

BURNING BUSH



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THE DORMITION OF THE MOST-HOLY THEOTOKOS

(Reprinted with permission from *These Truths We Hold*, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1986, pp 180-182.)

Liturgically, the most important feast of the Theotokos is that of her Dormition or Falling-Asleep. Prior to this feast there is a strict two-week fast, beginning on August 1st, which is broken only by the feast of the Transfiguration on August 6th. This Feast possesses two distinct aspects inseparably linked in the mind of the believer. On the one hand there is death and burial and, on the other, resurrection and assumption of the Mother of God. As a part of the Inner Tradition of the Church, this event was a mystery that was not designed for the ears of the outside world, but which was revealed to the faithful within the Church.

True believers know that insofar as the Son of God assumed human nature in the womb of the Virgin, she who was the means of His Incarnation, was resurrected and taken up into Heaven in the Divine Glory of her Son. “Arise, O Lord, and go to Thy resting place, Thou and the ark of Thy might (Ps. 132:8). The Son transported His Mother to the eternity of the life to come, “for being the mother of Life she was translated to life by the One Who dwelt in her virginal womb” (from the Kontakion of the Feast). Thus, if every year we commemorate the anniversaries of the deaths of the Saints—the Martyrs, Apostles, Sainted Hierarchs, Venerable Fathers and Mothers, etc.,—so much the more we do commemorate the death of the Most-Holy Theotokos who did not see the corruption of the grave common to all humanity. And not only did her soul ascend to heaven but her body also. As she was the perfect example of that obedience which all Christians are called upon to exercise, and as she alone was the Mother of God, her body did not see the natural corruption which follows death, but was raised from the dead and carried to the glory of the King of All in the heavenly mansions.

According to the inner tradition of the Church, the Dormition of the Most-Holy Theotokos took place in the following manner: Having reached an advanced age, the Most-Pure One wished to leave the body and go to God as soon as possible, since the one unceasing desire of her soul had always been to see the sweet face of her Son sitting at the right hand of the Father in Heaven. Many tears she shed as she prayed to the Lord to take her from this present vale of sorrows.

The All-Chaste One lived in the house of St. John the Divine on Zion and often she went to the Mount of Olives, which was nearby, offering there, in solitude, her fervent prayers to her Son. Once, as she was praying alone on the Mount, the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her and announced

that soon (after three days) she would depart and be with Christ. The Archangel told her that she should not be troubled, but should receive his words with joy as she was being called to immortal life and to the eternal King of Glory.

As a sign of the triumph of the Mother of God over death—that bodily death would not have power over her, just as spiritual death had not had dominion over her, and that she would merely fall asleep for a short time and then, as if waking from sleep, she would rise and shake off death like sleep from the eyes and would see in the light of the Lord's face the immortal life and glory to which she would go with shouts of joy and spiritual happiness—the Archangel handed the Most-Holy virgin a branch from Paradise. The Most-Blessed Mother of God was filled with unspeakable joy and, falling down on her knees, she fervently thanked her Creator.

Before her departure from this life, the Most-Pure Lady wanted to see the Holy Apostles who were already scattered all over the world for the preaching of the Gospel. On her knees she prayed that this might be possible and that at the hour of her death she might not see the Prince of Darkness and his terrible servants, but that her Son and God Himself would fulfill His promise and come and receive her soul into His holy hands. As she knelt, the olive trees growing on the mountain bent, and if they were animate, and when the Pure-Theotokos rose they straighten themselves out again, honoring her as the Mother of God.

Returning home, the Most-Blessed Lady showed the branch from Paradise to St. John and told him to carry it before her bed. Then she began to make preparations for her burial. St. John sent word to St. James, first Bishop of Jerusalem and the brother of the Lord, and also to all other relatives and neighbors, informing them of the imminent decease of the Mother of God. In turn St. James informed all the Christians living in Jerusalem and surrounding towns. With weeping they came to the home of the Pure Virgin to await her death.

As the multitude gathered at the home of the Theotokos, suddenly there was heard a loud noise, like thunder, and a cloud encircled the house of St. John the Divine. At the command of God angels seized the Apostles that were scattered to the ends of the earth and, bringing them on the clouds to Jerusalem, placed them on Zion before the door of the house. St. John greeted them and told them of the speedy departure of the Most-Holy Mother of God. Later the Apostle Paul, accompanied by his close disciples, Dionysius the Areopagite, Hierotheus and Timothy, as well as the seventy Apostles arrived at the home.

