

Week Two - Nativity Fast

As we continue our preparation for the coming of Christ on December 25th, this week we turn our thoughts to the Mother of God. Mary, the Theotokos, gives us the perfect model of humility and silent expectation that we can use as a model during this period of preparation. The more we find ways to follow her example of obedience and purity the closer we will come to Christ who is about to be born.



On November 21st we celebrate the entry of Mary into the Temple in Jerusalem. We know from tradition that Mary's parents were childless in old age. They prayed continuously to have a child and vowed that if God were to bless them with a child they would dedicate her to God. After a miraculous birth her parents took her at the age of three to the Temple in Jerusalem where she lived for twelve years. She lived in the most holy place in the Temple being cared for by the Temple priests and angels. The hymns of the Church testify to the careful spiritual preparation for the birth giving of the Son of God that God provided to her. She was purified through her life in the Temple to receive God Himself in her womb. Joseph, an older man, was selected to protect her when she left the Temple at the age of about 13.

The icon of Mary which we see in the asp of our Cathedral shows Mary with her arms lifted up in prayer and with Christ bursting from her womb. Mary, chosen to carry the infinite God in her womb, must be "wider than the heavens", is the name of this icon. The hymn which is sung at vespers of this feat of her entry to the Temple is as follows:

*The most holy virgin,
Temple that is to hold God,
is dedicated within the temple of the Lord,
and young girls, bearing lamps,
now go before her. Her noble parents,
Joachim and Anna, leap for joy and dance,
for they have given birth
to her who is to bear the Creator, and she,
the most pure, with rejoicing
goes round the temple habitations
and is fed by the hands of an angel.
She was chosen to be the Mother of Christ,
the Lord Who grants to the world great mercy.*

All the feasts of the Theotokos point to the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation through Christ. The icons of Mary show her holding Christ in her arms or as is shown above bursting from her womb. She is not praised for her own sake, but for her faithful role in being willing and obedient to God as an instrument in His divine plan. This good news of salvation is included in the Dismissal hymn for the feast day:

*Today is the foreshadowing
of the grace of God and the good news
of the heralding of our salvation.*

*The Virgin is manifest
in the temple of God and beforehand
she announces Christ to all.
Let us sing to her with a mighty voice:
Hail! You are the fulfillment
of the Creator's dispensation*

What was the Temple like?

Read Exodus 40:1-35; 1 Kings 7:51 - 8:11; Ezekiel 43:27-44:4; Heb 9:1-7

These are the prescribed Scripture readings for the feast that tell us about the Temple where she was dedicated:

How big was it?

How many rooms did it have?

What items were inside and where were they placed?

What was the significance of this structure?

Draw a layout of the temple indicating what was in each place.

Can you relate this design in any way to our Cathedral?

Just like this Temple that God designed for the Israelites to worship Him, Mary was also specially prepared to receive God into her womb. Can you imagine what it must have been like to grow up in such a holy place? This earthly Temple of the time of Moses foreshadows the living temple that God Himself chose to form the Christ, He who came down from heaven as fully man and God.

Read Lk 1:39-49,56

What does this tell us about the way Mary and Elizabeth anticipated the birth of Christ?

Read Lk 10:38-42 & 11:27-28

This Gospel that is read on the feast days of Theotokos is about the sisters of Lazarus who was raised from the dead, Martha and Mary.

What did Mary do when Jesus visited her and her sister in their home?

Why is Martha upset?

To whom is Jesus referring when He says, "just one is needed"?

What was Jesus' response to the woman's praise of His mother?

This lesson gives us insight about how to observe the Nativity Fast. We are not to worry or to be troubled over many things like Martha, but to have our attention focused on Christ. All we do should be in His memory and to glorify Him. Like Mary we are to sit

spiritually at His feet and listen to His words and strive to obey them out of our love for Him.

Are you more like Mary or Martha in the story? How?

How can you incorporate both into you daily life in this period of preparation?

Prayer:

Celebrating the coming of the Theotokos into the sanctuary, let us too, carrying lamps in spirit, go in joy with the attendants to the temple. Let us offer a prayer to Christ. To the Son who was begotten of the Father before all ages and in the last times was incarnated of the virgin, let us sing with one voice: Christ our God, You have raised up our banner of victory. O Holy Lord, glory to You!

Adapted from Matins Hymns of the Feast of the Entry of the Theotokos.

Read Luke 18:18-30

Next Sunday we hear the parable of the Young Rich Ruler. This is the story about the man who asks Jesus, "What can I do to attain eternal life?" In His response Jesus links eternal life with the observance of His commandments. It is essential that we know His commandments and dedicate ourselves to living them in their fullness as Jesus taught. What are the Ten Commandments in your own words? (see Exodus 20:1-17)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

What are some ways that Jesus expanded these commandments? (see page 13 in NT Orthodox Study Bible or read Matt 5 - 7)

What are areas where we too must earn to become obedient to God's commandments?

When was the last time you repented in front of the icon of Christ in the sacrament of repentance with a priest as your witness? This is a good thing to do as part of your families preparation for Christmas. Call the Church office and make an appointment with Allene the Church secretary to participate in this powerful sacrament.

Jesus was able to live with perfect obedience to God. Many of His teachings are stricter than what is found in the Old Testament. Jesus was trying to help us to look into our hearts instead of thinking about following some prescribed rules. He taught that we are to have a pure heart if we are to see God. In the Sermon on the Mount he repudiated not just murder but also anger, not just adultery but a lustful look, not only fair retaliation but no revenge whatsoever. He said "love your enemies" and "pray for those who persecute you."

Look up what Jesus tells His followers in Matthew 5:20 about strict obedience. Complete this: "You will be able to enter the kingdom of heaven only if your:

Christ centers His life on giving and sharing, serving others, sacrificing Himself for the good of others. He expects us to become like him, to be working towards our perfection. What does he say in Matthew 5:48?

What did Jesus ask of the rich man in the parable?

- a. Sell _____
- b. Give _____
- c. Come and _____

When he saw the rich man's sadness what did Jesus say?

What did He promise to those who make great sacrifices for the sake of the Kingdom of God?

Just as Jesus challenged the rich man, so too He challenges us to become self-giving and dedicated to doing God's work. His direction for us is difficult and impossible if we try to do it all on our own. This is why we need His help, the work of the Holy Spirit, the gift we continually receive in the sacramental life of the Church. A life in Christ is a continual tension between what we are now and what we are expected to become. It is an endless path of repentance. We must seek a deeper communion with the Holy Spirit and continue to grow in our love for Christ.

What is important to you about the story of the rich ruler?

What are insights about obedience to God's commandments?

Identify one thing you can do to improve your life in obedience to His commandments during this period of preparation. Take advantage of Holy Confession, a most powerful sacrament. During this period find at least one way to become more like Him who is coming for our salvation in just a few weeks.

In keeping with the season, this week our Philoptochos Ladies are offering on Thursday, November 21st a Thanksgiving meal and making our wonderful Greek Pastries available to the entire Greenville community. The proceeds from this event go to help charitable organizations sponsored by the Philoptochos society. Pastries go on sale beginning at 9:30am and meals are served until 7pm.

Ideas

Buy or make some pastries and take them to share with someone who is shut in, or a person you admire for their ability to follow God's commandments.

Visit a homeless shelter or a food bank kitchen with your family. See if there is any way you can help those in need.

Come to the Liturgy for the Entry of Mary into the temple on the 21st at 9:00am.