December 27

St. Stephen

On December 27 we commemorate Saint Stephen the first Christian martyr. The story is told in the history of the early Church, Acts of the Apostles. Here we see the first Christians in Jerusalem plagued with the same human problems and divisions that we have in our our society today, favoritism. The Greek speaking Christians are being discriminated against by those who speak Hebrew. This is an early and strong reminder to us to be open to all humanity with the message of Christ. We are called to bridge the cultural divide and share everything with our neighbors, not just those who are from our village.

The deacons are ordained to service-diakonia in Greek. This becomes a central element to living the Christian faith. Christ tells us that he came to serve not be served. Those who offer service to others are considered greatest in the kingdom. The first to clean up the mess, to pick up the trash, to wait on the tables and prepare the food, these are the ones truly following Christ.

Stephen also stands in the tradition of Israel. He knows salvation history because it is the history of God’s action in the world. He claims this history for the Christian people in the name of Christ, just as Jesus did during his ministry. He patterns his life of service on the example of Christ and he patterns his faith in God on this history of salvation. But the religious leaders of the community do not want Jesus to be seen as part of their community. They choose a different path. That places Stephen in the very same position that Jesus occupied, trail before the community. Stephen follows this path of Christ exactly. He proclaims the message of God. He is tried and condemned. He forgives those who kill him as dies. The life of Christ is something to be imitated by his followers.

“As soon as the immaculate one brought these petitions to the God lying in the cradle, at once

He received them and He says: ‘O mother,

I save them because of thee and through thee. Had I not willed to save them, I should not have dwelt in thee, I should not have allowed my

light to shine from thee, and thou wouldst not have heard thyself called my mother. Thou dost bear me in thy arms for their sake. The

Cherubim do not see me, but thou dost behold me, and carry me and cherish me as son. Mary full of Grace.’”

Christ in Romanos’ Kontakia