

Notes from the Sunday Sermon on December 11, 2022

Being "Like" Jesus:

The Sunday of the Forefathers: A Burning Bush, Holy Ground, and a Banquet

Sunday's Scriptures:

Colossians 3:4-11

Luke 14:16-24

Sunday's Sermon began with the reading of the poem, *The Annunciation*, by the Orthodox writer, Scott Cairns:

Deep within the clay, and O my people
very deep within the wholly earthen
compound of our kind arrives of one clear,
star-illuminated evening a spark igniting
once again the tinder of our lately
banked noetic fire. **She burns but she
is not consumed.** The dew lights gently,
suffusing the pure fleece. The wall comes down.
And—do you feel the pulse?—**we all become
the kindled kindred of a King whose birth
thereafter bears to all a bright nativity.**

Of particular interest was his expression about Mary that, "**She burns but is not consumed.**" Here Scott Cairns referenced an important section from the story of the encounter between Moses and God from the book of Exodus:

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Mid'ian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, **and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.** **3** And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt."
4 When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." **5** Then he said, "**Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.**"
6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Ex 3:1-6)

Orthodox Church writers have identified Mary as this bush, who "burned" with the presence of God within her, yet remained alive and still a virgin. The burning bush that was not consumed is the first image we need to consider.

Today on this the 2nd Sunday before Christmas we remember the "Forefathers" of Jesus - those who longed-for and in various ways anticipated His coming. Throughout Advent we have

featured the icon below that depicts the forefathers as participants of the “Tree of Jesse” (the father of King David) where at the center is Jesus and Mary. The texts for the Feast speak of seeds and blossoming:



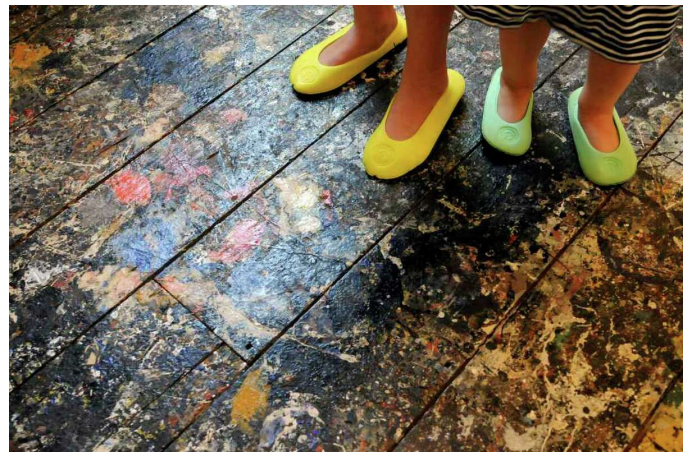
Troparion of the Forefathers

Through faith You justified the Forefathers,
betrothing through them the Church of the gentiles.
These saints exult in glory,
**for from their seed came forth a glorious fruit:
she who bore You without seed.//**
So by their prayers, O Christ God, have mercy on us!

From Vespers

Through them [the Forefathers] He has shown us the rod of His strength:
she is Mary, the only pure and Virgin Maiden of God.
From her Christ blossomed,//
bringing forth life, eternal salvation, and unending bliss for all.

The second image, also coming from the Exodus passage, has to do with the reality of being on “holy ground.” There are Christian churches and other religious communities which require that their participants take off their shoes when they enter their place of worship.



I shared a secular example of this experience by noting how when I visited the studio of the painter, Jackson Pollock - who was known for dripping paint on a canvas spread over his floor –

it was required that we take off our shoes and wear slippers as we walked over the paint splattered floor.

We might think of particular places as being holy, but Advent and the lives of the Forefathers reminds us that paths can be holy adventures that are capable of leading us to God.

St. Dorotheus of Gaza, a 6th century monastic, spoke of the spiritual life as a kind of wheel where the center represents the presence of God and each person's life is a spoke on the wheel. As they move towards the center they find their way closer to one another. The Forefathers to the extent that they desired the experience of knowing God – though living in different eras – found the experience and the language of this journey being similar to one another. We can hear and recognize our journey in theirs.

Finally, in today's Gospel we heard the story of the man who offers a great supper or banquet and finds that those he has invited have many excuses for not attending. A banquet is not a solitary event, but the opportunity for gathering and celebrating with others. We have this experience at every liturgy, but it is a description of the life in God's Kingdom for those who have found their way with one another on the path to knowing God.

As we prepare throughout Advent for the celebration of Christ's first coming into the world as a human being, we do so in anticipation of his Second Coming. Today's reading from St. Paul's epistle to the Colossians reminds us that:

When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory (3:4).

The first Epistle of St. John says something very similar:

2 Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 Jn 2:1).

As we review these three images today of physical items being transformed – the Theotokos as the burning bush that is not consumed, the holy ground where we need to remove our shoes as we walk and journey, and the banquet that is called by God which brings all those who have

been moving towards him together – we consider the Advent question what it can mean to “be like” Christ?

Throughout November and into December we have been hearing passages from “**Money and Salvation: An Invitation to the Good Way**” by Dr. Andrew Geleris. Last Sunday we explored “the fourth soil” mentioned by Jesus in the story of the Sower and the Seeds, the one in which a good and honest heart, brings forth fruit with patience. This past week’s readings considered the paradigm for a parish’s approach to its finances and resources.

We ended Sunday’s Sermon by reviewing how we as a community, utilizing our resources and energy, learn how to “be like” Christ and become his caring presence in a struggling and lonely world.

The efforts of our Inreach/Outreach Ministry – particularly during the tension of COVID times – have guided us. We have tried first to identify and care for the needs of our community – providing food and visitations for those who have been ill, are grieving, or are lonely. We have tried to support and encourage our local agencies that minister, feed, and care for the homeless, the hungry, and those struggling to maintain their pregnancies or hold their families together. We have supported our Diocesan Fund - the **Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors** and directed donations to Diocesan missions. We have identified national groups like the **IOCC** and **Church, World, Service** which provide humanitarian aid.

Conclusion: When Jesus comes again we will “be like him” for we “shall see him as he is.” But his presence, his “pulse” as Scott Cairns stated is already manifest, alive, and “burning” not only within Mary, but also for all who are in need and find him within one another on the path of their life’s journey. It’s available whenever there is the “breaking of bread” and especially during the Divine Liturgy or Banquet. We grow to become more like him by already sharing his presence, being his voice, his hands, and loving kindness among everyone we met along the way.

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