



Bible Study

March 25, 2015

Exodus 3:1-8
Ezekiel 43:27-44:4
Proverbs 8:22-30

Exodus 3:1-8 (NKJV) -

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn." So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." Moreover He said, "I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God. And the LORD said: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites."

Ezekiel 43:27-44:4 (NKJV) - When these days are over it shall be, on the eighth day and thereafter, that the priests shall offer your burnt offerings and your peace offerings on the altar; and I will accept you,' says the Lord GOD." Then He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary which faces toward the east, but it was shut. And the LORD said to me, "This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the LORD God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut. As for the prince, because he is the prince, he may sit in it to eat bread before the LORD; he shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gateway, and go out the same way." Also He brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple; so I looked, and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD; and I fell on my face.

Proverbs 8:22-30 (NKJV) - "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I have been established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, I was brought forth; while as yet He had not made the earth or the fields, or the primal dust of the world. When He prepared the heavens, I was there,

when He drew a circle on the face of the deep, when He established the clouds above, when He strengthened the fountains of the deep, when He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters would not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside Him as a master craftsman; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him.”

Commentary -

This week the regular cycle of Lenten Old Testament readings is interrupted by the Feast of the Annunciation to the Theotokos, and so the readings above are the Old Testament readings for the Feast. All three of these readings speak to the nature and the means of the Incarnation of Our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, which is the focus of this Feast. While the events we hear described involve the Holy Archangel Gabriel making the announcement of the coming of the Lord to the Theotokos, these readings help elucidate to us that, in fact, what takes place on this day, in tandem with St. Gabriel's proclamation and fiat, the agreement, of the Theotokos is in fact the Conception of Jesus Christ within the Virgin's Womb. While in our popular thinking, we tend to speak more about the Incarnation at the time of the Feast of the Nativity, and more concerning the Theotokos at this Feast, these readings from the Old Testament help reorient us to remember that it is actually here, at His Conception, that God the Word takes upon Himself our human nature, yes even as a single cell.

Today's reading from Proverbs speaks to the Divine Person, one of the Holy Trinity, who is God the Word. Before there was an earth, before there was a heaven, before humanity, before the angelic beings, He existed in communion with God the Father. Not only was the Word present from everlasting and before the beginning of the Father's Creation, but the Father created all of those things, the heavens, the earth, the seas, the land, angels and mankind through and with His Word. It is passages like this one which St. John is interpreting at the beginning of his Gospel when he says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him there was not anything made that was made.” (John 1:1-3)

As Proverbs tells of God the Word, today's reading from Ezekiel describes His Incarnation. When God led His people Israel out of the land of Egypt and through the wilderness, they lived in a camp made up of family tents. When they made camp, the family tents surrounded a central tent, the Tabernacle, in which tent God dwelt, behind the curtain of the Holy of Holies, in the midst of His people. Many years later, when His people were settled in the land of Canaan to which He had brought them, and King David had established his capitol at Jerusalem, he desired, and his son Solomon succeeded, in building a more permanent building, the Temple, as a house in which the Lord might dwell, and He condescended to do so, again, taking up residence in the midst of His people. Due to the wickedness and disobedience of His people, however, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar II in 587 B.C. The people were taken into exile in Babylon, and it is in exile in Babylon that the Prophet Ezekiel had his visions and prophesied.

Today's reading from Ezekiel is a part of a vision of a new Temple, one in which God would dwell among His people forever. The Prophet's description does not match the physical Temple that was later built in Jerusalem by the returning Judeans under the Persian Empire, nor does it correspond to Herod's Temple. This is because the new Temple in which God dwells among us forever is the Body of Jesus Christ. As St. John continues in the beginning of his Gospel, “The Word became flesh and dwelt (literally: tabernacled) among us.” (John 1:14) And again as Christ says concerning His own Body, “Destroy this Temple and I will raise it up in three days.” (John 2:19) It is because of the presence of the Body of Christ within that we as Orthodox Christians can rightly call all of our parish churches 'temples' in their own right.

The Prophet Ezekiel tells us that the Lord will enter this new Temple by way of the gate facing east. In the Book of Genesis, when our first parents Adam and Eve fell into sin and were expelled from Paradise, they were exiled to the East. Likewise the exiles of Judah, of which the Prophet was one, were taken to the East for their sinfulness. This entry of the Lord, then, is a reversal of that movement. If exile to the East is the consequence of disobedience, then entry from the East is the result of obedience. Just as our first mother led Adam into disobedience and thereby received the name Eve, the mother of all the living who had fallen into sin, so also the Theotokos, through her faithfulness, becomes the mother of all those who believe. And so, as St. Paul says, “Woman (Eve's name before the Fall) will be saved through bearing a child.” (I Tim. 2:15) That this gate is permanently shut points us to the fact that the Theotokos gave birth as a virgin, and afterwards remained a virgin still.

Finally, the reading from Exodus, concerning Moses' encounter with the bush which burned with the Grace of God but was not consumed, shows us the way in which God comes to us through His Creation. This vision found its true fulfillment on Mt. Tabor in Christ's Transfiguration when the Grace and Glory of God shown through the flesh of Jesus Christ. It is also, however, a paradigm for understanding the mode of the Incarnation, as the Lord comes into the world through the Theotokos, a human woman, without harming or destroying her. Likewise it shows us an image of the Holy Mysteries of the Church, in which we receive the Body and Blood of Christ by means of bread and wine, new birth through water, the Spirit through ointment, healing through oil, etc.

Contrary to the views of the Greeks, the material things of God's Creation, including our own bodies, are not evil or impure in and of themselves, such that the Presence of the Living God would destroy them or be unable to be near them. We can, however, put those material things, including our bodies, to good or evil use. The greatest purpose to which we can put any of these material things, be they our wealth or other possessions, our time, our spouses or children or friends, and even our own bodies, is to offer them back to God as a sacrifice, out of love. Great Lent is a time for such sacrifices, let each of us offer them as he or she is able to give thanks for the our Salvation which begins today, as the Word becomes flesh to dwell among us, His people, forever.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) All of the disciplines of Great Lent are forms of sacrifice; of offering the first and the best of what God has given us back to Him. In fasting, we offer the best of our food. In vigils and (sometimes lengthy) services and prayers we offer our rest and our time. In giving to the needy, we offer our wealth. As we near the end of this Great Lent, have you been giving all that you could, or are you withholding from God some of what He has given to you?
- 2) During every Divine Liturgy, we proclaim that Christ is in our midst, that He is, and ever shall be. Do you live your life within and outside of the Church and Her services in an awareness that Jesus Christ is with you always? Is He welcome in the places you go, in your conversations, and in your relationships? Alternatively, how much of your time is spent ignoring Him or deliberately pretending He isn't there?
- 3) The Theotokos expressed her faithfulness and obedience to God by accepting His will, even though to her it seemed an impossible thing, and the gloriously impossible happened. Are there areas in your life in which you know there is something that God would have you do, that you should do, but for whatever reason you are not doing?

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