

December 1 – Thursday – Nahum 1:1-14, Tone 7
Kellia Reading for the Holy Prophet Nahum

Norms and Destiny: Nahum 1:1-14, especially vss. 7-8: *“The Lord is merciful to those who wait on Him in the day of affliction, and He knows those who reverence Him. For with an overwhelming flood He shall make an end to those rising up, and darkness will pursue His enemies.”* Terrorist attacks in recent years have caused many nations and peoples to consider their destiny and vulnerability. Sir William Watson, a twentieth-century English poet, writes: *The seasons change, the winds they shift and veer; / The grass of yesteryear / Is dead; the birds depart, the groves decay: / Empires dissolve and peoples disappear: / Song passes not away.*

The painful cruelty of terrorism also lends striking poignancy to the words of Nahum the Elkoshite. The Prophet Nahum’s “song” endures in three short chapters enshrined in Holy Scripture. Its music brings God’s living voice to His enemies and His people alike. The prophet’s words, affirming that “empires dissolve and peoples disappear,” sound the eternal hymn of the Church. They demand reflection on the part of those who would plot the demise of others, as well as those whom they would destroy. Indeed, Nahum speaks to all of us who vainly hope that things will remain as they are today, as they have always been.

Assyria, a fierce empire in upper Mesopotamia, rose to international prominence in the fertile crescent around 900 BC. Its armies proved invincible against neighboring kingdoms from the mighty empires of Egypt, Elam, and Babylonia to the tiny kingdom of Judah in Palestine, the homeland of the Prophet Nahum.

Assyria reached the zenith of power during the reign of Emperor Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC). Following the destruction of the capital city of Nineveh by the Babylonians in 612 BC, the nation suddenly declined and then disappeared forever. Illumined by God, Nahum foretold this scouring defeat. Although the historical circumstances in which the prophet of Elkosh lived are largely forgotten, the truth of his words – the abiding word of the Lord – lives on.

The present reading is the opening portion of Nahum’s prophecy. It is divided into two parts, with the first section revealing God’s judgment of His “adversaries” (vs. 2) and His will for “those who reverence Him” (vs. 7). The second portion describes how God acts toward those who “plot against the Lord” (vs. 9) and toward His own who have been in “bonds” under them (vs. 13).

The Lord without fail “takes vengeance on His adversaries” (vs. 2). The prophet frames this word of the Lord in images drawn from the destructive powers of nature (vss. 5-6). However, God’s aim is always mercy for “those who wait on Him in the day of affliction, and He knows those who reverence Him” (vs. 7).

If we love the Lord, then we realize that enemies, suffering, and affliction will always be the norm for the faithful. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself “was ill-treated” (Is 53:7). Public figures who oppose truth and those politicians who temporize with terrorists are the enemies of God, as much as those who are openly bent on destroying life, families, cities, and churches. Nahum declares God’s judgment on all such people.

Let us rejoice, however, for the Resurrection of Christ determines our eternal destiny. “Neither death nor life . . . nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

Holy art Thou, O Master who lovest mankind, who hast provided for us the salvation of regeneration, which is in Thy Christ Himself, who brought us to the knowledge of Thee our God. – Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great

December 2 – Friday – Habakkuk 3:1-19
Kellia Reading for the Holy Prophet Habakkuk

Wondrous Prophecy: *Habakkuk 3:1-19, especially vs. 1:* “*Lord, I have heard Your report and was afraid; I considered Your works, and was greatly astonished.*” The feast of the Prophet Habakkuk falls in early December, as we prepare for the coming feast of the Lord’s Nativity. In the Orthodox Church, today’s passage is understood as a vision of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh. The Church hears the prophet speaking at the very moment of his enlightenment by the Holy Spirit, “when he perceived [Christ’s] coming in the last days.” She understands the enlightened Habakkuk to say, “I have heard of Thy might, O Lord [Jesus], that Thou hast come to save all Thine anointed ones” (Fourth Ode of Pentecost).

The faithful in every generation since the Lord’s coming are likewise amazed by Him “that spake in the Prophets and was proclaimed through the Law” (Fourth Ode). Let us stand in awe of the Prophet Habakkuk’s foresight, for we live in the gracious “years of the Lord” following the Incarnation. Before our eyes all the riches of Christ’s works are recorded and arrayed for our prayers. “All that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs” (Acts 1:1-3).

The ancient prophets, however, can only look forward. Habakkuk states that Christ “shall be known . . . in the approaching years . . . You will be revealed when the time comes” (Hb 3:2). For us this future corresponds to the present time, for Christ is with our benighted race and manifests Himself as the Great Mercy. Now, because of our iniquities, let us be troubled before God’s *wrath* (vs. 2)! Habakkuk foresees the future, but we *meet* Christ as both judgment and mercy. He gives “light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lk 1:79).

The prophet continues: “God will come from Teman” (Hb 3:3). How precisely the Holy Spirit opens the prophet’s eyes! “Teman” refers to a region of Israel that includes southern Judah, where Christ’s birthplace of Bethlehem is located. Here is how Saint Irenaeus of Lyon interprets these prophetic words: “Thus [Habakkuk] indicates in clear terms that He [Christ] is God, and that His advent was to take place in Bethlehem . . . which is toward the south of the inheritance” (“Against Heresies,” *ANF* vol. 1, p. 451).

Furthermore, the Church understands the “mount of shaded leafy trees” (vs. 3) to refer to the Theotokos. Our hymnody proclaims: “Habakkuk foresaw as an uncut mountain Thine undefiled womb, O pure One, and so he cried out: The holy God shall go forth from Teman and from a wooded and uncut mountain” (Octoechos). That is prophecy! We recall the words of the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (Lk 1:35).

This prophecy is like a vein of ore laden with the gospel riches, given to us by the Spirit of God just as He gave it to His servant Habakkuk. Christ’s “excellence covered the heavens, and the earth [is] full of His praise” (Hb 3:4). “Before His face a word will go forth . . . by the shoes of His feet” (vs. 6). Let us sing with the prophet in triumph concerning the Lord who becomes man: “You went forth for the salvation of Your people, to save Your anointed ones. You brought death upon the heads of the lawless” by trampling down death by death (vs. 13).

Today the Virgin cometh to the cave to give birth in an ineffable manner to the pre-eternal Word. Rejoice, therefore, O universe, when thou hearest the prophet’s message. – Preparatory Hymn of the Nativity

December 3 – Saturday – Zephaniah 3:8-18
Kellia Reading for the Holy Prophet Zephaniah

The New Age of Joy: Zephaniah 3:8-18, especially vss. 16, 17: “At that time the Lord shall say to Jerusalem, ‘O Zion, be of good courage; do not let your hands grow slack. The Lord your God is with you. The Mighty One shall save you. He shall bring gladness upon you and will renew you with His love.’” The Lord God reveals to Zephaniah the Prophet a wonderful future age when He will transform His covenant with the human race. We read these verses now to remind us that this new age is here. What God accomplished by taking on our flesh and becoming man is now operating among us. The Lord Jesus’ birth from the Theotokos culminates in the Resurrection, Ascension, and the active outpouring of the Holy Spirit to “as many as received Him” (Jn 1:12).

We are now living the age of the New Covenant in the Church. What a blessing! We are able not only to read Zephaniah’s prophecy, but to receive, enjoy, and taste what he only foresaw. God’s grace and love has become available to the whole community of God’s people. Sadly, many who call themselves Christians do not yet know that God is with us. He is the reason Saint Paul asks, “Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. . . . that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin?” (Rom 6:3,6).

Today, we may “lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has laid hold of [us]” (Phil 3:12). Zephaniah records, in this passage, seven aspects of what we now call the “life in Christ,” so that we may lay hold of what God offers us in and through His Church.

First, God promises us that in this age of the Church He will provide “a language . . . for all to call upon the name of the Lord” (Zep 3:9). In the Body of Christ, which is the Church, we are born anew and learn to say, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28).

Second, God shows Zephaniah that the whole human race is to unite “under one yoke” (Zep 3:9), becoming one people across the globe. This is what Christ offers us at this moment: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29). Orthodox Christians everywhere – Syria, Russia, Greece, Japan, Romania, Albania, North America – are one people, yoked together in Christ.

Third, as Zephaniah foresees, God is removing *shameful practices* and *arrogance* (vs. 11). Within the Church we strive together to be “a gentle and humble people” (vs. 12) who do not fret when wronged or slandered, but earnestly forgive and seek forgiveness from those with whom we are in conflict.

Fourth, we learn that attaining such humility is a path open to all who “show reverence to the name of the Lord” (vs. 12). Fear of God in the heart will readily drive away *unrighteousness* (vs. 13). Thus, as we follow what the Church teaches, we arrive at the fifth aspect: by the grace of God, we cease *speaking vanities* so that no deceitful tongue is found in our mouths (vs. 13).

Sixth, being fed by truth and the life of God through the Church, the faithful will seek to feed and lie down under God’s shepherding, “and there will be no one terrifying them” (vs. 13).

Finally, once our dread of the world is removed and we are joined to the Lord Jesus and cared for in His pasture – the Church – we may “be glad and rejoice with [our] whole heart” (vs. 14).

Indeed, Christ our God “has taken away your iniquities and ransomed you from your enemies. The Lord, the King of Israel, is in your midst!” (vs. 15). Let us have joy “as in a day of feasting” (vs. 17)!

O Lord, look upon Thy servants, prove us, search us and root out of us every operation of the devil and give us victory over him, that we may be worthy of Thy heavenly mysteries. – Prayer for the Reception of Catechumens

December 4 – Sunday – Isaiah 43:9-14. Tone 7
First Reading at Vespers for the Great Martyr Barbara

Witnesses: Isaiah 43:9-14, especially vs. 10: “*You are My witnesses, and I am a witness, ’ says the Lord God, ‘and My Servant whom I chose, that you may know and believe, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no other God, nor shall there be after Me.’*” Today, Nativity scenes in public places and the very mention of Christmas in advertisements seem to stir up protest. Such reactions are symptomatic of society’s uneasiness in the face of a deeper challenge: Is the Lord of the Church the ultimate God and King of this world?

The present passage indicates that this question is many ages old, yet it remains pertinent for countless decisions that we must make every day as Christians. In the courtroom of this world, Truth is on trial and, as God declares, “You are My witnesses” (vs. 10). Note that this statement from the Lord is repeated twice: “You are My witnesses” (vs. 12).

Are we open to being God’s witnesses? Consider the role of a witness – to verify a truth under examination. Based on his personal observation or experience, the witness provides evidence for or against a claim (vs. 10). In the case of the claim to which the Lord testifies, everyone must stand as a witness – either for or against Him. Christ says it this way: “He who is not with Me is against Me” (Lk 11:23). Note that God speaks to Christians as His Church, for when He says, “You are My witnesses” the word “you” is plural. He joins us to His own witness: “I am a witness . . . and My Servant whom I chose” (Is 43:10).

How seriously should we consider the claims of God’s presence in this world, especially when compared to all the other ideals and leaders who compete for our allegiance and obedience? “Before Me there was no other God, nor shall there be after Me. I am God” (vss. 10-11). The God revealed in Jesus Christ gives no ground to competitors. Allegiance to Him rises above any created power or entity. We often see truth modified for the purpose of coddling consumers, pandering to special interests, or currying favor from money and politicians. The net effect is to qualify God’s first-rank position. The Lord challenges such testimony: “Let them bring forth their witnesses, and be proven right; and let them speak the truth” (vs. 9).

Many medications are available today to treat sleeplessness, anxiety, tension, and nerves. Although most of these cures treat symptoms rather than root causes, the pharmaceutical industry aggressively promotes its wares on television. What is *our* witness as to the true source of physical and spiritual health? We must not discount the counsel and therapies offered by doctors, yet at the same time we are to evaluate our own behavior and choices as witnesses of God, reviewing our prayer routine and daily habits.

In the arena of national security, we constantly face ideological and religious claims made on behalf of “foreign gods” (vs. 12). Such claims are not to be treated lightly. These are believers in gods-who-are-not-God, fanatic devotees frantic to prove they are right. God challenges them to stand up to His testimony and to the witnesses from the Church (vs. 9). Solutions to complex problems seem elusive in this fallen world, but a Christian starts at the high end, knowing that human solutions are ultimately limited. Can science, technology, war craft, or international treaties ultimately “deliver out of [God’s] hands”? “Who,” indeed, “will reverse it?” (vs. 13). The witness of the Church, spread by the blood of the martyrs, cannot be turned back.

We serve the God who offers a salvation not measured on a temporal scale but rather on an eternal one. The redemption (vs. 14) and salvation (vs. 12) that God brings is not of this world. The “Babylon” (vs. 14) from which He frees us is sin, evil, Satan, and death; these stretch across time to eternity. In the Lord, we are witnesses to the Kingdom of God above all.