On the fifteenth day of the month of August, as all were awaiting the final hour there suddenly shone in the room an ineffable light of Divine

Glory which dimmed the lamps that had been lit in the house. The inhabitants saw the roof of the house opened and the glory of the Lord descending from Heaven—Christ the King of Glory Himself with the hosts of Angels and Archangels, with all the heavenly powers, with the Holy Fathers and Prophets who of old prophesied about the Holy Virgin, and all the righteous souls, approached His Immaculate Mother.

After greeting her Son, the Virgin surrendered her pure soul into His hands. She felt no pain whatever, for the end was as if she had fallen into a sweet sleep. At once there began angelic singing and with triumphant songs the heavenly hosts accompanied the soul of the Mother of God as she went in the arms of the Lord to the dwellings on High.

After her demise, the Apostles bore the Most-Pure body of the Mother of God to the Garden of Gethsemane, where she was placed in a tomb. The Holy Apostles stayed at the tomb of the Most-Pure One without leaving the Garden for three full days, singing psalms day and night. In addition, for all this time there was heard in the air the wonderful singing of the heavenly hosts praising God and blessing His Immaculate Mother.

By God's arrangement, one of the Apostles, St. Thomas, was not present at the glorious burial of the body of the Immaculate Mother of God and he only arrived at Gethsemane on the third day. Grieving that he had not been granted the last greeting and blessing of the Most-Pure One, Thomas wept bitterly. Taking pity on him, the Apostles decided to open the tomb so that he might at least see the dead body of the Blessed Mother. But when the tomb was opened, the body of the Mother of God was not there, but only the burial clothes, giving off a wonderful fragrance.

With weeping and reverence the Apostles kissed the burial clothes, praying that the Lord would reveal to them where the body of the All-Pure One had disappeared to. Later after having eaten a meal in the Garden, the Apostles suddenly heard angelic singing. Looking up, they saw standing in the air the Immaculate Mother of God surrounded by a multitude of Angels. She was enveloped in an ineffable light and she said to them: "Rejoice, for I am with you always!" Filled with joy, instead of the usual "Lord Jesus Christ help us!" the Apostles cried "Most Holy Mother of God, help us!" From that time they taught the Holy Church to believe that the Immaculate Mother of God on the third day after her burial was raised by her Son and taken with her body to Heaven.

Thus, the Lord by His special providence, delayed the arrival of St. Thomas until the third day of the Falling-asleep of the Mother of God so that the tomb might be opened for him, so that the Church, in this way, might believe in the resurrection of the Mother of God just as previously through the same Apostles's unbelief the Church had come to believe in the Resurrection of Christ. Thus were accomplished the Falling-asleep of our

Most-Blessed Lady the Mother of God, the burial of her undefiled body, her glorious resurrection and the triumphant assurance regarding her ascension to heaven in the flesh. ■

BUILDING A HOUSE ON SOLID GROUND

Adapted from a homily given on June 27, 2020

Fr. John Konkle

In the early weeks of the season of Pentecost we read the Sermon on the Mount (MT 5-7), and on the third Saturday, today, we read the concluding words of Jesus' extended teaching:

Whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall. (Mt 7:24-27)

This sobering image invites us to reflect on the Sermon on the Mount because it reveals the profound practical difference in outcomes for our lives in light of how we respond to our Lord's teaching. Let us, then look more closely at the imagery our Lord uses in this text, and then briefly at His teachings that provide the solid foundation on which we are exhorted to build our home.

Storms

The first thing to notice about today's text is that everyone experiences storms in this life: the wise, the foolish; the rich, the poor; the Jews, the Gentiles; the slaves, the free; the Christians, the pagans. No one escapes them. Storms are the trials and tribulations of this life: illness, a lost job, and angry spouse, an impatient parent, an uncooperative child, the death of a loved one, a haughty priest, a rude store clerk, a traffic jam, a burned dinner, political and cultural unrest, a pandemic. Some storms are minor inconveniences and others are life-shattering tragedies. Strangely, sometimes we react more immaturely to the little annoyance than we do to devastating adversity. Storms, Jesus is telling us, reveal something about us, about our character, about who we are, about what we value and what we depend on. The first and simplest lesson of today's reading, then, is that we

should attentively notice how we react to the storms in our lives. Do not excuse, explain, or evaluate; just notice. Storms become like mirrors for our souls, and if we pause to look into this mirror we will learn something about ourselves, about our inner life. Self-knowledge, divinely revealed in life's storms, provides the raw materials that we offer to God for His healing touch.

