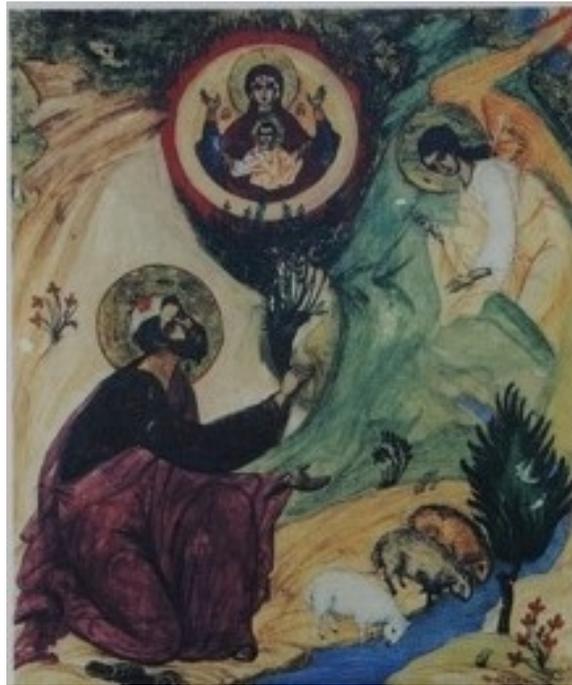


THE BURNING BUSH



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Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

Fr. John Konkle

At the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ, we greet one another with the joyous proclamation, “Christ is born!” And we reply to this greeting with the only proper response to such a proclamation, “Glorify Him!” We need not eschew the more common, and now highly secularized seasonal greetings, Merry Christmas” and “Happy Holidays,”—there is nothing worse than a pious grinch—but let us not succumb to the cultural pressures to be silenced from the authentic proclamation of the feast: Christ is born!

This characteristic greeting of the Nativity feast echoes the angel’s words to the shepherds:

Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. (Lk 2:10-12)

Of what were the shepherds afraid? The preceding verse answers, “Behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid” (Lk 2:9). So here we have it: the proclamation that Christ is born is inseparable from the glory of the Lord encompassing us. But why would this be an occasion for fear?

It is tempting to have an image of God as being a teddy bear and His glory being a warm and fuzzy embrace—an appropriately sanitized communion with our Creator in keeping with the warm and fuzzy spirit of the age. But if we consider the Biblical encounters with the glory of God, we find the Shepherd’s fear perfectly normal. Recall Moses’ meeting God in the unconsumed burning bush:

Then He said, “Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.”⁶ 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. (Ex 3:5-6)

Similar descriptions are given whenever someone is encountering the glory of God: Moses on Mt. Sinai (Ex 24:16-18; Ex 33:18-23; Ex 34:29-35), the consecration of Solomon’s temple (2 Chron 5:11-14; 7:1-3; 1

Kings 8:10-13), and the visions of prophets of Ezekiel (Ez 1:1-2:2), and Isaiah (Is 6:1-8), to name only a few.

Examples of encountering the glory of God can be multiplied in the Old and New Testaments, as well as throughout the history of the church. In all these accounts, we have expressions of profound and overwhelming holiness, of a terrifying encounter that will not leave us unchanged. The quintessential encounter to which all others point to is, the transfiguration of our Lord on Mt. Tabor in the company of Peter, James and John, with Moses and Elijah present. The disciples' reaction is typical of the divine-human encounter: "they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid (Mt 17:6; cf. Mk 9:6; Lk 9:34).

With these representative examples of being encompassed by the glory of God, we can appreciate a little more fully the shepherds' fear upon hearing the angel's announcement that Christ is born. So too, we can reflect on our own response to our customary Nativity greeting, which comes more directly from the opening paragraph of St. Gregory the Theologian's (+390) theologically rich and practically focused Nativity sermon.

Christ is born, give glory; Christ is from the heavens, go to meet him; Christ is on earth, be lifted up. "Sing to the Lord, all the earth, and, to say both together, "let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice," for the heavenly one is now earthly. Christ is in the flesh, exult with trembling and joy; trembling because of sin, and joy because of hope. (Oration 38, On the Nativity of Christ, in *Festal Orations*, SVS Press, 2008, p.61).