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

December 5 – Monday – Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9
First Reading at Vespers for Saint Sabbas the Sanctified

The Saints' Appearance: Wisdom 3:1-9, especially vs. 7: *“In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and they will run about like sparks through straw.”* At the time of their repose, those glorified saints who now “shine forth” from the Kingdom of Heaven were visited by the Lord. He judged their lives, “tested them and found them worthy of Himself” (vs. 5).

The Church recognizes what God has made apparent by glorifying His holy ones within the Body of Christ. The faithful recognize the saints' glory, for we cease to pray for them in the same way we do for our beloved dead. Instead, we seek their intercessions. We know that the saints are worthy in God's eyes, for they have been glorified by Him. We are prompted to turn to them in our necessities as to ones having privilege with Him. We especially seek their prayers before the face of the Lord during those times when all appears hopeless, asking that the fiery grace of God may “run like sparks” and ignite the straw of our lives.

The saints' words and actions often seemed like a foolish waste to those who scoffed at their witness, but the hearts and souls of the saints remained firmly planted “in the hand of God” (vs. 1). As a result, even torment was unable to dislodge their faith. It was only in the “eyes of the undiscerning [that] they seemed to have died, and their departure was considered to be misfortune . . . and . . . their destruction” (vss. 2-3). The Church understands that the saints, aflame with the Lord's love, consumed the dry grass of arrogance and “bridled the mouths of beasts” with their supplications. Even as they were being beheaded, they struck down the hosts of the enemy. Their lives reveal how this present existence is mere smoke and vapor, no matter how solid it seems to the earthly-minded. “For though in man's view [the saints] were punished, their hope is full of immortality” (vs. 4). Let us not be deceived, but praise these great victors of Christ who stand with us!

Of eternal import is the manner in which the saints appear in God's eyes. He views them as His sons and daughters. Like a good Father, He “chastened [them] in a few things” but also showed them “great kindness” (vs. 5). Having chosen to follow the path of the eternal Son and Word of God who “Himself has suffered” and struggled with temptation as a man (Heb 2:18), they became pillars “of the Church and the fulfillment of the Gospel” (Vespers for All Saints).

Consider how ore, when first removed from the earth, appears to possess little value. Yet despite its unattractive appearance, the dross can be refined away to reveal the pure and gleaming metal. Thus it is with the saints, as the Scriptures teach us (Wis 3:6). God is a keen, observant craftsman. He works with precious hearts. He knows which are made of fool's gold and which are acceptable for refining.

To the faithful, the appearance of the saints is revealed in stages. First, we read accounts of their lives and marvel at their endurance. Then, we read of feats of bravery, asceticism, and martyrdom that nourish “the perfection of believers.” Some of the saints, in their struggles, even “dazzled the incorporeals” (All Saints). After their departure from this life they continue to aid us, their brethren here on earth, with miracles that glow like the crepuscular light after sunset. At the dawn of the age to come, however, the saints will blaze forth in eternal brilliance (vs. 8).

In December alone we celebrate Saint Nicholas of Myra, who protects the nation of Russia, the monastic striver Sabbas the Sanctified, wonderworker Herman of Alaska, and Innocent of Moscow, Enlightener of North America. Truly these will “judge nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord shall reign over them unto the ages” (vs. 8). And “those who trust in Him will understand truth” (vs. 9), for the saints evoke in us the desire to receive the same “grace and mercy” which they received.

Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous, praise is meet for the upright. Alleluia!

December 6 – Tuesday – Proverbs 10:31-11:2

Second Reading at Vespers for Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker

Grace-Filled Pastors: Proverbs 10:31-11:12, especially vss. 32-33: “*The mouth of a righteous man distills wisdom. . . . The lips of righteous men distill grace. . . .*” For centuries, worthy men have been ordained as deacons, priests, and bishops. The Church glorified a select number of these men as saints after their repose. The prayers offered at every ordination ask that “the grace of the all-holy Spirit may come upon” those chosen to join the ranks of the clergy. It is instructive to search the lives of those pastors who attained the further glory of sainthood.

The present passage characterizes the saints as *righteous* (vss. 31, 9), *humble* (vs. 2), *discerning* (vs. 10), and *faithful in spirit* (vs. 12). The Holy Spirit raises many men to productive ministry, yet through the power of the Spirit some pastors have defined these words by their very lives. Matthew the Poor identifies the mark of saints who exhibit righteousness, humility, discernment, and faithfulness as “submission of the human ego to God . . . effected in such a manner as to release the soul and let it live in total surrender to the will of God” (*Orthodox Prayer*, p. 122).

Indeed, good shepherds of the Church conform to Abba Matthew’s guidelines for submission to the Lord. They do not rely upon their own wisdom and refuse to think highly of themselves. They embrace discipline as a gift of great profit, obey the Spirit’s leading, confess weakness and ignorance, and prayerfully examine their thoughts, intentions, words, and deeds in the light of both God’s word and the counsel of their superiors.

These, of course, are actions that God requires of us all! God calls the faithful to Himself. Let us remember to pray for our pastors and for all who struggle alongside us in the Church.

We can examine the words of glorified pastors through their sermons, teachings, counsels, and writings. Being righteous, their mouths *distilled wisdom* (vs. 31). They offered more than bits of information and popular phrases, for God’s wisdom illumines, transforms, and guides us toward salvation in Christ. Saint Demetrius of Rostov sums up the exemplary style of the saint we celebrate today, Nicholas of Myra, by saying: “His way of life became known to everyone . . . so that the Christians might be edified and glorify God.”

We learn further that “the perception of the righteous is prosperous” (vs. 8). Through the the grace of the Holy Spirit and a pastor’s submission to the will of God, the Gospel takes hold in the hearts and minds of the faithful he serves. As fellow servants of Christ, let us join our clergy in seeking God’s will so that the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ may touch many lives.

Being true in their defense of the Gospel, “the lips of righteous men distill grace” (vs. 32). This does not imply, however, that their words were always warmly received. Saint Athanasios the Great, while still a deacon, inspired the First Ecumenical Council to refute the Arian heresy with his devotion and zeal for Orthodoxy. During his forty years as archbishop of Alexandria, Saint Athanasios was frequently was exiled on false charges, yet he never wavered. Our pastors need us to stand with them in defense of the faith.

“The mouth of the humble meditates on wisdom” (vs. 2). The verb “meditate” implies not only reflection from the depths of the heart on known truths, but also applying those truths in practice. As the Prophet David says, “My heart grew hot within me, and in my meditation a fire was kindled. I spake with my tongue” (Ps 38:4-5).

Finally, a holy pastor is “a man of discernment [who] keeps quiet” (Prv 11:10). The Fathers indicate that the search for Christ the Truth takes place in the silent prayer of the heart. Here again we find that the pastoral task is also the work of every Christian.

O God of grace, lead Thy pastors and Thy people by Thy Holy Spirit, to edify all, restore the wayward, proclaim the Gospel of Thy kingdom, and minister the word of Truth to Thy glory.

December 7 – Wednesday – Proverbs Selections
First Reading at Vespers for Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker

Wise, Spirit-filled Ones: Proverbs 10:8, 23; 3:13-18; 8:32, 34, 4, 12, 14, 17, 5-9; 22:20, 15:4, especially vss. 10:23 and 3:13: “The blessing of the Lord is upon the head of the righteous man. . . . Blessed is a man who finds wisdom, and a mortal who sees discernment. . . .” These short verses from Proverbs are sewn together like a quilt to help us to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” God’s word and, in so doing, acquire wisdom. They are appointed for the feasts of the Church’s beloved hierarchs, including Nicholas of Myra, John Chrysostom, Sergios of Radonezh, Innocent and Tikhon of Moscow, and Raphael of Brooklyn.

In chapter 10, we learn how to address the saints; chapter 3 provides an overview of the wisdom manifested by the Saints; chapter 8 urges us to obtain Wisdom’s benefits for ourselves. The final chapters promise us that “the words of the wise . . . establish [our] heart” (vs. 22:20) so that we too may “be filled with the Spirit” (vs. 15:4).

The saints are wise and Spirit-filled, enlightening us by their words, deeds, and miracles as the favored ones of God who plead on our behalf. The opening verses of this selection, in their unabridged form, contrast the righteous (*dikaion*) with the ungodly (*asebous*) or impious. The reading used at the Church’s feasts of the holy hierarchs emphasizes the former, for the saints are the righteous whom God blesses (vs. 10:23). We are called to raise hymns and songs (“eulogies”) in praise of them (vs. 10:8).

But what makes someone a saint who is *blessed* by God (vs. 3:13)? Surely it is the “man who finds wisdom, and a mortal who sees discernment” (vs. 13), for the key to unlocking the impenetrable mystery of spiritual fulfillment is Wisdom. No wonder our Lord Jesus Christ is called Wisdom. The Great Church at Constantinople, which is dedicated to the Lord Jesus, is thus known as *Hagia Sophia* (Holy Wisdom).

Why is Wisdom, then, referred to in Proverbs as *she* or *her*? Both Greek and Hebrew assign genders to nouns; we see vestiges of this practice in English, where ships are still personified as feminine and referred to as “she.” The ancients, before the Incarnation of the Word of God in the man Jesus Christ, personified Wisdom as feminine in keeping with the feminine gender assigned to the noun *sophia*: “She carries law and mercy upon her tongue” (vs. 3:18). But those who “heard . . . looked upon, and . . . handled . . . the Word of life” (1 Jn 1:1), the Incarnate Lord, soon recognized that now the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24) Himself had appeared among us in the flesh, bearing law and mercy.

We need only look to the portrait of Wisdom offered in the verses chosen from Proverbs 8 to know who speaks these “sacred things” and brings forth “from [His] lips . . . things that are true” (Prv 8:6). These words lead us straight to Christ. They also apply to His saints – those who hearkened to Him, kept His ways, and watched for Him (see vs. 32). The Lord urges us to “crown with songs of praise” the saints who attained glory from Him, our common Master, so that we might, together with them, gain “glory from the presence of Christ the Savior” (Feast of All Saints).

Those of a worldly disposition tend to place the highest value on gold, silver, precious stones, and other forms of material wealth – the so-called *enduring* valuables. Surely this view reflects our mad obsession with consumerism and acquisitiveness. Christ, the Wisdom of God, is “better than the treasures of gold and silver, and . . . more valuable than precious stones” (vss. 3:14-15).

Our Lord exhorts (vs. 8:4), counsels (vs. 14), and loves us (vs. 17). Above all, He speaks truth (vs. 7) so that we, along with the saints, will “trade in virtue, [and] distribute the Holy Spirit’s gifts of grace to those in need of them. . . . For earthly riches when distributed are diminished, yet when the heavenly riches of God’s grace are distributed, the more they increase in him who distributes them” (Saint Seraphim of Sarov, *Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 96).

Let the brightness of the Lord our God be upon us, and the works of our hands do Thou guide aright upon us, yea, the work of our hands do Thou guide aright. – Psalm 89:19

December 8 – Thursday – Wisdom of Solomon 5:15-6:3, Tone 8
Second Reading at Vespers for Saint Sabbas the Sanctified

Grace for the Saints: Wisdom 5:15-6:3, especially vss. 15-16: “But the righteous live for evermore, and their reward is with the Lord; and their care is by the most High. Therefore they shall receive a kingly dwelling of dignity and a crown of beauty from the hand of the Lord.” According to Leonid Ouspensky, “An icon is an external expression of the transfigured state of man, of his sanctification by the uncreated divine light.” He adds, “Therefore, all the visible world represented in the icon changes, becomes the image of the future unity of the whole creation – the Kingdom of the Holy Spirit. In accordance with this, all that is depicted in the icon reflects not the disorder of our sinful world, but the divine order, peace, a realm governed not by earthly logic . . . but by divine grace” (*The Meaning of Icons*, p. 38).

The present reading from the Book of Wisdom reveals that the saints are known, manifest, and fulfilled in the Kingdom of God. Its message reminds us that “their care is by the Most High” (vs. 15) through His outpouring of grace and favor upon His Church. This gift is offered to all mankind, including those of us who call ourselves Orthodox Christians.

When the writer of Wisdom calls the saints the “righteous” (vs. 15), he brings to mind Saint Peter’s love for the Lord (Jn 21:17), the joy of the myrrh-bearing women (Lk 24:1-12), and the peace of heart in Saint Thomas’ cry, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28). We see all the fruits of the Spirit manifest in the saints: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22).

Thus, all the visible works of God the Holy Spirit point beyond the saints to the grace that works beautifully within them, and which God discloses to us so all men may see and believe. Flowing from Solomon’s wisdom is this constant message: God cares for everyone, acts with zeal on our behalf, and reminds us that whatever powers we enjoy derive from Him.