Instruction

A second feature of our Lord's teaching is that we all have heard, we all have been instructed. Jesus first and foremost has in mind His instruction in the Sermon on the Mount, which most of us have heard and read many, many times. In this way, when our house collapses in the storm, we are without excuse; we cannot honestly say "I never heard this instruction." But what about those who have never heard Jesus' teachings? St. Paul considers this situation in the early chapters of his letter to the Romans. Everyone, he tells us, is exposed to the revelation of God through the natural world (Rom 1:18ff). Everyone is also given a conscience that bears witness to the law written in the hearts (Rom 2:12ff). And finally, our own attitudes reveal moral instruction to us since whenever we judge another person we condemn ourselves for doing the very same things, thus revealing that we are indeed aware of how we ought to behave, that there is a moral structure to our world which applies not only to others but to ourselves (Rom 2:1ff). So the question is never whether I have been included or excluded from the formative instruction necessary for living a stable and anchored life. God makes the gentle rains to fall and the bright sun to shine upon us all, the righteous and unrighteous alike. This, then, is the second lesson that we would do well to remember: God is always speaking to us, teaching us, calling us, inviting us to follow Him.

Response

So we all have been given the divine instruction needed to build our homes so as to withstand the varied storms that we are certain to face throughout our lives. The only question we need to confront, given to us in today's reading, is how we will respond to that revelation. The question is always, have I responded to the revelation given to me? For the one who faithfully responds to the little he has been given will be given more, but the one who ignores life's subtle gifts squanders the precious building blocks essential for the foundation of his home. The only thing that distinguishes the wise from the foolish in today's reading is their response to the instruction they've been given: the wise hear and do; the foolish hear and ignore. We are often tempted to think we would handle life's storms better if we only had what God had given some other person. If I had been raised

in that family, given that education, went to that parish, had teaching from that priest, then I would be equipped to face these horrible trials I'm now encountering; as it is, my excuse is that God didn't give me what I need to face the trials He's allowing in my life. This of course is not correct. God provides exactly what we need, and if we receive it, if we respond to it, then we will have what we need to endure patiently and even joyfully our trials. This is the third lesson from our reading: we simply need to respond to what God has given us—not what we wish He had given us, or what He gave someone else, but the revelation He has given us.

Internal and External Storms

Responding to our Lord's word to us does not mean that our storms will dissipate. Often quite the opposite—they may well increase. But our Lord is showing us that there is a difference between internal and external storms. If we habitually respond to His revelation, our inner life will be calmed. The anger, impatience, anxiety, fear, agitation, envy, disgruntledness, and the like will melt away even though the external storms continue to rage. Indeed, the external storms often increase for those who wisely follow Christ because they not only reveal our character but are simultaneously the divine training ground in which He is continuously shaping and transforming our character. Consider Job, St. Paul, and the two millennium history of confessors and martyrs whose lives all testify to ever-increasing inner tranquility in the face of relentlessly escalating external tribulations. This is the inward journey to the kingdom of God within us. It is not us working harder so much as it is discovering the King already working within us—uniting our desires, our efforts, to His. The inner kingdom consists in allowing God to reign within us, to calm our internal storms, even as the world we inhabit becomes ever more hostile to His compassionate dominion. The stark contrast between the Kingdom's ways and the world's ways is precisely the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, and so we now return for a selective taste of its guidance which invites us to build our home on the solid rock of Christ.

The Blessed Life (Mt 5:3-12)

We begin with the beatitudes, which we just sang. Imagine what our lives would be like if we could simply follow the first beatitude: Blessed are the poor in spirit, i.e., those with crushed hearts, with contrite and broken hearts; this is the person God does not despise but to whom He gives the kingdom. And just imagine if we could add to that the second beatitude: Blessed are those who mourn, i.e., those who allow themselves to experience the sorrow of their own lives, of their own sins, and also of the brokenness of this tortured world. These are people who do not let the pain

and suffering of this world turn into anger and violence, control and manipulation. Instead they experience a godly sorrow, a divine grieving, for the world we inhabit, for its waywardness, for its tormented self-inflicted wounds. And so we could continue through each of the beatitudes one by one striving to respond to our Lord's invitation to abandon worldly thinking and enter the Kingdom. This is the blessed life.

