

Notes from the Sunday Sermon of January 22, 2023:

“On Being Put Together with Light”

Scriptures:

1 Timothy 1:15-17 (<https://www.oca.org/readings/daily/2023/01/22/2>)

Luke 18:35-43 (<https://www.oca.org/readings/daily/2023/01/22/3>)

This past week I learned a new recipe. It only requires a few easily found ingredients, but they are all essential and the results can be an overwhelming abundance and celebration of life. All that is required besides the recipe and ingredients are patience and consistency.

First, one needs some good water; then carbon dioxide – easily found in the air; and finally the direct rays of sunshine. If it's done correctly then glucose will be produced that will lead to energy being circulated throughout the entire circulation system.

Of course, I'm describing **“photosynthesis.”** As a Greek word it means to **“put together with light”** and it describes the chemical process which uses light to bring together separate elements (water and carbon dioxide) to form **“a coherent whole”** which allows life to grow.

We might think that this relates only to plants which enables them to create their own food for growth. But I am interested in how the definition of being **“put together with light”** can relate to our liturgical experience, how we are supposed to grow, and what we are supposed to do to accomplish God's will – both as individuals and as a community.

1) **THE LITURGICAL PROCLAMATION OF CHRIST AS LIGHT:**

We are in the midst of celebrating **three Feasts of Light** that reveal or tell us more about Jesus who calls Himself – the **“light of the world”** (John 9:5). This is the primary theme of **Christmas** during which we sing of Him as – the **“Sun of righteousness”** (the date of December 25 was chosen to coincide with and yet transform the yearly celebration of the birth of a Roman sun god). **Epiphany** is also a feast of illumination at which time the Holy Trinity, the ministry of Jesus, and the healing nature of water and creation are all revealed. Finally, on February 2, we'll celebrate the **Meeting of the Lord** when on the 40th day following His birth Jesus was brought to the temple in fulfillment of the Jewish law and completed the expectations of Simeon and Anna. As part of this Feast, we bless candles, and proclaim in the main festal hymn, the troparion:

*Rejoice, O Virgin Theotokos, Full of Grace!
From you shone the Sun of Righteousness, Christ our God,
enlightening those who sat in darkness.*

In today's Gospel, we hear of Jesus's encounter with a blind man. Jesus asked him, **“What do you want Me to do for you?”** and the man replied, **“Lord, that I may receive my sight.”**

Then Jesus said to him, **“Receive your sight; your faith has made you well”** (Luke 18:41-42).

Next Sunday, we'll hear the first of the Gospel Stories – the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus – that will prepare us for Great Lent. During the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, offered on Wednesdays and Fridays of Great Lent, a lighted candle will be brought out during the Old Testament readings and the proclamation will be made that, “**The Light of Christ illumines all.**” In the middle of the Paschal Liturgy which takes place in the darkness of late night/early morning, we'll hear in the Gospel of St. John that, “**the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it**” (Jn 1:5).

At every evening Vespers Service we sing the hymn, “**O Gladsome Light**” (Phos Hilaron) and offer the words:

O Gladsome Light of the holy glory of the Immortal Father, heavenly, holy, blessed Jesus Christ. Now we have come to the setting of the sun and behold the light of evening. We praise God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For it is right at all times to worship You with voices of praise, O Son of God and Giver of Life, therefore all the world glorifies You.

Every Liturgy offers an example of the above synthesis – the putting together, the making whole of a community of different individuals through the person of Jesus, the light.

In being “put together” by and seeing ourselves better in the light of Christ, we come to know both Him and ourselves better.

2) **HOW TO KNOW WHAT TO DO – INDIVIDUALLY?**

But coming to know Christ and ourselves better brings us to the question of what to do next? How do we best fulfill God's will for our lives? In thinking about these questions over the weekend, I received the following text in an email blog:

The Best Preparation

What God may hereafter require of you, you must not give yourself the least trouble about. Everything he gives you to do, you must do as well as ever you can, and that is the best possible preparation for what he may want you to do next. If people would but do what they have to do, they would always find themselves ready for what comes next (George MacDonald).

The answer would seem to come by: doing to the best of our ability whatever God has placed in our lives at every moment (Note: those interested in more reflection on this response can look at Leo Tolstoy's story, “**The Three Questions**” (<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/short-stories/the-three-questions>)).

3) **HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT TO DO – AS A COMMUNITY?**

This Sunday, January 22, has been designated by the Orthodox Church in America as “**Sanctity of Life Sunday**.” Our parish has sought to recognize the value of life at each stage – supporting organizations that provide aid for women who desire to maintain their pregnancies and also recognizing the needs of those struggling for existence at other levels – providing food, clothing, and additional means of support.