God cares for us with the same grace that He showers upon His most beloved saints. We need not hesitate to ask for “a kingly dwelling of dignity and a crown of beauty” (Wis 5:16). Yes, we fall away from the Lord our God, but He raises us up again so that we may fervently pray, “Thy Kingdom come!” He took our flesh upon Himself, embraced mortality, and revealed to us that death itself has been destroyed. In short, He did not “cease to do all things until [He had] brought us back to heaven, and . . . endowed us with [His] Kingdom which is to come” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom). The Lord indeed extends a *crown of beauty* to all (vs. 16).

The central portion of today’s passage focuses on the *zeal* with which God pursues His loving ministry toward His people. The Orthodox Study Bible translation of *zalos* (“zeal”) accurately captures the original meaning of the word: “He will take His zeal as His full armor and will turn His creation into weapons against His enemies” (vs. 17). As a warrior, God arms Himself and enlists all creatures as allies against His adversaries. He unleashes His “righteousness,” “impartial judgment,” and “holiness” (vss. 18-19) with “relentless wrath . . . against the senseless” (vs. 20).

The world of human endeavor – every nation, organization, and coalition of men – is put on notice. It is time for us to cease trusting in our own power, glory, and sovereignty, as if we somehow exist through our own efforts (vss. 6:1-3). God loves the entire world and gives grace to all. Our earthly skills and abilities come from God, for “power [is] given . . . from the Lord, and . . . lordship from the Most High” (vs. 3). The grace afforded to the saints is available to all. God tries our *works* and *plans* (vs. 3) and tests our talents, capacities, and abilities. Let us humbly offer them to God, submitting to His will.

Rejoice in the Lord, O ye just: Praise becometh the upright. Alleluia! – Communion Hymn for the Feast of All Saints

December 9 – Friday – Wisdom of Solomon 4:7-15
Third Reading at Vespers for Saint Spyridon of Trimythus

Pleasing God: Wisdom 4:7-15, especially vs. 12: “For envy arising from lack of judgment obscures what is good, and a whirling of desire undermines an innocent heart.” Let us heed the wise Solomon’s warning lest our hearts, and souls be undermined, for in this life the desires of men are indeed like whirling tornadoes obscuring truth, justice, and candor. We can too easily find ourselves drained of all virtue by the nihilism of this age and the steady bombardment of clichés, opinions, and fads. We are crushed by an avalanche of empty words that sweep away goodness and bewitch us.

Worst of all, the concupiscence that lurks within us stealthily undermines our faculties of reason, should we set out to find truth on our own. If we follow such a path, we will surely defeat our own simple minds. Within and without, are we doomed? Not necessarily!

God teaches us in this brief passage the better way to find truth – by embracing honesty and retaining a pure outlook. It is possible to attain to old age with *a spotless life* (vs. 9) by living righteously (vs. 7). Yet because the righteous life requires sustained effort, there remains the temptation to fall into hopelessness. Our conscience reminds us how much we have soiled our lives. Worst of all, most of us are not fully aware of how our thoughts and deeds have fouled and disfigured us. Our uneasiness is compounded by the irreverence of the present world. It is difficult to know for certain what the nature of our stain may be, or how to cleanse it.

Let us listen to Solomon – the key is to strive to be “pleasing to God” (vs. 10). Since we are “loved by Him,” He will reveal truth, justice, and honesty to us even when we are “living among sinners” (vs. 10). Thus *evil* will not “change [our] understanding or deceit deceive [our] soul” (vs. 11).

We find hope in this possibility! When we glimpse the truth, we do our best to embrace and practice it. In this way we fend off the assaults of mindless words and deflect a host of lies that would deceive our souls (vs. 12).

How do we please God in thought, word, and deed, despite our human frailty? The Lord gave Solomon great wisdom in this matter: the righteous man is “made perfect . . . in a short time” (vs. 13). The Greek word translated as “made perfect” is *teleiotheis*, which means “to be completed.” Being *completed* as a human person is a labor of restoration, a process of reassigning thoughts, inclinations, desires, and actions to their rightful place and function. And who does this for us? We look to God, of course, for He can make perfect even “in a short time” (vs. 13). He is ready to complete us *if* we will work with Him.

In verse 15, Solomon sets forth the essential components of this perfecting (or completing) process. The wise prophet assures us that “the Lord’s *grace and mercy* are with His elect” (vs. 15). Are we counted among the elect of God? Saint Paul teaches that “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb 11:6).

Christ appeals to us in this vein, saying: “You believe in God, believe also in Me” (Jn 14:1). He begs us to trust Him, surrender our wills, and submit to Him. Do we wish to find what is true, just, and honest? Hear Saint Paul again: “So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Rom. 8:8-9). When we cry out for the Spirit and confess our uncertainty, He will heal and complete!

O Master, who couldst not endure to behold mankind oppressed by the devil, but didst come and save us: we proclaim Thy mercy. We conceal not Thy grace. Save us and help us! –Baptismal Prayer

December 10 – Saturday – Second Kingdoms 3:6, 17-28, 33-39

Kellia Reading on David as a Type of Christ

David as a Type of Christ – Consent of the Governed: 2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel) 3:6, 20-21, 24-29, 33-39, especially vs. 21: *“Then Abner said to David, ‘I will arise and go, and gather all Israel to my lord the king, and I will make a covenant with you, and you may reign over all that your soul desires.’ So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace.”*

The first four chapters of Second Kingdoms describe the rise of David as sole monarch over the twelve tribes of Israel. In chapter 1, he is portrayed an honorable leader who survives the wrath of Saul, the first king of Israel, yet honestly mourns the king’s death and the loss of his friend Jonathan, the king’s son.

In chapter 2, David is revealed as a man obedient to the Lord, for he returns to live among his own tribe of Judah. The men of Judah crown him as their king at Hebron, while Saul’s son Ishbosheth is crowned king over the other eleven tribes with the help of “Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul’s army” (2 Kgs 2:8). War then breaks out between the two kingdoms (vss. 2:12-32), “a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David” where “David grew continually stronger” (vs. 3:1).

The third chapter opens with the bitter feud between the commanding officers of the two armies. Abner leads Ishbosheth’s army while Joab leads David’s forces. Chapter 4 details how officers of King Ishbosheth murder the king in his sleep in the hope of gaining David’s favor, but instead they incur David’s wrath and a sentence of death (vss. 4:11-12). The struggle between the two royal houses finally ends, leading to the reign of David for “thirty-three years over all Israel and Judah” (vs. 5:5).

Two elements are necessary for the reign of a king, or for any exercise of government: the power to decree, so that what is ordered comes to pass, and the consent of the governed. The present reading makes clear the interplay between these elements of power and consent. The shift of power in David’s favor occurs as the result of a falling out between King Ishbosheth and Abner, his commander (vss. 3:7-11). Not only had Abner played an instrumental role in Ishbosheth’s anointing as king (vss. 2:8-9), but over the next two years he “was strengthening his hold on the house of Saul” (vs. 3:6).

Abner is what we call a “king-maker.” Note what he promises to David during his meeting with him: the gathering of “all Israel to my lord the king, and I will make a covenant with you, and you may reign over all that your soul desires” (vs. 21). Although Abner is treacherously murdered by Joab (vss. 26-27), it is his shift in loyalty, together with the regicide of Ishbosheth, that transfers sufficient power to David to enable him to be acclaimed king over the entire nation. With Joab now acting as the sole commander of his armed forces, King David of Judah now rules the tribes of Israel from a single center of command and control.

As events unfold, the consent of the governed continues to accrue to David. His fervent disavowal of the murder of Abner by Joab (vss. 28-29) and his grief over Abner’s death (vs. 33) certainly gain him popular support. As he laments, all the people” join him in grieving (vs. 34). As we consider the rise and fall of world leaders, there is much to learn concerning power and consent from David and the people of his nation.

Preserve well Thy holy Church, O all-good Master, strengthening and confirming by the might of Thy hand the rulers of the nations, that Thy kingdom of all ages may come upon us. – Doxology for the New Year

December 11 – Sunday – Second Kingdoms 5:6-26, Tone 8
Kellia Reading on David as a Type of Christ

David as a Type of Christ – Gaining Dominion: 2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel) 5:6-26, especially vs. 12: “So David knew the Lord had prepared him as king over Israel, and his kingdom was exalted for the sake of His people Israel.” David’s accession as king over all the tribes of Israel (vss. 5:1-5) presents the young monarch with a host of national security problems. By relying first and foremost on seeking and following God’s counsel, however, he becomes an outstanding practitioner of statecraft. Thus, “the Lord Almighty was with him (vs. 10).

The Lord anoints each of us as ruler over the unruly kingdom within our hearts and souls. Will not the good God who established David also assist us in extending the gracious rule of our God and King, the Son of David (Mt 22:41-45)? Surely He will! As we observe how David strengthens his nation’s security, let us also seek to foster the Lord’s dominion within our heart, soul, and will by relying on God’s unfailing help. We pray that Christ will be all in all.

A sovereign nation must first have control over its territory. King David faces a Jebusite enclave within his borders that does not submit to his governance. These people say to David, “You shall not be welcomed here” (2 Kgs 5:6), but “nevertheless, David took the stronghold of Zion” (vs. 7). Each of us must likewise “renounce all things, despise all things, deride all things and shake off things” within our hearts that refuse to submit to Christ and His will (Saint John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 1.10, p. 6).

A secure nation possesses a defensible *stronghold* for its seat of government (vs. 9). Loving our Savior, let us say, “The Lord is my foundation, and my refuge, and my deliverer. . . . I will hope in Him, my defender” (Ps 17:1-2). Christ is our unfailing stronghold!

To prosper, a nation needs good working relationships with other countries, especially those willing to furnish it with resources for building (2 Kgs 5:11). Our fellow laborers in the Church include the priests, confessors, saints, and Fathers of the Church, along with the Divine Liturgy and other services. All of these supply us with what we require to build our inner house.

A nation needs *sons and daughters* (vs. 13) to increase its population and occupy its land (vss. 14-17). We, too, must nurture a large family of growing virtues if we are to further our inner realm, turn words into deeds, and populate our lives with fruitful offspring.

Nations must maintain effective defenses against hostile enemies who seek out its leaders and conquer its people (vs. 18). King David prepares his defenses at Jerusalem and then “went down to the stronghold” (vs. 18). If we accustom ourselves to receiving counsel from Christ, our living Stronghold, we shall always resort to Him when the enemy comes after us. Our Lord knows how to defeat the temptations, passions, and demons that attack our hearts and souls.

With each invasion of the Philistines David prays to the Lord, setting before Him his battle plan for approval and further adaptation (vss. 20, 24). We pity all those who refuse divine guidance and reject God’s help in their tactical and strategic planning for this life. Likewise, God pities us if we do not *inquire of the Lord* (vs. 20). He is the almighty ally, security advisor, and defender who helps us break through our enemies “like water that breaches a barrier” (vs. 21).

David maintains his nation’s security by doing “as the Lord commanded him” (vs. 26). As Saint John Climacus reminds us, “Obedience is the tomb of the will and the resurrection of humility” (*Ladder* 4.3, p. 21). Let us beseech the Lord without hesitation for the grace to defeat our own will and to follow His directions always, so that Christ may have full dominion over our lives.

O Lord, reveal to us the word of truth, reveal the gospel of righteousness, unite us to Thy holy Church, and have mercy on us, save us, help us and keep us, O God, by Thy grace. – Divine Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts

December 12 – Monday – Second Kingdoms 6:1-15
Kellia Reading on David as a Type of Christ

David as a Type of Christ – Touching the Ark: 2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel) 6:1-15, especially vs. 7: “The Lord was angered against Uzzah, and there God struck him. And before God, he died there next to the ark of the Lord.” In the Divine Liturgy, at the conclusion of anaphora, “the priest takes up the Lamb in both hands and makes therewith the sign of the cross over the diskos, saying, ‘Holy things are for the holy.’” The people respond, “One is holy, One is Lord: Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.”

These liturgical prayers tell us that holiness pertains to the Lamb (the holy Seal of bread) and to the holy people of God for whom the gifts are intended, but above all to the One who alone is holy, our Lord Jesus Christ. The hymn explicitly asserts that “One is holy, One is Lord,” implying that everything else called “holy” derives that property from God alone.

For the ancient people of God, the holy presence of God was closely associated with the Ark of the Covenant, a rectangular wooden chest overlaid with gold in which was kept the tablets inscribed by the Lord with the Ten Commandments (Ex 25:22). It also contained Aaron’s rod and a pot holding a bit of manna (Heb 9:4-5). This chest and its contents served as the unique, visible sign of the presence of the invisible God among His people.

