

JOHN THE BAPTIST (JANUARY 7)

“I assure you that John the Baptist is greater than any man who has ever lived: (Mt. 11:11) These words of Jesus are a weighty testimony to the importance of John the Baptist in God’s plan of salvation. A prophet born of the priestly family of Zechariah and Elizabeth and a relative of Jesus (Lk 1:36). John the Baptist stood at the frontier between the ages, completing the old and announcing the new. He was the greatest Old Testament as the Forerunner (Prodromos) of Christ. He was also the person who had the unique privilege of baptizing Christ. It is for this reason that during the season of Theophany we have the “Synaxis” of John the Baptist (Jan. 7) “Synaxis” means a liturgical gathering of the faithful in honor of a saint whose memory is celebrated on that day.

The main hymn of the Synaxis of John the Baptist expresses the significance of his work with these words: *The memory of the righteous is celebrated with praise. As for you, O Forerunner, the Lord’s witness is sufficient. For you were indeed the greatest of prophets since you were found worthy to baptize in the waters the One they prophesied. You fought as a martyr for the sake of truth and gladly proclaimed the Good News to those in Hades: God has appeared in the flesh, taking away the sins of the world and bestowing His great mercy upon us!*

Dismissal Hymn of the Synaxis of St John the Baptist

An uncompromising and controversial figure, John the Baptist lived in a time of political corruption, oppression of the poor and abuse of religious power. God inspired him to lift up a voice of judgment and doom for those unwilling to heed God’s call. Yet another John, the Evangelist, portrays John the Baptist in a warm, personal light, as the humble friend of Christ (Jn 3:26-30). When the Baptist’s followers complained to him that all the people were going over to Jesus, John told them that he was the “bridegroom’s friend, who stands by and listens, and is glad when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. ... He (Jesus) must become more important while I become less important (Jn 3:29-30).

Because of his role in preparing for the coming of Christ, John the Baptist is one of the greatest saints in the Orthodox Church. He is remembered on two major feastdays during the liturgical year: The Synaxis on Jan. 7, and the beheading of John the Baptist, which is a solemn fast day on August 29. His name occurs many times in Orthodox prayers and hymns. His icon which has a prominent place on the icon screen (iconostasion) of every Orthodox sanctuary depicts St. John as pointing to Christ and holding a scroll bearing a call to repentance. Church tradition, hymns and iconography follow the Gospels in portraying John the Baptist as forerunner, prophet and ascetic.

PREPARATION FOR THE BLESSING OF HOMES

Before the Priest arrives at your home, here are a few reminders on how to prepare:

- In the main room of the home, usually the kitchen or dining room, have placed on the table a white cloth, a candle and /or an Icon or cross. You may place a small container of Holy Water on the table. (Note: Father will be bringing his own.)
- Make a list of those living in the house including pets and all deceased you want prayed for.
- Turn off all TV’s, radios, computers, etc. So as to keep focused on the blessing service.
- Make sure that pets are heeled or restrained so as not to get underfoot while Father goes through the home.
- In some customs, someone (usually a child) takes a candle and leads Father through the house while the rest follow.
- If you have any items to be blessed (Icon, Cross, etc.). Put them on the table where the blessing will take place.
- When the priest arrives, have everyone in the home gather around the table and join in the blessing. PARTICIPATION IS IMPORTANT.
- Invite friends or neighbors to participate and witness the beauty of this tradition.

NOTE: Remember, the invitation to the priest to come and bless your home is an invitation to ask for the mercy of God upon the household. The sprinkling of the Holy Water is a sign of God’s presence in the home as an extension of His Holy House, the Church. It is a time to renew our commitment to God as we begin another year in His mercy and love for mankind.

THE LIGHT THAT SHINES

The Argo, a merchant ship sailing off the New England coast, ran aground and lost its cargo. It was traveling at night and in dense fog. The captain later explained that the ship was only three degrees off course. Those three degrees eventually meant a difference of ten miles at the point the ship hit ground. The ship's instruments had malfunctioned and in the darkness the captain could not see that he was approaching land.

Our life can be like that. Life is a journey requiring a right course. Our most urgent need is to align ourselves in all that we are and in all that we say and do with God, His will and His purposes, so that we may safely reach the harbor of His Kingdom. To veer from this course only a few degrees can eventually lead to a shipwreck on the rocks of selfishness, sin and spiritual death. We cannot travel in the darkness of the world without spiritual sensitivities and without guiding light.

Christ said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness" (Jn 8:12). Christ Himself is God's light and He always shines upon us to the degree that we are ready to receive Him. As we hear the Good News of Christ and we embrace God's love and forgiveness with all our hearts, we experience something of God's spiritual light shining through Christ. As we affirm our faith in Christ and daily practice His teachings, the new creation takes hold in us. To quote St Paul: "The God Who said, ' Out of darkness the light shall shine!' Is the same God Who made His light shine in our hearts, to bring us the knowledge of God's glory shining in the face of Christ!" (2 Cor 4-6). This is " the light that comes from the Good news" (2 Cor 4:4). Which keeps us on the right course—helping us to maintain a right relationship with God, ourselves, others and everything in the world.

The words of Jesus in V. 17 call for repentance as the way of preparing to see Christ's light. " Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Is the RSV translation. True repentance means a deliberate and decisive resolve to change course and to head in a new direction. Repentance is God's offer for a fresh start. How can God forgive us and liberate us from whatever enslaves us unless we turn to Him? How can we experience our new self in Christ unless we are willing to leave the old self behind? That is why Jesus began His ministry by asking people to turn their eyes from themselves and look toward God

And His Kingdom. "Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom is near!" (Mt. 4:17) THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS ALWAYS NEAR! THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS GOD HIMSELF IN HIS PERSONAL PRESENCE, GRACIOUS POWER, HEALING FORGIVENESS, AND RENEWING LOVE EXPERIENCED THROUGH CHRIST. That's the Good News!

THANK YOU LETTER RECEIVED

Christ is Born! Glorify Him! With love in Christ from the Board and volunteers of St Mary of Egypt Orthodox Mission and Chapel.

Dear Fr. Andrew & Parishioners of Holy Assumption Orthodox Church,

We greet you with Joy and gratitude on the feast of the Nativity. Your kind remembrance of us in prayers is humbling, and reminds us how much God loves and watches over us as we try to serve his poor. Your donation of \$500 is warmly appreciated. Thank you for supporting our work. God bless you all in the coming year with His peace! Tain Reidy, President

CHRISTMAS GREETING FROM ST. HERMAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Dear friends & Benefactors,

Here in Alaska, the Nativity of our Lord is celebrated with special zeal and joy. On wintry nights, carolers follow the "Star of the East" from home to home, bearing the glad tidings of our Saviour's birth. Like the Magi and wonder-struck shepherds, young and old alike, adore the newly born Christ Child.

The eternal Word became flesh not in a rich palace but among the lowly and downtrodden. As an infant, He lay in a manger with the ox and ass among the threadbare shepherds. During this season of gift-giving, we approach you, our faithful benefactors, and ask you to financially support our school. We rely on your yearly financial contributions so that we can provide tuition-free theological education to Alaskans eager to serve Christ and His Church. We are deeply grateful for your \$333 financial support from last year! During this season of Christmas hope and joy, we offer our blessing, prayers and best wishes! With love in Christ:

Bishop David of Sitka & Alaska.