In his statement prepared in anticipation of this Sunday, His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon, wrote the following:

But we must never, ever allow ourselves to become focused solely on political, and much less partisan and ideological, pursuits. Instead, the defense and promotion of life must start and end with our personal commitment: in our hearts, in our families, in our parishes, in our communities, with alms of time and treasure and talent and effort. With whatever resources God may give us, we must promote true human flourishing, starting with the right to life for all people, at all stages of life. And we must do what we can to orient our life toward God through virtuous living, encouraging the same in our brethren and neighbors wherever and however it is possible. In so doing, we might hope to attain to the everlasting life and bountifulness of the heavenly kingdom, where Christ the Lord reigns with his Father and his All-holy and life-giving Spirit (his whole statement can be found here: <https://www.oca.org/news/headline-news/sanctity-of-life-sunday-for-2023-announced>)

4) CONCLUSION:

This sermon began with a recipe that utilized some simple ingredients “put together” by the sun as the means of life and growth.

Christ as the Sun, as Light, brings us together, enabling us as individuals and as a community to understand how we might see and do – to the best of our abilities – that which He has placed before us – as the means of preparation “for what comes next.”

If we are willing, this effort can have an unpredictable and immeasurable level of growth and “bountifulness.”

In seeking to do this, we are reminded in today’s Epistle from St. Paul of our hope that “Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience [in us] for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:16).



by Natalka Weismantel

Notes from the Sunday Sermon on January 15, 2023:

“Receiving with Humility the Implanted Word”

Scriptures:

- 1 Timothy 1:15-17
- James 1:19-27
- Luke 18:18-27

As I entered a small local shop once while Christmas shopping, I was asked by a clerk if she could help me find something. I expressed my appreciation but told her that I wasn't looking for anything in particular – rather I felt that something in her store might be trying to “find me” – and I would know it, if that happened.

I believe that this is what can also happen to us during the Divine Liturgy and every time we come to worship: God is trying to reveal himself to us in words and images that can find a place in our hearts and return home with us, becoming a part of our lives.

1) In today's first epistle from St. Paul to Timothy, we heard the expression that is part of the **Prayer Before Receiving Holy Communion**: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom **I am first.**” We begin by realizing that we cannot change or save anyone else, we must begin with ourselves. During Great Lent we will offer the Prayer of St. Ephrem and state: “Help me to see my own sins and not judge my brother and sister.”

2) At the end of today's Gospel (which we read several times during the year), we heard how certain things that are **impossible** for men and women become **possible** with God. The Greek word for possible, “**dynamis,**” means “power” and so the implication is that God provides us with the power, the ability to do things that – on our own – we cannot. This Gospel and message have a particular significance for our community as it was the Sunday reading over 20 years ago when at a Special Parish Meeting we decided as a community to move ahead with our building program – believing that God would help us make the building effort possible. And He did!

3) Taking the above themes of **beginning with ourselves** and **believing that God can provide us with the ability to accomplish things otherwise impossible**, we explored the image presented in the Epistle of St. James which was read on the previous Thursday:

“receive with humility **the implanted word**, which is able to save your souls.”

God's “implanted word” comes to us, can find a place, and grow within us in ways similar to that of any plant. Bulbs and plants can produce individual flowers, like our paper white narcissus recently did. Other times, the root systems will move in horizontal ways so that the plants can multiply and spread, growing in ways that cover a larger area. Good soil, nourishment, consistent care, and light are required and can make all this possible. Growing as individuals and coming together as a community are both essential.

We've just concluded the Feasts of Christmas and Epiphany which are celebrations of light and illumination. But sometimes, real darkness is also required for growth, both for plants and for us. Darkness can imply simplicity, the facing of reality, the putting aside of access, the delaying of expectation, the requirement of patience, and the belief that something more **is** and **can** be going on.

Here the words of the artist, Andrew Wyeth, can be helpful:

I prefer winter and fall, when you feel the bone structure in the landscape – the loneliness of it – the dead feeling of winter. Something waits beneath it – the whole story doesn't show.

I think anything like that – which is contemplative, silent, shows a person alone – people always feel is sad.

Is it because we've lost **the art of being alone**?

Conclusion: The Divine Liturgy can provide us not just with certain answers or a kind of satisfaction, but with the experience of being "found" by God and receiving the gifts of having particular words and images "imbedded" within us. We can and must begin this experience individually and not in comparison or in judgment of others. But being found, formed, and guided by God personally we are given the power, the ability to learn, respond, and to do His will in ways that will surprise and illumine us.

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Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, January 8, 2023:

What Happens to Water and Us on Epiphany?

Scriptures:

Ephesians 4:7-13

Matthew 4:12-17



Each Divine Liturgy is a tapestry of the whole liturgical year. There are hymns, Scriptures, liturgical verses, and images from Pascha/Easter night, Pentecost, Christmas, and today we can hear as well an important verse from the Feast of Epiphany that we are currently celebrating:

“Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord; God is the Lord and has revealed Himself to us.”

Every Liturgy presents us with the theme of how God and all of creation are revealed for what they really are:

- 1) **The Holy Trinity:** The Festal Hymn (the Troparion), based on the Scriptural story, reminds us that when Jesus is baptized the three persons of the Holy Trinity are present or manifested:

When You, O Lord, were baptized in the Jordan,
the worship of the Trinity was made manifest.
For the voice of the Father bore witness to You,
and called You His beloved Son;
and the Spirit in the form of a dove
confirmed the truthfulness of His word.
O Christ our God, You have revealed Yourself//

and have enlightened the world, glory to You.