In recognition of the holiness of God, the ark was treated with special reverence. Its holiness was symbolized by the ark’s placement within the tabernacle, the center of worship. The plan for the tabernacle included a large area where the people gathered for worship, and a “holy place” set aside for the priests to conduct the worship. The holy place contained an altar, tables, and other furnishings. Screened off from the holy place by a heavy veil was a small room called the “holy of holies,” the most sacred place of all. This inner sanctuary was reserved for the ark, which resided on a special table.

The ark’s uniqueness was first revealed to the people when they crossed the Jordan to enter the Holy Land (Jos 3:14-17). It was kept at the national shrine in Shiloh until God allowed it to be captured by the Philistines, “because of the vices of My people Israel” (Jer 7:11). However, the Philistines experienced “a widespread panic of death” (1 Kgs 5:11) as a result of having the ark among them. They hastily sent it back to Israel in a cart drawn by newly freshened cows (vss. 6:10-12). After 50,070 men were slain at Beth-Shemesh by the Lord “because . . . they looked at the ark” (vs. 6:19), it was “brought . . . into the house of Abinadab” (vs. 7:1). There it remained until King David transferred it to Jerusalem.

Improper acts involving the ark – capturing it, peering at it, touching it – are fraught with dangerous consequences. Among the people of God, all sacred things must be treated with great respect. In the Orthodox Church today the icons, Gospel book, priestly vestments and, above all, the holy gifts of the Lord’s Body and Blood are to be touched only with reverence, for they are appointed to honor God whose presence is known in and through these created things.

These accounts of mishandling of the ark serve to remind us to approach everything associated with the presence of the Lord with the “glory due unto His name” (Ps 95:7). Let us extend all due reverence toward our marriages, to our fellow Christians who are baptized into Christ, and to our Church temples and sacred furnishings, for “Christ is in our midst!” “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory” (Is 6:3).

Holy is the Lord our God. Holy is the Lord our God. Holy is the Lord our God. Exalt ye the Lord our God and worship at His footstool, for He is holy. – Sunday Orthros Verse

December 13 – Tuesday – Second Kingdoms 7:1-4, 8-16
Kellia Reading on David as a Type of Christ

David as a Type of Christ – Divine Promises: 2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel) 7:1-4, 8-16, especially vs. 16: “*And his house will be made sure, and his kingdom shall be forever.*” If we consider the royal houses that have come and gone over the course of history and how many crowns have tumbled into dust, we understand just how remarkable are the promises God makes in these verses to King David. Indeed, the Kingdom of the Son of David assumes an eternal significance for the faithful, who confess that the kingdoms of this world shall “become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever” (Rv 11:15). In this light, today’s passage from Second Kingdoms acquires a significance far beyond a mere study in Hebrew antiquities!

The Lord’s promise to David that his son Solomon’s “house will be made sure, and his kingdom shall be forever” (2 Kgs 7:16) deserves close attention. In the original Greek, the word for “house” is *oikos*, which connotes a household or, in the case of royalty, a dynasty, i.e., the “house of Romanov” or the “house of Tudor.” The term implies a continuity of lineage over time. Saint Matthew and Saint Luke, with variations in details, both place the Lord Jesus within the lineage of Joseph, which they trace back to King David.

Of greater significance, however, is the lineage of the Virgin Mary, for the Lord was conceived without earthly father. In the *Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints*, we read: “She, being like a precious stone, was of royal lineage, having descended from David, who placed a stone in his sling and with it killed Goliath, which stone foreshadowed the Rock that is Christ. And she was fashioned, as it were, from aromatic woods of cedar and cypress, being of priestly ancestors as well, who offered God sweet-smelling sacrifices. Her father, the holy righteous Joachim, was the son of Barpaphira, who traced his ancestry to Nathan, the son of David” (Vol. 1, p. 152-3; see also 2 Kgs 5:14).

God further promises David, “I will raise up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will prepare his kingdom. . . . and I will establish his throne forever” (vss. 7:12-13). Measured in historical terms, the dynasty of David appears to end with the Babylonian exile. The Hasmonean kings never laid claim to Davidic ancestry, and their throne was superseded by the Idumeans (the “Herods”). And yet the apostolic witness declares a Davidic bloodline for the Lord Jesus!

The Romans finally abolished the kingship of Judah. They settled any doubts about Jesus when Pontius Pilate seemingly eliminated Him as a royal threat. And yet how often the Lord of history thwarts the plans of empires! “Come, let us all extol David . . . the grandparent of God; for from him . . . did shine forth Christ!” (Vespers of the Sunday after Nativity).

Note the final – and most wonderful – element of the divine promise to David. The Lord assures him that his son – the One who is to establish the everlasting kingdom – will enjoy an enduring love relationship with God His Father. God tells David, “I will not take My mercy from him” (vs. 15).

The Lord Jesus, King David’s greater Son, confirms His participation in this eternal, loving relationship with His Father: “And I have declared to them [the disciples] Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 17:26). Love is the essence of the relationship between God the Son and God the Father, and it remains our test of authentic life in the Church in every age.

Let us celebrate the memory of David the Prophet-king of true worship, so that being saved from error by his teachings, and by God’s true promises to him, we may glorify Christ who shone forth Incarnate from the Virgin to save our souls. –Sunday after Nativity Vespers

December 14 – Wednesday – Second Kingdoms 8:1-15
Kellia Reading on David as a Type of Christ

David as a Type of Christ – Victory and Tribute: 2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel) 8:1-15, especially vs. 6: “Then David put garrisons in Syria of Damascus, and the Syrians became David’s servants and brought tribute.” King David deliberately extends the borders of Israel to encompass the lands which the Lord originally promises to His people in the days of the Prophet Joshua: “Your territories shall be the desert and Lebanon as far as the great river, the Euphrates River; and from the setting of the sun to the farthest sea” (Jos 1:4). This ancient policy still haunts relations between the Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, and the modern state of Israel.

The Book of Judges discloses that God’s ancient people fail to fulfill what the Lord requires for receiving the Holy Land: “You shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land . . . and you shall tear down their altars” (Jgs 2:2). Rather, “they forsook the Lord God of their fathers . . . [and] followed other gods from among the gods of the nations all around about them” (vs. 12). So the Lord “delivered them into the hands of plunderers, who ravaged them and sold them into the hands of their enemies all around. As a result they could no longer stand before their enemies” (vs. 14). When the Angel of the Lord admonishes them for their sins, “the people lifted up their voices and wept” (vs. 4).

First Kingdoms describes how the Prophet Samuel “judged Israel all the days of his life,” going “yearly on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah” (1 Kgs 7:15-16). Samuel also anoints the two men who serve as the nation’s first kings: Saul the son of Kish (vss. 10:1) and then, when Saul disobeys the Lord, David the son of Jesse (vss. 16:12-13).

Second Kingdoms reveals David as a strong ruler who metes out tough justice and gracious mercy. He makes an uncompromising effort to subdue Israel’s opponents, incorporating the territories that God intended to be part of Israel and administering “judgment and justice to all his people” (2 Kgs 8:15).

Today’s passage calls to mind our King and God, Jesus Christ, for He accepts no other gods and asks us to do the same. Our souls will be plundered by our enemies unless we seek to follow His commandments, stand firmly against falsehood, and turn away from the worldly pleasures that would draw us into perdition.

The aggressive Philistines, who live along the coast of Palestine, are the first major nation to be subdued by David. The battles described earlier (vss. 5:17-25) show David relying on prayer and obedience to God as he asserts Israel’s supremacy. Even before he becomes king, he strikes the Geshurites and the Amalekites (1 Kgs 27:8). We, too, are to oppose every attack on our Christian confession and, by obeying Christ, cultivate new habits that enable us to gain control over the passions that dominate our lives.

King David’s methods for *subduing* the surrounding nations include incorporation, as with the Moabites who became “David’s servants and brought tribute” (2 Kgs 8:2). By garrisoning troops in his enemies’ lands (vss. 6, 14), he systematically eliminates their capacity to compete with Israel militarily.

Thus “David reigned over Israel, and . . . administered judgment and justice to all his people” (vs. 15). Our own lusts, bitterness, and will to dominate must be submitted to our Master Christ for the sake of our salvation, lest He mark us off for death instead of life.

O Lord, as Thou has called me to Thyself, grant that I may choose not to follow my desires in anything but Thy will only, praying constantly and striving ever to please Thee. – Saint Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain

December 15 – Thursday – Second Kingdoms 11:1-18, 23-27, Tone 1
Kellia Reading on David as a Type of Christ

David as Type of Christ – Sin and Repentance: 2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel) 11:1-18, 23-27, especially vs. 27: “But what David did was evil in the Lord’s eyes.” Saint Paul cautions, “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body” (Rom 6:12). Saint Augustine of Hippo, who knew sin’s power, notes that Saint Paul did not say “let there not be sin, but let it not reign. There is sin in you when you take pleasure; it reigns if you will have consented” (NPNF First Series, vol. 8, p. 189).

Sin indeed reigned in King David, as this sordid chapter from his life reveals. He became sin’s deplorable captive until he hastened to cry in repentance, “Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation” (Ps 50:14).

It is important to consider today’s account when we consider King David as a type of Christ. These events reveal the limit of the type when compared to the prototype – that is, to the blessed, direct acts of God as He discloses Himself to us. David’s sin exposes the limits of every created being in conveying the holiness, glory, and majesty of God. He, like us, is a man of God, and through his example the Lord reminds us that the primary aim of our life in Christ is repentance.

King David’s fall begins with vision and imagination: “He saw a woman bathing, and she was very beautiful in appearance” (2 Kgs 11:2). Note that he neither averts his eyes nor quells his passion. That small, treacherous step he takes, from *seeing* Bathsheba bathing to perceiving that she was *very beautiful*, reveals the kindling of sensuality within. Saint Gregory of Sinai notes that the demons play a role in inflaming our minds and arousing emotions that progress from mere seeing to the generation of pleasurable images: “The spirits of self-indulgence kindle the soul’s desiring faculty, and they also confuse the nous and plunge it into darkness” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 225).

Our captivity to sin begins with this interior progression from the reception of information (through the eyes, ears, or touch) to the awakening of a concrete desire. In Saint Gregory’s words, “the roving spirits . . . seek to lay hold of us in order to devour us.” Once a passion is awakened, we are urged to action.

David, influenced by the demons, “sent and asked about the woman” (vs. 3). We observe a king who now turns slave, obediently following the temptations that play upon his passions. He ignores every echo of the life-giving commandment of the Lord against adultery! The evil spirits take the reins of his soul and quickly plunge him into darkness.

A callous ruler might savor his pleasure and then use the power of the throne to protect himself. King David frantically seeks to use Uriah to hide his sin, but the king’s soldier proves nobler than his monarch. Uriah refuses to enjoy the pleasures of marriage while his fellow soldiers are in the field (vss. 9-13).

David cannot quiet his conscience. His second sin, like the first, begins with warped thinking and the illusion that he can save himself. The murder of Uriah is easily arranged and dispatched at the king’s order. Joab obediently “assigned Uriah to a place where he knew there were valiant men. . . . [and] Uriah the Hittite died” (vss. 16-17). But “what David did was evil in the Lord’s eyes” (vs. 27). The Lord knows our ways, and nothing is hidden from Him.

In David we see the desperation of a sensitive soul as it realizes its predicament and faces the consequences of its deeds. These consequences lead David to repentance: “Save me, O God, for the waters are come in unto my soul. I am stuck fast in the mire of the deep, and there is no sure standing” (Ps 68:1-2).

Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy; and according to the multitude of Thy compassions blot out my transgression. . . . Cleanse me from my sin. – Psalm 50:1-2

December 16 – Friday – Haggai 2:1-9
Kellia Reading for the Prophet Haggai

Haggai’s Nativity Vision: Haggai 2:1-9, especially vs. 9: “*The glory of this latter house shall be greater than the former. . . . And in this place, I will give peace, ’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and peace of soul for a possession to everyone who builds and raises this temple.’*” This prophecy is especially suited to the period just before the feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Theophanes the Hymnographer confirms in his verses that the new temple Haggai sublimely foretells is none other than Christ Jesus our Lord: “To Thy prophet, O Christ, Thou didst show the animate temple . . . which came forth from the Virgin” (*Lives of the Holy Prophets*, p. 543).

When we receive the whole of Haggai’s prophecy in this manner, the prophet’s words are transformed into a glorious anticipation of the Incarnation of our Savior. Haggai discloses the gracious saving work of the Church, the eternal “animate temple” of the Lord’s earthly body, which begins with His birth.

However, at the time Haggai first delivered these words, they were received as encouragement for the exiles who, in 537 BC, returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. Some of them could still remember the glorious temple of Solomon, and the sight of the pitiful beginnings of a second, replacement temple, seemed to their “eyes as being nothing” (vs. 4).

