

# Rector's Letter, January, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters:

We have a dangerous habit of dividing the universe in two: this part belongs to us, and that part belongs to God. There is this life, which is exciting, full of concrete pleasures (and pains!); and then there is “the afterlife,” something rather misty and distant. God reigns far above us, with his angels and saints, but down here we have to adjust his commands to fit more ordinary and pressing demands. Heaven may be full of light, but we have to live among shadows.

The feast of Theophany on Jan. 6 shows us how very wrong this idea is. In reality, heaven is not far from us at all. St. John the Forerunner prepares the way of the Lord by preaching “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2), and after being baptized in the Jordan, our Lord Jesus Christ preached with exactly the same words (Matthew 4:17).

Heaven and earth, God and Man are united in the very body of Jesus Christ, and he has come to unite us to the same heavenly reality — now, in this life! That’s what repentance means for us, to turn back to the Lord to be made clean, forgiven, and healed. Because if the kingdom of heaven is at hand, then God is in our midst, and to refuse to turn back *toward* him is to choose to turn our back *on him!*

We can only imagine that God and his kingdom are distant if we blind ourselves to his appearance. “Theophany” means the appearance, the shining forth of God, and we hear, in the festal troparion, how

When you, O Lord, were baptized in the Jordan,  
the worship of the Trinity was made manifest.  
For the voice of the Father bore witness to you,  
calling you his Beloved Son;  
and the Spirit in the form of a dove  
confirmed the truthfulness of His word.  
O Christ our God, you have revealed yourself,  
and have enlightened the world, glory to you!

Bethlehem and Nazareth, Jordan and Galilee: these are in some sense ordinary places where God appeared in the flesh. And since God has appeared, the light that shone from him makes those ordinary places extraordinary. For those “who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8), these are all signs of the nearness of the Day of the Lord, or windows letting the light shine on us from the kingdom of heaven.

We only have one life, and we can only belong to one kingdom. We are free to devote ourselves to other fleeting, shadowy concerns. Or we can live as those who love and look for signs of God’s appearing, now.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Joshua S. Madhu

## Around the Parish

Thank you to everyone who worked faithfully to prepare for the celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord: cleaning and decorating the church, all the aspects of our Christmas flowers, our choir, our altar servers, and all the details attended to behind the scenes. May the Lord bless you.

**New Year's Day** is also a feast celebrated in our church: **The Circumcision of the Lord**. This day commemorates the eighth day from the Nativity of the Lord, when he was actually given the name "Jesus." The Church still has prayers for the Eighth Day of a child's birth, to name that child before God. Come celebrate the feast and pray for the new year, with Vespers & Liturgy at 5:00, Tuesday, Dec. 31.

We begin January with the **Feast of the Theophany** ("manifestation as God") of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, on Jan. 6. We celebrate that, when our Lord was baptized in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the Father proclaimed that Jesus was his Only-Begotten Son. Though in America it is overshadowed by Christmas, the Theophany is at least as important to us as Christians. We will celebrate Vespers of Theophany, with the Great Blessing of Water, on Sunday, Jan. 5, following our fellowship hour. On Monday, Jan. 6, we will celebrate the Divine Liturgy of Theophany at 9:30.

With the Theophany and the Blessing of Water, we enter **the season of house blessings**. Our homes need this spiritual "spring cleaning" each year to free them from the remembrance of sin and fill them with the presence of the Holy Spirit. All that is required is that you prepare a list of the living and departed that you wish to commemorate, and set up a candle and bowl of holy water before an icon. (Fr. Joshua brings holy water, too, in case anyone needs more.) Please sign up for a time on the sheets provided at the candle desk, or contact Fr. Joshua if none of the times are convenient.

**Forebears in Faith: Study the Book of Judges—starting Sunday, Jan. 12.** We hear many times the Epistle to the Hebrews on the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses and David, "who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises...." Most recent was the Sunday before the Nativity of the Lord, when we celebrate the Forebears of Christ. Starting Sunday, Jan. 12, we are going to explore one of the most dramatic books of the Bible: Judges. We will read of men and women of great courage in a confusing time before the Kings of Israel, "who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises...." Discover more of our Christian family tree!

We look forward with joy to the reception of **Chris Eckels** into the Orthodox Faith on Saturday, Jan. 18, at 4:30 PM. All are welcome!