The Merciful Life (MT 5:21-48)

Later in Chapter 5, we hear a sequence of instructions using the formula "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you" In each case our Lord quotes an Old Testament prescription only to inform us that that standard is too low. The prohibition for murder is replaced with the realization that unkind words directed at another condemn us of murder in our hearts. An eye for an eye is replaced with turning the other cheek. Adultery occurs in the heart when we lust after another. We are to do twice as much as what is asked of us, not simply giving our coat but our shirt also, not simply carrying a load one mile but two. The life of following Christ is an immeasurably higher, and more internal, standard than the Mosaic Law. Our life does not consist in obeying rules but in relating to others with sacrificial love. We are to be merciful as our father in heaven is merciful. This is the merciful life.

The Hidden Life (Mt 6:1-18)

At the beginning of Chapter 6 our Lord instructs us in the pious practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The central theme that unites these ascetic disciplines is that we are to engage in such practices in secret, only letting our heavenly Father see our efforts. If our pious efforts are done to receive the praise of others, we have our reward already—and that reward, that glory, is empty: vainglory. It does not sustain us but rather tortures us, always leaving us subject to the manipulative power of what others think of us. In order to be filled with the glory of God, to be His temple, we need to not let our right hand know what our left hand is doing; we need to enter into our closet and shut the door to pray; we need to fast without drawing attention to our efforts. As we do this, we become freed from the storms of this life that are generated by caring so much about what others think of us—or even what we think they think of us. Our life gradually becomes solely focused on caring what God thinks of us. This is the hidden life.

The Sermon on the Mount for the Season of Pentecost

With these and other themes—e.g., The Anxiety-Free Life (Mt 6:19-34) and The Judgement-Free Life (Mt 7:1-14)—in the Sermon on the Mount,

Christ weaves a beautiful tapestry, inviting us in the most practical ways possible to follow Him, showing us how to live in this tumultuous world so as not to be controlled by it, allowing him to calm the inner storms even while external storms rage around us. These words are His voice, calling us. He is the good shepherd, and His sheep hear His voice and they follow Him. If we hear His voice, His words speaking to us in the Sermon on the Mount, and we follow Him by doing them, then we will be building our house on solid rock. We will not be exempted from life's storms; indeed, we may even experience more severe storms. But we will be immune to inner storms, to that distracting and debilitating turbulence inside our hearts. Calmed souls in the midst of a worldly tempest. Let us, then, take the Season of Pentecost to reflect on the sermon on the Mount, to listen for His voice, to respond in loving obedience to the only one who truly is the solid rock on which we can build our home. ■

CHRIST IN THE ICON NOT-MADE-BY-HANDS

Sermon given by Fr. Roman on August 16, 2009

“The day following the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God, August 16, is the day we celebrate the translation of the icon of Jesus Christ “not made by hands, from Edessa to Constantinople in the year 944 under the rule of Emperor Constantine Pophyrogenitus.

In his homily given on this day in 2009, Father Roman explains the real meaning of the icon.

“This is the icon named ‘Not-Made-by-Hands.’ The ruler of Syria at the time, King Abgar, being sick with leprosy, sent his envoy, Ananias to Jerusalem to invite Jesus to come to Syria, as he, Abgar, believed in Jesus as being the Son of God. Jesus took a towel and wiped His face with it and sent it with Ananias to Abgar in Syria. Abgar was healed almost completely until the arrival of the promised apostle, Thaddeus who baptized the King and everyone in Edessa.

The Church celebrates the Dormition of the Mother of God and her ascension into Heaven because her body represents the whole humanity; she represents us, our return back to God. Jesus took the human nature from her. She did not come down from heaven, her parents were people. So through the Mother of God going back, the whole humanity will go back to Christ and through Christ in God. The destiny of the material universe is to be deified, to be transfigured and to be in Christ. All will be in Christ, with the whole environment that is around us, with our history, with our ethnic groups, with everything, we will be in Christ and together with Christ in the Father. God made the world through the Word; that Word is Jesus Christ,

the Son and Word of God. God created the world for Himself; when God created the world nothing existed. St. Irinaeus of Lyon, says the world must return to God. He says that we all must return back to God with the entire material universe because we cannot be separated from it. Man is a microcosm; all creation will be in Jesus Christ and through Him in God the Father.

The history of this icon derives from tradition not from the Gospel because not everything can be in the Gospel. St. John the Evangelist says that if all things that Jesus did were to be written, there would be no room in the world for all the books. (John 21:25). He is referring to a theological concept, not the physical aspect of written volumes. The libraries of the world are full of theology and theology continues to flow because the Scripture, no matter how much is analyzed, always reveals something new. Because the Scripture is the word of God the depth of its understanding has no limits.