The prophet particularly exhorts the leaders of the community of returnees. Zerubbabel, the civic leader, is a descendant in the lineage of David. Joshua, the high priest, is from the line of Aaron through his father Jehozadak (vs. 3). However, Haggai’s message extends to the entire populace: “Be strong, all you people of the land . . . and work” (vs. 4), for the Lord declares that “all the nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory” (vs. 7).

Historical evidence shows that the second temple, built in Haggai’s day, never exceeded the glory of Solomon’s temple. Later, that second temple was enlarged by the Herod family, but then utterly destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

On the other hand, the Church – the living Body of Christ – is a true, ineffable fulfillment of Haggai’s prophecy. The Epistle of Barnabas, an apostolic letter written around AD 100, notes that the “Jews, wandering in error, trusted not in God Himself, but in the temple, as being the house of God. For almost after the manner of the gentiles they worshiped Him in the temple – that is, they worshiped the temple instead of Him” (*ANF* vol. 1, p. 147).

The faithful in Christ, following the wise apostles, know the Lord Jesus is the true and living Temple. He has shaken “all nations, and the choice things of all the nations . . . come in, and . . . fill this house with glory” (vs. 8).

Where, then, does the Spirit of God *remain?* (vs. 5). Surely the Church is the most evident place where He, in the words of Saint Basil the Great, “who is omnipresent, and exists together with God” is to be found. For this reason the Church highly exalts “Him who is in His nature divine, in His greatness infinite, in His operations powerful, [and] in the blessings He confers, good” (*On the Holy Spirit*, NPNF Second series vol. 8, p. 35). Join with our mother the Church in praising our glorious Head!

The Holy Spirit gives “peace,” says the Lord Almighty, “peace of soul for a possession to everyone who builds and raises this temple” (vs. 9), i.e., the Body of Christ. As Theophanes the Hymnographer further teaches, “Truly great will be the glory of the Church of the Incarnate Word who hath shared the nature of men, surpassing that of the assembly of Israel of old.” Let us build the Temple to which Christ has joined us as “living stones” (1 Pt 2:5).

O Holy Prophet Haggai, as thou dost prophesy to all mankind of that saving deed of our deliverance by the Savior, ask of Him that great mercy be granted unto all. – Vespers Hymn for the Prophet Haggai

December 17 – Saturday – Daniel 3:91-97

Prophet Daniel

Life in Exile: Daniel 3:91-97, especially vs. 95: “So King Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, ‘Blessed is the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who sent His Angel and saved His servants who trusted in Him; for they altered the word of the king and handed over their bodies to be burned, so as not to serve and worship any god other than their God.’” After the armies of Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem and captured the city in 587 BC, most of the population was deported to the lower Mesopotamian Valley, near the great capital city of Babylon. The exiles struggled to maintain their religious practices and the truth of their faith amidst constant pressure to conform to the dominant pagan culture.

We the faithful today live with continuous pressure to conform to society’s dominant worldview, which opposes the given truths of Christianity. The account of the three godly youths in the Book of Daniel helps us in our struggle to resist the slide into pagan living. To these young men it is clear that the idol they are asked to worship is no true god. They are willing, as Daniel reports, to die rather than pretend to worship such an image. They tell the king frankly that they “will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image you set up” (vs. 3:18). Full of fury, the king has them thrown into a burning furnace.

First, let us observe that God remains present with His faithful even in the worst of trials. In this instance Christ intervenes miraculously, appearing as a fourth person in the furnace and walking with the three in the fire (vs. 9:92). He thereby keeps them safe from all effects of the fire and heat (vs. 94).

However, we should not conclude that this unusual deliverance in any way constitutes an assurance that God will, in every instance, overturn the course of nature and miraculously rescue us from duress. Rather, God’s action assures us that He always is with us whenever we consciously and deliberately stand firm for the truth, even in the face of death. The faithful witness of untold martyrs for Christ reveals this same truth.

Second, note that the faithfulness of the three effects a change in Nebuchadnezzar. He blesses “the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who sent His Angel and saved His servants who trusted in Him” (vs. 95). Although this is not a conversion, in the fullest sense of the word, it indicates the king’s acceptance of a certain validity of the faith. He is moved to admire the young men’s unwavering stance and, as a result, begins to allow the people of God to practice their religion freely. (While in exile, the Jewish community developed the institution of the synagogue, with its reading and exposition of the written word of God. These practices form the underlying structure of the first part of our Divine Liturgy, which centers upon Holy Scripture.)

Only a small change occurs in the heart and mind of the Babylonian king after this extraordinary miracle. Is he moved to general tolerance? Not at all! Instead, he orders that any who “blasphemes the God of Shadrach, Meshach, or Abednego shall be destroyed, and their houses plundered, because there is no other God who can deliver in this way” (vs. 96).

What a vivid reminder of the complications involved in winning others to the true faith, especially those raised to believe in false religions! On the one hand, we rejoice that Nebuchadnezzar promotes Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to positions of power (vs. 97). On the other, let us not overlook their end: “Daniel and the Three Children lived to a great old age in Babylon, and were beheaded with the sword for the true faith” (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 4, p. 336). Our task as the Church is to disciple the nations (Mt 28:19), and we are to attend to this work until our life’s end.

Great are the achievements of faith! In the fountain of flame as by the water of rest, the Three Holy Children rejoiced. By their prayers, O Christ our God, Save our souls. – Festal Hymn of the Prophet Daniel

December 18 – Sunday – Second Kingdoms 12:1-25, Tone 1
Kellia Reading on David as a Type of Christ

David as a Type of Christ – Awakening Grace: 2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel) 12:1-25, especially vs. 13: “So David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’” According to Saint Theophan the Recluse, “The awakening of a sinner is such an action of God’s grace in his heart that he, having awakened from sleep, sees his sinfulness and feels his danger. He then begins to fear for himself and concerns himself with how he can rid himself of this trouble and save himself. . . . Only grace takes the sinner out of his habitual and customary bondage and relieves him from his fetters” (*Turning the Heart to God*, p. 13).

In King David we see grace awakening a sinner and stirring him into saving action. However, as Saint Theophan emphasizes, awakening from sin is always “an action of God’s grace.” That the Lord is the primary actor in the awakening of King David may be seen in the opening words of the chapter: “And the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to David. And he came to him” (vs. 1). The Prophet Nathan is a trusted confidant of the king, one who enjoys access to him and a man to whom David is likely to listen. The restoration of David to the Lord is the loving, gracious work that God intends to accomplish by sending Nathan.

However, we must exercise caution when we consider this passage. We are not to assume that we are called to reach out to the “sinners” around us. As a prophet of God, Nathan has his ear and heart deeply attuned to God; he knows within himself why God is sending him to the king. Before we speak to those caught in sin, let us take care always to measure ourselves against the Lord’s admonition: “Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Mt 7:5).

In this instance, the emissary sent by God is able to speak in a manner that awakens the fallen king. Nathan uses “case history” as his method, reporting an event between two neighbors, “one rich and the other poor” (2 Kgs 12:1). His example is crafted to arouse the ire of the king against the rich man who “took the poor man’s lamb”(vs. 4).

The prophet does not leave the king puzzling over the meaning of this story, but makes its application immediate and personal to David: “You are the man” (vs. 7). These famous words serve as the hand of God on David’s shoulder, shaking the sinner back to saving rectitude.

When God graciously brings us a messenger who awakens us to spiritual danger, we do not expect merely to be roused. The Prophet Nathan presses on to announce the judgment of God upon David’s life: “The sword shall never depart from your house forever, because you scorned Me” (vs. 10). Let us remember that sin, first and foremost, is an offense against God.

At last King David confesses that his adultery and murder have severed him from God: “Against Thee only have I sinned and done this evil before Thee” (Ps 50:4). In the face of such true contrition, the prophet swiftly turns to God’s forgiveness: “So David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ And Nathan said, to David, ‘The Lord also has put away your sin. You shall not die’” (2 Kgs 12:13). God’s grace indeed confers great mercy.

Nathan then makes a further declaration concerning the consequences that will follow upon David’s sin: “Your son who is born to you shall surely die” (vs. 14). Forgiveness does not stop the damage we unleash.

We find evidence that God’s grace has been received in David’s prayer, fasting, and vigil for the child (vs. 16), in his subsequent worship in “the house of God” (vs. 20), and in the comfort he gives to “Bathsheba his wife” (vs. 24). May God awaken us to act like David for our own salvation as we reflect upon the grace and mercy He reveals in these verses!

If I think upon the multitude of my evil deeds, I tremble for the terrible Day of Judgment. But trusting Thy compassion, I shout to Thee like David, Have mercy upon me, O God. – Lenten Hymn of the Triodion

December 19 – Monday – Third Kingdoms 1:15-25, 32-40

Kellia Reading on David as a Type of Christ

David as a Type of Christ – Succession: 3 Kingdoms (1Kings) 1:15-25, 32-40, especially vss. 34-35: “There let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him as king over Israel, and blow the ram’s horn, and say, ‘Long live King Solomon!’ Then he shall sit on my throne and be king in my place. For I have appointed him to ruler over Israel and Judah.” The transfer of governmental power can throw any nation into uncertainty, political bargaining, and even outright civil war unless succession is provided for lawfully and firmly. King David reigned for many years, yet even during his lifetime he was challenged by one of his sons, the popular Absalom (2 Kgs 13-18). As David’s death neared, the succession issue arose again.

The present passage reveals how the question of succession is forced upon the king by the self-assertion of another of his sons, Adonijah (3 Kgs 1:5). In the face of this challenge, David shows himself to be a wise and faithful ruler and a true man of God. As he promised, he immediately places his son Solomon on the throne of Israel, for this is the son whom God Himself confirms as a worthy king (vss. 3:4-14).

During David’s lifetime the question of succession to the throne of Israel is ongoing. From the day Samuel obeys God’s command to anoint David (1 Kgs 16:1-13), the young shepherd perceives that the crown lies before him. Yet even when he has every opportunity to murder Saul, the reigning king, thus assuring his ascension to the throne, he refuses. He recognizes the primacy of God in controlling all matters pertaining to succession (1 Kgs 24). When opportunities arise for him to assume the throne, he submits to God’s lead in each instance (see 2 Kgs 2:1 and 5:3). Even when Absalom rises up against him, he rests the monarchy in the hands of God (vss. 15:24-29).

This present reading calls us to turn to God in every question that arises concerning succession and inheritance in our lives. What do we wish to pass on to our children and future generations? Each of us rules for only a brief time over our tiny “kingdom,” whether it be a household of few belongings or a company, perhaps even a group of businesses. Most of us, of course, possess little more than a home, a vehicle or two, plus a few other tangible items. Wealthy or poor, however, the most important inheritance we pass on to the family members who will succeed us is their standing before the Lord.

We pray that we may come to life’s end in the blessed manner of King David of Israel. With his last words, he declares, “The Mighty One . . . prepared an everlasting covenant with me, keeping it prepared for every time. For my entire salvation and my every desire is, that the lawless may not in any way flourish” (2 Kgs 23:5). When his household’s standing before God is challenged – when Adonijah “exalted himself, saying, ‘I will be king’” (3 Kgs 1:5) – David acts so that the *lawless* will not flourish. He guides the course of succession to assure that the wise and godly Solomon, not Adonijah, reigns in his stead (vss. 32-35).

If David’s example is to guide us in relation to our own households, we must emphasize the primacy of submission to the Lord’s will in all our dealings with our children. We are to demonstrate in both word and action that we have submitted ourselves to the Lord, and thwart the ambitions of family members who would exalt themselves and attempt to control others. Finally, let us always heed the cautions of those members of our household who are governed by these same principles.

Put far from our home, O Lord, every root of bitterness, the desire of vainglory, and the pride of life: fill us with love, faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, and godliness. – Family Blessing, Book of Common Prayer

December 20 – Tuesday – Exodus 6:16, 18-20, 23-7:6

Moses as a Type of Christ – Deliverance: Exodus 6:16, 18-20, 23-7:6, especially vs. 27: “*These are the ones who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt to bring out the children of Israel from Egypt. These are the same Moses and Aaron.*” At the royal Third Hour of the Nativity we exclaim: “Blessed is the Lord God, blessed is the Lord day by day; the God of our salvation” (Ps 67:20). God’s salvation extends through all of history. Foremost among His redemptive acts are the exodus from Egypt, which delivers His ancient people from slavery, and the Passion of Christ, which saves mankind from bondage to sin and death. Christ our God achieves the second and great deliverance, which is why at His birth “a multitude of the heavenly host” sings: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Lk 2:13-14).

May these two acts be rightfully compared? In the first, God saves a single, chosen people: the nation Israel. In the latter, the whole of benighted mankind receives salvation “that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16). The Lord raises up spokesmen in Moses and Aaron, but at the Incarnation the angels themselves herald the advent of the God-Man, who speaks as one of the Holy Trinity and saves many.