The Spirit, in the form of a dove, confirms the word of the Father, that Jesus is His “beloved Son.”

2) **Jesus**, upon His baptism, in a sense, begins His ministry by being Himself the light that shines among the people “who sat in darkness.” He reaffirms the message and sermon of John the Baptist by proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:16-17). Repentance literally means to “change your mind” or to re-examine that way you are thinking and living.

3) **Water** is blessed on this day, not to identify a kind of sacred water that is different from “regular” water, but to say that all water – and in fact, all of creation – is meant to be a way for God to reveal His saving presence in our midst and for the “healing of our souls and bodies.”

4) **US**: The petitions from the **Blessing of Water** were repeated to remind us of how the “power, operation, and descent of the Holy Spirit” were offered for the transformation of both the water AND us.

For these waters that they may be sanctified by the **power, operation, and descent** of the Holy Spirit, let us pray to the Lord.

For these waters, that the **cleansing operation** of the super-substantial Trinity may come down on them, let us pray to the Lord.

For these waters, that they **may become healing for souls and bodies**, and the **banishing of all contrary powers**, let us pray to the Lord.

That the Lord God may send down the blessing of Jordan to sanctify these waters, let us pray to the Lord.

For all those **requesting from God help and protection**, let us pray to the Lord.

That He **may illumine us with the light of understanding**, by means of the Trinity One in Essence, let us pray to the Lord.

That the Lord our God **may show us to be children and heirs of His Kingdom**, through partaking of and sprinkling with these waters, let us pray to the Lord.

5) **CONCLUSION**: Every Divine Liturgy presents us with the language and images from the major feasts of the liturgical year, so that being reminded again and again in small, repetitive ways we may

- come to know more fully how God desires to be revealed to us;
- in doing this we will learn how all of creation is made available by God for the healing of our souls and bodies,
- so that we may participate more completely in the “building up of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12).

Notes from the Sunday Sermon of January 1, 2023:

The Blessings of New Year's Day: God's Gift to Us and Our Gifts to God

Scripture Readings:

Luke 2:20-21, 40

Mark 1:1-8

As God this day gives you a *New Year*, and has not surprised you, nor taken you away in the sins of last year; as He gives you a new year, give him a *New-Year's gift*, *Cor novum*, a new and a Circumcised heart, and *Canticum novum*, a new Song, a delight to magnify His name, and speak of His glory, and declare His wondrous works to all people.

Source: *The Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. 6

Despite the difficulty in getting up early and preparing to attend church when New Year's Day falls on a Sunday, there are also numerous blessings. John Donne in his Sermon presented above notes first of all that in the New Year God, rather than punishing us for our what we did or didn't do over the previous year, presents us with the gift of time – a gift we should never take for granted. We, likewise, should respond by offering two gifts of our own – that of a new and Circumcised heart and a new Song.

1) John Donne, an English poet and priest (who died in 1631), in knowing the Scriptures was aware that New Year's Day – eight days after Christmas – is when in affirmation of His humanity, Jesus was liturgically given His name and was circumcised in fulfillment of the Law:

And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb (Luke 2:21).

The Saturday evening text for Vespers stated that:

[God] made the Law, and He obeyed His own commands.

But also in knowing the Scriptures, Donne was aware that it was noted in Old Testament as well as by St. Paul that circumcision was not just a physical rite imposed on Jewish young boys, but there was a spiritual significance that had broader implications:

6 And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live
(Deuteronomy 30:6)

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; **29** but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart
(Romans 2:28-29).

So, our first New Year's gift to God involves a changed and open heart.

2) The second gift is that of a new Song by which we magnify His name and speak of His glory. Today is the feast of St. Basil the Great, the fourth century bishop of an area in what is now Turkey. He was known for his theological wisdom, his concerns for social welfare, and for the Anaphora Prayers in the Liturgy we are serving today (and on the Sundays of Great and several other special occasions

throughout the year). These Prayers are a tapestry of Biblical images and provide us with the language for singing the story of our salvation.

Today is also the Sunday before the Feast of the Epiphany and we read the opening verses from the Gospel of St. Mark which anticipate the Feast (we'll celebrate with a Vespereal Liturgy on Thursday night). In recognizing Jesus's willingness to identify himself with humanity and to be baptized, we affirm – as the text of the Baptismal Service states – that the one baptized is not just born again, but receives a “life of regeneration,” a lifetime of continually being reborn and renewed by the Spirit.

Within the Divine Liturgy and nearly every other service we hear the petition that we would “complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance.” Peace is always the gift provided by and realized in Jesus and repentance is the opportunity to continually grow and change in the understanding of ourselves. They are among the fruits of Baptism.

CONCLUSION: The opportunity to celebrate New Year's Day on a Sunday provides us with several blessings. We receive God's gift of the entrance into new time. With this comes our response in offering to God a new and circumcised heart and a new song. From this transformed heart and with the melody and language of this new song we pursue the Baptismal life of regeneration and look to completing the remainder of our time in peace and repentance.