St Gregory beautifully expresses the trembling joy that the shepherds' felt, and that we too are invited into. "Trembling because of sin, and joy because of hope." Being engulfed by the glory of God is frighteningly purifying—if we are willing to enter and remain in the glory. So the exhortation "go to meet him" summons us into the Refiner's fire, the only place where there is authentic joy founded in a steadfast hope.

Entering in and remaining in that glory is not a forgone conclusion. When Moses led the people of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt, bringing them to the base of Mt. Sinai, God invited all the people to come and meet him. He longed to make them a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6). However, when the people experienced the awesome and overwhelming glory of the presence of God (Ex 19:16-20:18), "they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, 'You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die'" (Ex 20:18-19). Entering and remaining in the presence of the true

and living God, not a comfortable God of our own making, requires confronting our own insecurities.

Moses doesn't give up on the fickle people of Israel, however, but rather pleads: "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin" (Ex20:20). Exactly as St. Gregory teaches us, the terrifying presence of God is to purify us, to free us from the bondage of sin. And yet in response to this invitation to a transformative divine cleansing, we hear the most heart-wrenching sad words in Scripture: "*The people stood afar off*, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was" (Ex 20:20). There is nothing more lamentable than standing afar off from God. And yet Moses provides an alternative: entering the fearful darkness. So here we have the two ways: at the invitation to go to meet Him, we will stand afar off or will we enter the thick darkness where God resides?

By entering the illuminating darkness of God's presence, of His glory, Moses himself becomes transformed.

Now it was so when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moses' hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him. So when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned to him; and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the children of Israel came near, and he gave them as commandments all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. But whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would take the veil off until he came out; and he would come out and speak to the children of Israel whatever he had been commanded. And whenever the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone, then Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with Him. (Ex 34:29-35)

Entering into and abiding in the divine glory infuses us with that same glory—the creature comes to resemble his Creator. "A disciple is not above his teacher," our Lord teaches, "nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master" (Mt 10:24-25; cf. Lk 6:40; Jn 13:16; 15:20). Entering and abiding, fills us with a transformative terrifying joy.

St. Paul elaborates on Moses' encounter with God, and in particular about the meaning of the veil which Moses used to cover the divine glory that shone from him. "[We are] unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of

what was passing away” (2 Cor 3:13). Moses’s glory faded; he covered his face so that the people would not see the deficiency of his communion with God. But St. Paul proceeds to contrast the situation for those who have the Spirit of God dwelling in them.

Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Cor 3:16-18)

Like Moses, we come to shine with the glory of the Lord by beholding the glory of the Lord, by meeting Him face to face. The difference for us whose very bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19-20) is that we do not enter a tabernacle made by hands to be in the presence of this divine glory, but instead enter into our hearts (2 Cor 3:3). Entering our hearts, going to meet Him in the innermost core of our being and remaining there, is every bit as difficult—terrifying—as it was for the people of Israel to meet their Lord at Mt. Sinai.

Our tendency is to be more like Moses, going to the tabernacle (the prayer corner or the Sunday liturgy) for a ‘refill’ of glory, and then leaving the presence of God behind as we carry out our daily responsibilities with a veiled face—often veiled with self-generated piety—so that no one notices our fading divine light. This practice betrays the Nativity message: God becoming man in order to birth us into His family by the continual indwelling of the Holy Spirit, to create in us an abiding family resemblance, to replace the limitations of intermittent communion with abiding love and unity (Jn 17:22-23). We glorify God by becoming like Him, and we become like Him by dwelling in His terrifying glory.

Christ is Born! Glorify Him! ■

THE PASSION OF ANGER

Fr. John Konkle

Orthodox Christians normally view passions as negative. There are, of course, culturally common uses of the term that might be more innocent. For example, the frequent advice to follow your passions need not be an exhortation to follow your gluttony, your lust or your talkativeness, but simply to do what you care deeply about; it is a separate question altogether whether you care about the right things. As a technical term describing harmful aspects of your spiritual life, however, a passion is “an appetite or impulse such as anger, desire or jealousy, *that violently dominates the soul*” (*Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 363). To put it simply, passions are desires that control us instead of us controlling them. I eat chocolate cake because I cannot control my desire for it. Passions enslave us, leaving us with feelings of frustration and hopelessness about experiencing genuine inner transformations toward a peace that the world cannot give and a joy the world cannot take away.