Take note, however, that both of God’s mighty acts involve members of the tribe of Levi. Today’s Exodus reading details the descent of Moses and Aaron from Levi (Ex 6:16-20). The lineage of the most pure Theotokos, the birthgiver of God the Word in the flesh, comes through the tribe of Judah *and* the tribe of Levi. Saint Demetrius of Rostov reports that Joachim, father of the Virgin Mary, comes from Judah, while “her mother, the holy righteous Anna, was the daughter of Matthan the priest, who was of the line of Aaron. Thus, the most pure Virgin was by her father of royal descent, and by her mother, of high-priestly lineage” – that is, from the tribe of Levi (*Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints* vol. 1, p. 153).

In both instances, God raises up spokesmen who declare His people’s freedom from the power of a tyrant. “The Lord said to [Moses], ‘I am the Lord. Speak to Pharaoh king of Egypt everything I tell you’” (vs. 29). Christ our God directly rebukes the greatest slave master of men after the evil one seeks to tempt Him to abandon His mission of salvation (Mt 4:1-11).

Just as God the Lord makes His spokesman Moses “a god to Pharaoh” (Ex 7:1), Jesus tells Pilate: “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above” (Jn 19:11). In both cases the goodness of God serves only to harden the heart of the tyrants: “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh will not heed you” (Ex 7:3-4). Satan leaves Jesus after tempting Him, but he returns with more sinister intent when he enters Judas Iscariot (Lk 22:3).

Neither tyrant listens to the word of the Lord. Judas is one of the twelve, and yet after receiving life from Life Himself, he gives his heart to Satan (Jn 13:27). God judges all tyrants. The Egyptian slave masters meet God the Judge when He *stretches out* His hand on all of Egypt (Ex 7:5).

The Lord Jesus defeats death by death and thus brings judgment upon Satan, “because the ruler of this world is judged” (Jn 16:11). In Egypt, God’s actions through Moses foreshadow the great salvation He will work once and for all with the coming of the God-Man, for He brings all who desire salvation out of death and into everlasting life.

Let God arise and let His enemies be scattered, and let them that hate Him flee from before His face. As smoke vanisheth, so let them vanish; as wax melteth before the fire, so let sinners perish at the presence of God, and let the righteous be glad. – Paschal verse, based on Psalm 67:1-2

December 21 – Wednesday – Exodus 17:8-16

Moses as a Type of Christ

Moses as a Type of Christ – The Secret War: Exodus 17:8-16, especially vs. 16: “*With a secret hand the Lord wars with Amalek from generation to generation.*” God wages war against the forces of evil with the Cross, His invincible weapon. He leads Israel through the Red Sea and provides water for the people in the desert after Moses makes the sign of the cross with his staff; He has Moses stretch out his arms, cruciform, for victory over Amalek at Rephidim (vs. 11).

The Amalekites are a marauding, warlike tribe that persistently attacks Israel in times of fatigue (Dt 25:18). The nation of Amalek traces its ancestry from “the concubine of Eliphaz, Esau’s son” (Gn 36:12). Balaam, the prophetic son of Beor, declares that “Amalek was the first of the nations, but their seed shall perish” (Nm 24:20). In Moses’ final words to Israel, he directs his people to “blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven” (Dt 25:19). Samuel, Saul, and David all fight against the Amalekites. In the reign of King Hezekiah (729-686 BC), the men of Simeon defeat the last of them (1 Chr 4:43).

Today’s account of Israel’s initial encounter with this nagging enemy follows an important miracle in the arid Sinai desert. Just a few short days after God’s people watched their Egyptian taskmasters drown in the sea, they run out of water. The Lord guides Moses to “the rock in Horeb” (Ex 17:6) that he is to strike with “the rod with which [he had] struck the river” Nile (vs. 5), and water comes forth. These events inform in our life in Christ as we journey to the promised land of God’s heavenly Kingdom.

Let us follow the story step by step, to see how it can and does aid us. First, God frees us from our enslavement to sin and death when we pass through the baptismal Red Sea by the sign of the Cross. Then He leads us through this barren world toward the Promised Land, assuring us, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst” (Jn 4:14). Moses strikes the rock, which yields water, for according to Saint Paul “that Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). Christ our Rock is struck on the Cross and brings forth living water for us.

Immediately after God provides water from the rock, Amalek – a type of the evil forces at war against God and His people – comes to fight. Saint Augustine identifies Amalek with “that most proud spirit . . . to things above” who “receives a greater power of domination, unless one avoids the secret snares he is laying.” When that evil spirit openly rages through a sinful people, he “is like Amalek – he denies the passage to the land of promise. He then can be overcome by the Cross of Christ, which was prefigured by the extended hands of Moses” (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Old Testament vol. 3, p. 91).

The victorious Christ always defeats the forces of evil by the power of His Cross. During His fast in the wilderness Jesus directly confronts the devil, the leader of all the evil powers. Throughout His ministry, Christ meets demons who cry against Him as they injure and sicken God’s people, often driving them to madness. The Lord exerts His authority over the evil spirits by silencing and casting them out (Mk 9:17-27; Mt 12:22-29). With His conquest of sin and death, the Lord Jesus plainly confirms the vulnerability of the dark powers.

The Lord’s decisive defeat of evil occurs on the Cross, the prototype of every victory over darkness. During ancient Israel’s battle with Amalek, Moses stretches out his arms in a cross: the type gains the victory through the power of its prototype. God aids Moses in defeating Amalek. The prophet draws victory in the war against evil from Christ’s Cross, for He uses the Lord’s true, invincible weapon.

O Christ our God, who didst stretch out Thine arms on the hard wood of the Cross for our salvation, ever assist us by the power of Thy Cross to defeat every attack of the enemy. – Morning Prayer, Book of Common Prayer

December 22 – Thursday – Exodus 24:6-14, Tone 2
Kellia Reading on Moses as a Type of Christ

Moses as a Type of Christ – Sealing the Covenant: *Exodus 24:6-14, especially vs. 8:* “*This is the blood of the covenant the Lord made with you according to all these words.*” Salesmen always “close the deal” by securing the buyer’s signature on a contract. Holy Scripture records the sealing of different types of contracts between human beings such as matrimony, political allegiances, and adoptions, but only a few covenants between God and men. The first major divine-human covenant to which Scripture attests is ratified in the lifetime of the Prophet Moses and called the Old Covenant. It is followed by the New Covenant, sealed between the God-man Jesus Christ and those united to Him.

The present reading from Exodus, although it concerns the sealing of that first covenant, allows us to examine the key elements of every divine-human contract: there is a sealing in blood, a divine revelation, a communion meal, and the giving of commandments for living. As we approach the Nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ, this passage enriches the joy with which the Church celebrates the birth of our Savior.

The Child whose birth we are preparing to worship says to the faithful, “This cup is the New Covenant in My blood” (1 Cor 11:25). Blood, sprinkled upon the people, is likewise used to seal the Old Covenant (Ex 24:8). This blood comes from calves sacrificed as *peace offerings* to the Lord (vs. 5). For the ritual ratification of the Old Covenant, Moses first sprinkles half of the blood on the altar where the animals were offered up to God as “whole burnt offerings” – that is, completely consumed by fire. His second action is to throw the other half on the people of God, declaring, “Behold the blood of the Covenant, which the Lord has made with you concerning all these words” (vs. 8).

Blood may seem a bit grizzly for this purpose, but God states His reasons for sealing His covenants in blood in the Book of Leviticus: “For the life of all flesh is in its blood, and I give it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for its blood makes atonement for the soul” (Lv 17:11). The critical difference between the Old and New Covenants lies in the nature of the blood offered. In the New Covenant it is no longer animal blood, but “My Blood . . . shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins,” as the priest recites during the Divine Liturgy.

Under both covenants God reveals Himself to those with whom He makes the covenant. In the Exodus account, the leaders “went up . . . and they saw the place where the God of Israel stood” (Ex 24:9,10). The wonder of the Nativity lies in God’s emptying of His heavenly majesty before the most humble witnesses. No longer gloriously enthroned with “a paved work of sapphire stone” under His feet (vs. 10), our God comes as a defenseless infant to be wrapped in swaddling cloth and laid in a feed trough.

The Old Covenant is completed with a communion meal: “So they saw the place of God, and ate and drank” (vs. 11). We, likewise, “enjoy the banquet of the Lord, an immortal table . . . receiving with uplifted minds exalted words from the Word” (Canon of Great and Holy Thursday).

Lastly, the Lord lays down *laws and commandments* for the instruction of His people (vs. 12) as part of establishing His great covenants. The Lord Jesus is explicit concerning what He expects from us: we are to take up our cross (Mt 16:24), love one another as He has loved us (Jn 13:34), and disciple all nations (Mt 28:19).

O Lord, who didst appear by Thine own will as a newborn child and was smitten for the sake of mankind and was not wroth, deliver our lives from corruption and save us! – Hymn of the Forefeast of the Nativity

December 23 – Friday – Exodus 32:1-7, 15-28
Kellia Reading on Moses as a Type of Christ

Moses as a Type of Christ – Sin and Shame: Exodus 32:1-7, 15-28, especially vs. 27: “Thus says the Lord God of Israel: ‘Let every man put his sword on his side and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.’” There are idealists today who long to return to the Christianity of the “New Testament Church,” where they imagine they will find pure, uncorrupted fellowship and practice. Such longings surely spring from uninformed thinking and a failure to read Holy Scripture with the Church.

As Saint Paul points out, “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom 3:10). Sin clings to all men. Even among those who knew the Lord Jesus in the flesh – even among the beloved Twelve, whom the Lord Himself chose – there were those “who would betray Him” (Jn 6:64). And after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, others tried to trouble the faithful and “pervert the Gospel of Christ” with their own ideas (Gal 1:7).

The present passage records yet another example from the long history of the people of God in which men took it upon themselves to refashion the faith to their own liking. There have always been heretics and schismatics who assert themselves and their God-given liberty “as an opportunity for the flesh” (Gal 5:13). Sadly, these sins arise in the Church and bring shame on God’s people and the gospel of Christ.

Let us read this present passage carefully and see how easily we may be corrupted (Ex 32:7). A sure symptom that alerts us to spiritual danger is an impatience with those whom God has provided to guide the Church. Let us be cautious whenever we find irritation in our hearts toward our bishop or priest. “Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron” (vs. 1). They grow restless waiting for the prophet to return and descend in a mob on Aaron, not to express their fears and concerns, but rather to demand action.

Note the use of two imperative verbs in the people’s demand that Aaron “rise up and make us gods” (vs. 1). How ready they are to cast Moses aside, rather than waiting until God returns him to them! “Be subject unto God, O my soul, for from Him is my patient endurance. . . . I shall not be moved from hence” (Ps 61:5-6).

Next we observe the subtle temptation to make gods in own own image. There is always the danger, in this scientific age, that we will discount the possibility of falling into idolatry. The Israelites seem unsophisticated when they demand the creation of “gods that shall go before us” (Ex 32:1). Yet we modern thinkers often show ourselves capable of being captivated by secular things and ideas. We fall into the trap of giving persons, programs, movements, or theories the devoted attention and obeisance due to God alone. This constitutes idolatry – the fashioning of other gods. This temptation is especially active when we are inconvenienced, fearful, or insecure. “Let the peoples give Thee praise, O God, let all the peoples praise Thee” (Ps 66:3).

Finally, this passage warns against another sin that shames us before God: the desire for a religion that consists only of feasting and pleasures. We soon find ourselves unwilling to undertake the real struggles required if we are to be “on the Lord’s side” (Ex. 32:26).

What happens if we ignore the four seasons of fasting, the need for self-examination and confession, regular attendance at worship, and sacrificial giving? We pray that God will aid us in remaining honorable members of His Church and heirs of His Kingdom. Let us beware of being *scattered* as “a prey to [our] enemies” (vs. 25).

O Lord, before Thee is all my desire, and my groaning is not hid from Thee. For in Thee have I hoped, O Lord; Thou wilt hearken unto me, O Lord, my God. – Psalm 37:9, 15

December 24 – Saturday – Genesis 1:1-13

First Reading at the Vesperal Liturgy for the Nativity of Christ

Our Creator: Genesis 1:1-13, especially vs. 1-3: “In the beginning God made heaven and earth. The earth was invisible and unfinished; and darkness was over the deep. The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of water. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.” Joy to all! The feast of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ is now come. When we celebrate His birth by participating in the Divine Liturgy, we affirm our belief in “the Holy, Consubstantial, Life-giving, and Undivided Trinity.” By taking part in the prayers, hymns, and actions of the liturgy, we once again offer our lives to God in return for His great gift of Himself to us.

