



Orthodox Church of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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Moving to the Region of Darkness *January 21, 2024*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Christ is Baptized! In the Jordan!

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Caper'na-um by the sea, in the territory of Zeb'ulun and Naph'tali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "The land of Zeb'ulun and the land of Naph'tali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles -- the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." (Matthew 4:12-16)

When we were children, most of us were afraid of the dark, weren't we? I remember quite clearly how frightening it was to pass through the darkness to get to the light switch. In the house in which I grew up you had to go through the kitchen in order to get to the light switch in the dark to turn on the light. I hated doing it, and my older brother, of course, used to mock me: "When are you going to grow up?" Of course, I was only three or four, so I had to quickly get over it. But in truth, the dark can be frightening even as adults. It is disorienting. We can get lost or lose our way easily.

The theme of light overcoming the darkness is one that the prophets frequently use. They prophecy a time of hope, a time of fulfillment. This is especially true for the prophet Isaiah. And in our lesson today, St. Matthew in the short passage that makes up our Gospel lesson sets down in only a few words the entire mission of our Lord's earthly ministry clearly and succinctly. He says that after his

childhood and youth are over, after his Bar Mitsvah, his Baptism at the hands of the righteous John which we celebrated on Thursday evening, after his temptation in the wilderness, after John is imprisoned by the unrighteous Herod, Jesus begins His public ministry with a definitive action: He moves not from the darkness to the light, but from the light to the darkness. This is a highly symbolic action, taken straight from the prophecy of Isaiah, not to carry out some mechanical fulfillment to prove a point to His Jewish audience, but to demonstrate, to proclaim the purpose of His entire ministry and to set the stage for what is to be the purpose of the entire ministry of those who follow Him. Look for your ministry not to the light, but to the darkness! Go there, and bring the light to those who are lost, who wander about aimlessly, who need help, direction, comfort, healing, hope, love.

Zebulun and Naphtali were both sons of Jacob whose descendants were given regions of the Holy Land along with the other sons of Jacob in which to settle. These two regions named by the prophet Isaiah and quoted by Matthew bordered the South-Western Edge of Lake Galilee, and over the years had become a place of warfare and strife; battle after battle, army after army had run through the regions; their descendants had intermarried with the pagan invaders, and those who eventually dwelt there as early as the time of Isaiah had tragically become Gentiles even in his time. Jesus left His native Nazareth to move there to the small fishing village of Capernaum located in that region, and Matthew tells those who would read his Gospel that the Lord did so purposefully. He purposefully chose to go to the place of the Gentiles, just as He purposefully chose to be born in humble circumstances in a cave, laid in a manger, visited by magicians from Persia, chased by an evil king as Moses had been. He purposefully allowed Himself to be chased away to Egypt as if He were a slave. All of these actions were outward signs of His humility, as Fr. Anthony reminded us last week; and, it is humility that would be the mark of his disciples as well. And now, once again, He symbolically turns His face to the land of the Gentiles, the lost and the forsaken, for it was to them, the lost and the forsaken that His ministry is especially directed.

I must say that I love this time of year within the Liturgical cycle of the Church most especially because it is this message, this emphasis, that comes across in our readings and our readings most clearly. The Lord does indeed love the righteous, but it is for the sinner, those lost in the confusion and darkness of sin that He is most concerned. It is those who are ill that are indeed in need of the Great Physician! This is what our short Gospel lesson from St. Matthew so clearly reminds us of today. The cost of our discipleship, Brothers and Sisters, is to turn ourselves to the darkness, as did our Lord, and to bring the Light of Life to those there.

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Fr. Elias

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