The placement of the celebration of the translation of the icon of Christ the day following the Dormition of the Theotoks is significant in that the icon in general is the image of the Father. The image of Christ in this icon is a physical interpretation of His image so the world can understand it. He is the image of the Father. When we pray in front of the icon Jesus's presence is in the icon; and He invites us to come into His own universe. When an icon is painted, being St. George, St. Basil, or any other saint, it is not a photograph of the person but the image of God realized in that person. Everything in the byzantine icons is symbolic, is an indication to look further. The icon draws us into its universe, calls us to clean our image and return to becoming the way God created us, in His image and likeness.

St. John of Damascus defines the icon as a window into Heaven. The service today was for this special icon. This image was not made by hands because the Dormition of the Theotokos is our calling for transfiguration. The ascension to Heaven of the Mother of God includes the human nature because she is the one who gave human nature to Jesus Christ and Jesus represents us. So, on this day we are called to transfigure this image of God in us. We are the temples of the living God, consecrated churches of the living God. St John says that when Jesus Christ will come we should be like him. This will be the judgement. He will look into you and say "I do not see my image in you, stay on the left side." And the righteous will come and He will say "I see my image in you, stay on the right side." That is the meaning of salvation." ■

TO ALL OUR FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

We greet you with the words our Lord Jesus greeted the women after the Resurrection: Rejoice! And to the disciples He said: Do not fear!

Since the lock-down in the second week of Great Lent, we are forced to keep the monastery closed to the public. Some of you would have come regularly during this time; some on a retreat or on a work day, and many of you were, and maybe were looking forward to celebrate the Feast of the Dormition with us on August 14-15. Sadly everything had to be canceled and postponed because of the circumstances outside of our control.

Physical separation for a time can be—if we are wise—an opportunity to reflect on the nature of our relationships at a deeper level. The words of St. Paul ring out loud: “...what can separate us from the love of God? Neither tribulations, nor distress...” By physically separating themselves for a time, as we learn from the reading of the lives of the saints, some have acquired such grace, as to become chosen vessels of the Holy Spirit, through whom God has worked miracles.

The current situation has many of us asking many questions: how long will this last? When will we be able to welcome pilgrims again? Are we living Apocalyptic times? Is this the end of times! Let us remember when the apostles were troubled and asked Christ “...when will these things be?” (Marc 13:3), the Lord told them not to be concerned with the end of times, but rather “...watch and pray for you do not know when the time is” (Marc 13:33)..

As Father Roman, of blessed memory, says in his sermon on August 16 of 2009, our only care and concern should be how to live every moment of our life in keeping the commandments and becoming more and more like Christ. Otherwise, at the day of Judgement, we may hear—God forbid—“I don’t know you”!

Let us take courage and continue to have hope in the things to come, by showing love to our neighbor, and be good stewards of the gifts God has entrusted us with, be it teaching, preaching, distributing material goods, encouraging and praying for one another and for the entire world.

As for us here at the monastery, we are considering this period of time a Sabbatical. The pandemic has been powerless in changing the rhythm of our lives. This rhythm continues without interruption: work and prayer and more prayer and more work! During this beautiful summer season we are continuing the work on the monastery grounds, the cemetery, the flowers and the vegetable gardens. The berries have started to ripen; the first tomatoes are ready to be picked. It is the time to start the preparations for the Feast of our monastery.

However, and with a heavy heart, we will celebrate the feast in the absence of pilgrims. All our services will be streamed on You Tube on both days. You can celebrate and pray with us by logging on “HOLY DORMITION MONASTERY VIDEOS” in your browser.

We understand it is not the same and we feel the same way, however, we feel great responsibility for all the pilgrims as well as for the monastics during these times of uncertainty.

The monastery will remain closed to the end of the year. We invite you to continue sending us your prayer requests as well as to visit our online bookstore for icons, books prayer ropes and other religious items.

We thank you for your prayers and continued financial support.

In the love of Christ,

Mother GABRIELLA and the community.
Feast of St. Elijah the Tishbite
July 20, 2020

**The schedule of streamed services
for the Feast of the Dormition is as follows:**

Friday, August 14,
Vigil service starting at 6:00 pm.

Saturday, August 15,
Akathist and Hours at 8:00 am
Divine Liturgy at 9:00 am.
Holy Unction Service at 1:30 pm
Vigil for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost at 6:00 pm.