Let us tell our Father Almighty, the Maker of all things visible and invisible, that we are His, for we are indeed His visible and invisible creation. We acknowledge in the Nicene Creed “one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . . by whom all things were made,” for He not only created us but assumed our nature as His own. As we call upon the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, let us also greet Him in our hearts, for He lives within us. Without Him we would know neither Jesus Christ nor His Father in heaven.

The Nativity liturgy brings us face to face with the great mystery of our Creator born in the flesh. Divested of His heavenly majesty, He lies in the cave of our souls, having “made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:7). Consider the immense universe that mankind has studied and explored for millennia. Today we receive the divine embrace of the God who made that universe, yet chose to limit Himself to a finite human life with all its imperfections and struggles.

“In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1) – God the Word. He said, “‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gn 1:3). The love of God the Father, the utterance of God the Word, and the movement of God the Spirit produced creation. There was light – then water and earth, living plants, you and me on this beautiful planet. We exist because He loves, speaks, and moves. Delicacy and intricacy blend with the great forces and massive materials of the universe, all of which God speaks into existence. We bow in awe before His manger-cradle.

How humbling that God the Word chose to become one with us in such an elemental way! He becomes a babe born of a mother, as we were, within the flux of history. He splits the very flow of time in two, for now history contains the time before the Christ, BC, and the years of our Lord, AD. Creation spans both segments of time.

We see, touch, taste, smell, and handle the world around us. For a moment we may feel at home here, settled in. At other times we are overwhelmed by our insignificance! We see, touch, taste, smell, and handle only the tiniest piece of the universe around us. But take heart, for we declare that “in the beginning God made heaven and earth” (vs. 1). We proclaim glory in the highest, for He became one of us – God with us!

How are we to approach the overwhelming mystery of our Creator? Perhaps we may begin with the tangible bits and pieces of ordinary life, remembering that He made them. We touch and handle Him every day, adoring Him in these commonplace, approachable, and tangible things.

“Come, ye believers, let us see where Christ was born. Let us follow the star whither it goeth with the Magi, kings of the east; for there angels praise Him ceaselessly, and shepherds raise their voices in a worthy song of praise, saying, Glory in the highest to the One born today in a cave from the Virgin Theotokos in Bethlehem of Judea. Since God willeth, the order of nature is overcome, as it hath been written, Christ hath been born of the Virgin in Bethlehem of Judea” (Orthros for the Nativity).

Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, hath given rise to the light of knowledge in the world, for from the east of the highest Thou didst come, O Lord. Glory to Thee. – Festal Hymn of the Nativity

December 25 – Sunday – Numbers 24:2-3, 5-9, 17-18, Tone 2
Second Reading at the Vespereal Liturgy for the Nativity of Christ

Balaam's Prophecy: Numbers 24:2-3, 5-9, 17-18, especially vs. 17: "I will show Him, but not now; I will bless Him, but He is not near. A Star shall rise out of Jacob; and a Man shall rise out of Israel." Israel's years in the wilderness conclude when the nation finally "camped west of Moab, by the Jordan across from Jericho" (Nm 22:1). Fearful at the presence of such a great horde, the elders of Moab and Midian (the two nations directly east of the river Jordan) send emissaries to the famous Prophet Balaam, inviting him to travel from his home in Mesopotamia and "curse this people . . . for they are stronger than we" (vs. 6).

After consulting God, Balaam refuses to join King Balak of Moab. The ruler persists, offering greater honors. God then says to Balaam, "Rise and follow them; but the word that I speak to you – that you shall do" (vs. 22:20). Balaam tries to oblige Balak, but under the inspiration of God he is unable to curse Israel.

The present reading is the last of Balaam's four oracles, when "the Spirit of God came upon him" (vs. 24:2) and he prophesied the coming of the Christ. Balaam declares: "A Man shall come forth from his [Israel's] seed" (vs. 7). This word establishes the expectation that the Messiah will be a man, which is proven true "when the fullness of the time had come [and] God sent forth His Son, born of a woman" (Gal 4:4).

Balaam also predicts that the Lord Jesus will "rule many nations" (Nm 24:7) and his kingdom will be greater than Gog's (a scriptural name for Satan). We see clearly today how Jesus' kingdom has *increased* and continues to expand over the face of the entire world, including the Americas, Eurasia, and Africa.

Although the prophet does not address the flight of Joseph, the Virgin Mary, and the Christ Child from Herod's realm, he foresees the time when "God led Him out of Egypt" (vs. 8). Later, a similar vision is given to the Prophet Hosea (Hos 11:1); it is fulfilled when Joseph, "arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel" (Mt 2:21).

Likewise, Balaam foretells the Lord's ability to defeat the adversaries of the Gospel: "He shall consume the nations of His enemies" (Nm 24:8). This striking prophecy of the advance of the Lord and His Church is steadily fulfilled, century after century.

The Holy Spirit reveals to the prophet how men will respond to the Messiah and how those responses will affect them in turn: "Those who bless You are blessed, and those who curse You are cursed" (vs. 9). How tragic is the fate of those who serve false gods!

Balaam's prophecy discloses that the true Messiah of Israel will crush the enemies of the people of God. All the traditional enemies of ancient Israel are named: Moab, Edom, and Seth, also called Seir (vss. 17-18).

Most wonderfully, Balaam even hints at the rise of the star of Bethlehem when he says, "A star shall come forth out of Jacob" (vs. 17). This is the very star which leads the Magi from the East to the cave! Indeed, Balaam foresees many things concerning the Christ who is to come. However, he can only say, "I will show Him, but not now; I bless Him, but He is not near" (vs. 17), for the coming of the Son of Man will not occur until the age of imperial Rome.

As the true Israel that worships Christ, the Church is living witness to Truth Himself, born in the cave to the Virgin Mother. He has dispossessed His enemies and established His people valiantly in many places. We are blessed, for we need not look to the future like Balaam in order to behold His glory. Christ is born! Glorify Him!

Let us, therefore, praise and magnify Him, the God born in flesh from the Virgin, the King born in a cave, the God worshiped by the Magi, who hath delivered us from the curse. – Nativity Hymn

December 26 – Monday – Micah 4:6-7; 5:2-3

Third Reading at the Vesperal Liturgy for the Nativity of Christ

The Song of the Church: Micah 4:6-7; 5:2-3, especially vs. 3: “*And He shall stand and see, and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, and they will dwell in the glory of the name of the Lord their God, for now they will be magnified unto the ends of the earth.*” On this day the Church sings out: “Now the prophecy draws near to its fulfillment, which mystically said: ‘And thou, Bethlehem, in land of Judah, who dost prepare the cave, art not the least among the princes: for out of thee shall come unto me in the flesh a Governor of the Nations, Christ our God born of a Virgin Maiden, and as a shepherd He shall tend His people, the new Israel.’ Let us all give Him glory” (Royal First Hour of the Nativity).

In the words of the Lord recorded by Micah, God speaks of a future time (“in that day,” vs. 6). Today is that day! Christ is born in Bethlehem – glorify Him, all the earth! By the illumination of the Holy Spirit the prophet saw this day and its import for the Church. The good news comes to “her who has been broken” (vs. 6), for she is now *gathered* into the pasture of the Lord to be nurtured “beside the water of rest” (Ps 22:2). She who was *exiled* and *rejected* by the Lord (Mi 4:6) is seated in honor at His table, filled from His cup and anointed with oil, so that she may “dwell in the house of the Lord unto length of days” (Ps 22:5-6).

Today the Church is a torch burning with light “after being plucked out of the fire” (Am 4:11) to illumine all nations. The apostles are the *remnant* (Mi 4:7) saved by the firm hand of the Lord. We are a *strong nation* spread over the earth, claiming no land as our own – for the Lord “reigns over [us] in Mount Zion henceforth and forever” (vs. 7). How tiny, indeed, the remnant that began “with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. . . . Altogether the number . . . was about a hundred and twenty” (Acts 1:14-15)! Look at us today, spread over every continent and, if not received, at least known in every land.

The faithful have a great song to lift up to God, for He is true to His promise. Christ’s birth takes place in Bethlehem because of the decree from Caesar Augustus (Lk 2:1-5). Is it only after that birth in Bethlehem that He goes forth in time? By no means! “His goings forth were from the beginning, even from everlasting” (Mi 5:1). *In the beginning*, as we know, it was our Triune God who “made heaven and earth” (Gn 1:1) and even created the beginning itself, since the Trinity exists outside time.

The Church that sings includes the members of this age and those of a future age, when “the remnant of their brothers will return to the sons of Israel” (vs. 2). In that future day, as Saint Paul teaches, many nations will “come in” to the Holy Table to share in the Body of Christ, and “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:25-26). Many Jews shall return to the true Israel and the true Messiah. When will this take place? At the “appointed time for her to give birth” (Mi 5:2), the “woman clothed with the sun,” i.e., the Church, will “[cry] out in labor and in pain to give birth” (Rv 12:2). Then He who created the beginning will bring all things to conclusion.

On that day the Lord shall “stand and see, and shepherd His flock” in power (Mi 5:3). No longer will the Church live under the dominion of the prince of this world, with his armies of hate and death. The faithful shall instead “dwell in the glory of the name of the Lord their God” (vs. 3). If He who is faithful, the eternal Word, wills to be born in Bethlehem, then He will also magnify His Bride “unto the ends of the earth” (vs. 3). Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

Let our mouths be filled with thy praise, O Lord, that we may sing of thy glory all the day long and meditate upon thy righteousness unto the ages. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 27 – Tuesday – Isaiah 11:1-10
Fourth Reading at the Vesperal Liturgy for the Nativity of Christ

A New Beginning: Isaiah 11:1-10, especially vs. 10: “It shall come to pass in that day that there shall be a Root of Jesse who shall arise to rule the nations. The Gentiles shall hope in Him, and His resting place shall be honorable.” Saint Cyril of Alexandria calls attention to the significance of the Nativity of our Lord: “Since, through the mercy of God it was necessary for us to be made worthy of the Spirit again by being restored to our earlier condition, then the only begotten Word of God was made man. He was free from sin so that in His unique triumph of sinlessness the nature of mankind, now crowned once more, might be enriched with the Holy Spirit, and thus by sanctification it was refashioned for God. . . . For He was constituted the first new beginning of the race since, as God, He anointed all those who believe in Him” (McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 294, 296).

A new beginning has come, releasing humanity, enriching us with the Holy Spirit, and refashioning us for God. Here is a true news bulletin: mankind enjoys access to God! It is now possible for us to be restored to our pristine condition, before sin and death wreaked havoc in creation, corrupting hearts and souls and making human existence wretched.

To shepherds, tending their flocks near Bethlehem, the angels announce the birth of God as man. This divine bulletin, which seems unimaginable, has worldwide repercussions. Earlier statements concerning this great reversal of the human condition are released by the prophets in Galilee and regions of Palestine. Evidence of this refashioning continues to be reported today via communiqués posted from every continent and nation. Have you heard?

God releases advance notice of this new beginning through the Prophet Isaiah. He describes three major aspects of what will occur. First, the Virgin-born, only begotten Word of God will function not with limited human knowledge, but with divine perception and precision. Second, He will advance the cause of the lowly, punishing the earthly-minded and destroying *the ungodly* (vs. 5) by righteousness and truth. Third, His rule will transform the predatory, violent elements of society, turning our race into gentle, caring, innocent persons.

The Holy Spirit rests upon the man Jesus of Nazareth. He is filled with “the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and godliness” and “the Spirit of the fear of the God” (vss. 2, 3). With the Spirit accompanying Jesus as His equal, Christ makes it possible for the Spirit to come into other men, for “after Christ . . . a Comforter should not be lacking unto us,” according to Saint Gregory the Theologian (“On Pentecost,” *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 7, p. 382). Just as Christ does “not judge by reputation nor convict by common talk,” but sees with godly acuity, so also through the Spirit others are able to see with an insight that defies our expectations of normal human perception.

As we know from the Gospels, the Lord aids the “cause of the humble” (vs. 4) by healing, teaching, and loving sinners. At the same time He punishes the earthly-minded and by “the breath of His lips [slays] the ungodly one” (vs. 4). He continues this work through His Church so that many may share in this transformation.

Using images of wild and domestic animals, Isaiah reveals the essence of the Lord’s restoration of the human personality to meekness, tenderness, simplicity, and humility (vss. 6-9). As Theodoret of Cyrus notes, “We see the accomplishment of the prophecy in the churches: emperors . . . soldiers, artisans, servants, and beggars partake together at the Holy Table” (Manley, *Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 210-11).

Listen, O mountains and hills and the regions about Judah: for Christ cometh to save man whom He did create; for He is the Lover of mankind. – Vespers for the Sunday before the Nativity

December 28 – Wednesday – Baruch 3:36-4:4
Fifth Reading at the Vesperal Liturgy for the Nativity of Christ

The Incomparable God: Baruch 3:35-4:4, especially vs. 36: *“This is our God; no other shall be compared to Him.”* Saint Basil the Great addresses God as the “Master of all, Lord of heaven and earth, and of all creation both visible and invisible; who sittest upon the throne of glory, and beholdest the depths; who art unoriginate, invisible, incomprehensible, uncircumscribed, immutable, the Father of our Lord: the great God and Savior Jesus Christ, our Hope, who is the image of Thy goodness, the Seal of equal type, in Himself showing forth Thee, the Father the Living Word, the true God, the Wisdom before all ages, the Life, Sanctification, Might, the true Light, through whom the Holy Spirit was manifested; the Spirit of Truth, the Gift of Adoption, the Pledge of the inheritance to come, the First-fruits of eternal good things, the life-giving Power, the Fountain of sanctification; by whom enabled every rational and intelligent creature doth serve Thee and ascribe to Thee perpetual praises, for all things are Thy servants” (Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great).

Now, at this very moment, we stand in the presence of this great “Lord of heaven and earth.” There is no hiding from Him in any secret place on this planet, nor in the depths of the earth, nor even at the outermost edges of the universe, incalculable light years away. Every movement of every fiber of our being is visible to Him. Nothing escapes His notice, not even our inner thoughts, fears, dreams, and hopes.

This is the truth of our existence as we celebrate the nativity of “our Lord: the great God and Savior Jesus Christ – our Hope, who is the image of God’s goodness.” He is *the* significant Truth of our lives, and the Prophet Baruch shows Him to be the source of all knowledge. Having revealed Himself upon earth, living among men as the Way, the Truth and the Life, He promises that all who keep His way shall come not to knowledge alone, but to life eternal!

Think closely about the prophet’s declaration that God “found the whole way of knowledge” (vs. 37). Is Baruch suggesting that God somehow passed through a metaphysical course of study until He exhausted the process of learning itself, and thus discovered every existing means of acquiring knowledge? Of course not! God is the eternal endpoint of knowledge. What is there to learn that He does not already know?

Rather, the significance of this statement is that no matter which avenue of learning we may choose to pursue, we shall find the Master of all present there. We may acquire university degrees, attend professional seminars, and pursue every possible opportunity for learning, and yet God is already there ahead of us.

We know this is true because God gives this knowledge “to Jacob His servant and to Israel His beloved” (vs. 37) – and through them to us! We who are united to Him know that He knows all things, including the means by which we learn and everything we can discover. We may set about our studies with confidence, faith, and the full assurance that He is there before us. Let us therefore strive *not* learn things that would offend Him and separate us from Him!

How do we avoid the trap of false knowledge? Here is our Christmas present! Christ our God “was seen upon the earth and lived among men” (vs. 37). We have both the record of His revelation and the living experience of knowing Him through His Church.

Christ is born! If we glorify Him, we learn the Way to knowledge. We discover the fullness of Truth that undergirds everything worth knowing, for we shall know Life Himself. “We are blessed, for what is pleasing to our God is known to us” (vs. 4:4).

Be mindful, O Lord our God, of all Thy people, and upon them all of us pour out Thy rich mercy, granting to all their petitions which are unto salvation, O Thou who knowest each one. – Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great

December 29 – Thursday – Daniel 2:31-36, 44-45, Tone 3
Sixth Reading at the Vesperal Liturgy for the Nativity of Christ

The Kingdom of God: Daniel 2:31-36, 44-45, especially vs. 44: “The God of heaven will raise up a kingdom, and it shall never be destroyed. This kingdom shall not be left to another people, but it will break in pieces and crush all these kingdoms; and it will stand forever.” After the arrest of Saint John the Baptist, “Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Mk 1:14). His message catches the attention of God’s people, for thanks to the Prophet Daniel they are already looking for the kingdom that will “never be destroyed” (Dan 2:44).

In the centuries since Daniel’s lifetime, the people of God had fallen under the control of successive empires. They briefly enjoyed self-rule under the Maccabees, but then the Romans became the latest empire to dominate them. According to Daniel’s prophecy, however, God is to introduce a divine kingdom that will *stand forever* and *crush all these kingdoms* under which they had lived, bringing foreign rule to an end.

Now Jesus declares that the kingdom is at hand! The Baptizer himself foretells the imminent coming of the Messiah, who will take “His winnowing fan . . . in His hand, and . . . thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn” (Mt 3:12). The people know that the Christ will be the one to usher in the great Kingdom of God.

Did the Lord Jesus do this? Absolutely! We are now living in the age of the great Kingdom of God. Let us understand exactly what the Lord Jesus means when He says, “The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk 1:15). We already experience the working of the kingdom in our lives, even as we look for it to be fully completed and realized in the future. We are blessed with both retrospect and prospect. We know in retrospect what the Lord states clearly: “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36). Yet He also teaches us to pray in prospect, “Your kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10).

The Prophet Daniel receives the first hint of the coming of this kingdom during the time of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (605-562 BC). The story begins when the Babylonian monarch has a strange, troubling dream that no one can interpret. God discloses the meaning of the dream to Daniel, and the prophet offers this interpretation to the king (Dan 2:31-36, 44-45).

Daniel draws from the imagery of the dream to illumine its historical implications. God will bring an end to the succession of human kingdoms with His divine kingdom. The heavenly kingdom will be introduced without human agency, like a “stone cut out of the mountain without hands” (vs. 45). It will stand forever, enduring throughout all time.

Now we know firsthand the marvel of the Kingdom of God. Already it has a two-thousand-year history, for its dominion is not subject to the limitations of space and time. It has broken many earthly kingdoms *in pieces*, letting the *winds* of history carry them away so that “their place was not to be found” (vs. 35). And yet the reign of Christ continues, defying every human attempt to control it. His Church – “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people” (1 Pt 2:9) – enjoys dual citizenship in the Kingdom of God and in a succession of many different nations.

The great feast of the Lord’s Nativity is truly a celebration for each of us, for we have received a visa from the holy nation of the King of kings and Lord of lords. “The dream is true, and its interpretation is trustworthy” (Dan 2:45): Christ is born in Bethlehem for our salvation.

Today, the Beginningless doth begin, and the Word becometh Incarnate. Let us shout ceaselessly, crying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will towards men. – Orthros Verse for the Nativity

December 30 – Friday – Isaiah 9:5-6

Seventh Reading at the Vespertine Liturgy for the Nativity of Christ

Divine Zeal: Isaiah 9:5-6, especially vs. 6: “*The zeal of the Lord of hosts shall perform this.*” In these two verses Isaiah describes the divine action that unites heaven and earth forever: divine glory enters our humiliation. Eusebios, considering the scope of this action of God, asks, “What kind of zeal but that zeal, good and befitting Himself, by which He desired to save all those who were subjected to the devil and dragged down to godlessness?” (Manley, *Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 176),

How desperately we need this holy action of God! Let us recall for a moment the sordid news that flows in daily from every corner of the globe: children are aborted, the divinity of Christ is vigorously denied, governments shoulder arms against other governments, fallible men take counsel with men as flawed as themselves, might and power seeks after weapons and money, popular culture adulates the nasty, sensual, and brutish. Such is the zeal of men – a zeal that assaults decency, morality, love, and honor.

Surely these external conditions bring our hearts into agreement with Saint Nikolai of Zicha, who proclaims, “All that is wonderful, all that is new, comes to the human race from Him and through Him” (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 3, p. 200). The so-called daily news cannot obscure the blessed, refreshing, and life-giving acts of God. If we expose these news reports to the light of the star over the cave in Bethlehem, we increase our awe and wonder at the zeal of the Lord. He acts vigorously on behalf of a world that continues along its dark way, from the moment of Cain’s murder to the latest grim dispatch. Glory to God whose zeal offers us the Way of Life!

The Prophet Isaiah asserts, “The zeal of the Lord of hosts shall perform this” (vs. 6). This holy man foresees more than a troubled world! He sees God “high and lifted up” (vs. 6:1) – and this very Lord reveals to him that from eternity “unto us a Child is born” (vs. 9:5).

We have the privilege of declaring this truth alongside the shepherds and magi, the Theotokos and all the saints, because God, in His zeal, launched His saving action two thousand years ago. “In clear and incontrovertible terms, there is indicated by the prophecy the dispensation of His humanity,” affirms Saint Gregory of Nyssa (“Against Eunomios” 11.3, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 5, p 235). God is so zealous to change the course of our world that He becomes man, forever uniting Himself to our humanity.

When Isaiah says, “unto us a Son is given” (vs. 5), he proclaims that this Child is both divine and human – two natures residing in one Person. Because the God-man is born, He is obviously a man. And if the *government* is on His *shoulder*, it means that the world is ultimately under the control of God who has become incarnate man.

We who “were dead in trespasses, [were] made . . . alive together with Christ . . . and made [to] sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:5-6). The entire universe, including our sordid little planet, rests on His shoulders. He is our “Angel of Great Counsel” (Is 9:5) and our Messenger of determined intent. (The Greek word translated as *counsel* implies decisiveness.)

Let us be sober, harboring no despair about the fate of the world. The zeal of God is working within human hearts, minds, and lives. There will be no end to “His government, and of His peace” (vs. 6). The zealous divine project is firmly underway, its outcome assured. God is establishing His kingdom, upholding “it with righteousness and judgment, from that time [of the Incarnation] forward and unto ages of ages. The zeal of the Lord of hosts shall perform this” (vs. 6).

I shall return to the bliss of paradise from which I was driven away by reason of iniquity, for the likeness of the Father hath taken the likeness of a servant out of His love for mankind. – Vespertine Liturgy of the Nativity

December 31 – Saturday – Isaiah 7:10-16; 8:1-4, 8-10
Eighth Reading at the Vesperal Liturgy for the Nativity of Christ

Immanuel: Isaiah 7:10-16; 8:1-4, 8-10, especially vs. 14: “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and you shall call His name Immanuel.” This present passage is the middle part of a conversation between God, the Lord of Hosts, and King Ahaz of Judah. The Lord speaks to the king through the Prophet Isaiah in the midst of a national crisis: an attack on the nation of Judah. King Rezin of Syria and Pekah, “the son of Remaliah, king of Israel [Ephraim],” form a military coalition and come “against Jerusalem to war against it” (vs. 7:1). They intend to remove Ahaz and put “the son of Tabeal” (vs. 6) on the throne of Judah.

Ahaz’s enemies are motivated by a fear of the Assyrian empire, which is in the process of conquering the entire region. At first the Syrian and Ephraimite kings try to convince Ahaz to join them in fighting the Assyrians, but Ahaz refuses. Now they attempt to force a *coup d’état* in Jerusalem in order to establish a more friendly government willing to join their confederacy against the Assyrians.

Isaiah compares the troubled soul of King Ahaz and his people to “a tree of the woods . . . shaken by the wind” (vs. 7:2). But God reassures the king: “Guard yourself and be silent; do not fear, neither let your soul be disheartened because of these two stubs of smoking firebrands, for when My fierce anger is over, I shall heal. . . . This counsel shall not continue, nor shall it come to pass” (vss. 4, 7).

King Ahaz, however, is not convinced. Thus the Lord invites the nervous king to “ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above” (vs. 7:11). Ahaz, unable to see beyond his fear, turns down this divine offer with a pious demur: “I will not ask, nor will I tempt the Lord” (vs. 12).

The Lord’s response to King Ahaz reaches to the very depths of God’s creation – the lowly earth and its inhabitants – as well as to creation’s invisible heights. By the power of God that which is impossible on earth will occur: “The virgin shall conceive and bear a Son” (vs. 7:14). Thus the poor, ineffectual, unbelieving, timid king of Judah learns of a wondrous future – the incarnation of God in the flesh. Furthermore, he is informed of the child’s dual nature – fully God and fully man – by the instruction “you shall call His name Immanuel” (vs. 14), which literally means “God with us.”

In speaking of Immanuel, God first reveals the sinlessness of the Lord Jesus: “Before the Child knows good or evil, He refuses the evil to choose the good” (vs. 7:16). With this prophetic utterance God declares, centuries before the birth of our Savior, the truth affirmed after the death and resurrection of Christ: “We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but [one who] was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).

Then God addresses the immediate circumstances of the Syro-Ephraimite invasion and the looming threat of Assyria. Yes, these are temporal threats with consequences at a certain point in history, but in no way will they disrupt the counsel of God. Centuries later, the plotting of Herod and Pilate leads to the crucifixion of Christ and scatters His disciples, yet the intentions of these evil men do “not continue . . . for the Lord God is with us” (Is 8:10).

The Lord easily scatters the counsels of men whenever they conflict with His purpose: to give eternal life to the human race. “For God did not send His Son [Immanuel] into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (Jn 3:17).

God is with us, understand, O ye nations, and submit yourselves: for God is with us. Harken ye unto the ends of the earth, for God is with us. – Isaiah 8:10 (Great Compline)