Among the particularly pernicious passions is anger. We describe an angry person as having a “short fuse.” We ask about a person on a raging tirade, “What triggered him”? This is the imagery of violence: a bomb about to explode, a gun that has gone off. The damage is of course inflicted on the recipient of the ill-tempered behavior, but the Church fathers often draw our attention to the destruction that anger does to one’s own soul.

If it true that the Holy Spirit is peace of soul, as He is said to be and as, indeed, He is, and if anger is disturbance of the heart, as it really is and as it is said to be, then there is no greater obstacle to the presence of the Spirit in us than anger. (St. John of Sinai, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 8)

It behooves the athlete of Christ, who is contending lawfully, to root out the movements of wrath. The perfect medicine for this disease is that we realize, first, that in no way are we permitted to get angry, whether for an unjust or a just cause, knowing that we shall at once lose the light of discretion... and then, that the purity of our mind will soon be driven out and that it can never become a temple of the Holy Spirit as long as the spirit of wrath dwells in us. (St. John Cassian, *Institutes*, VIII. 22)

Anger rots its vessel, these fathers are telling us, making it unfit to be its Creator’s dwelling. So let us call it “poisonous anger” since it destroys its subject as well as its target. With these common reflections

in mind, it will seem surprising, maybe even shocking, to hear the opening saying from St. Isaiah the Solitary (+489):

There is among the passions an anger of the intellect (*nous*), and this anger is in accordance with nature. *Without anger a man cannot attain purity*: he has to feel angry at all that is sown in him by the enemy. (St. Isiah, #1 in *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p.22; emphasis added)

St. Isaiah directs our attention to a “purifying anger,” one which is directed not at other people, or even at oneself or God, but at things inside us, “seeds sown by the enemy,” that do not belong in us. Foreign invaders lodge themselves in our souls polluting the persons that God created us to be. Such “seeds” might include our inclinations to laziness or envy, vainglory or possessiveness. Like poisonous anger, purifying anger harms its target, but unlike its negative counterpart it does not damage its source; instead, it purifies us precisely by eradicating our soul-destroying passions.

The contrast between being angry at a person (others, ourselves, or God) and the foreign invaders that reside in us is pointedly expressed by St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: “For we do not wrestle againsts flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). Anytime we are battling against “flesh and blood,” against fellow humans, we have misidentified the enemy. If we are angry at a spouse, a child, a parent, a parishioner, a priest, a co-worker or boss, or even at ourselves, we are misdirecting our anger. Instead, purifying anger should be directed toward our own sins and the temptations, desires, and passions that give rise to them.

Purifying anger, St. Isaiah teaches, is “in accordance with nature.” By this he means in accordance with our *created* nature. We often refer to human nature to mean our *fallen* nature (see, e.g., Eph 2:3), while at other times to mean our *created* nature (see, e.g., Rom 1:26; 2:14). Poisonous anger is in accordance with our fallen nature; it is among the foreign invaders, sown by the enemy, that needs to be eradicated from our soul. How? By directing our purifying anger at it. St. Isaiah frequently reinforces the need for this practice. “If your heart comes to feel a natural hatred for sin, it has defeated the causes of sin and freed itself from them” (#6 in *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p.23). And again: “Examine yourself daily in the sight of God, and discover which one of the passions is in your heart. Cast it out, and so escape His judgment” (#20 in *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p.26).

The difference between anger according to our created nature and anger according to our fallen nature is further clarified by noticing that

they are associated with different faculties of the soul. Purifying anger arises in the *nous*, the place of unmediated communion with God, and is charged with defending our genuine, divinely created, self and our intimate communion with God. Anything that hinders or distracts from that communion should be cast away by purifying anger. The only things that can separate us from this communion are our own sins; no person and no event can destroy our communion with God; only we can—by sin.

Poisonous anger, on the other hand, arises in the *thymos*, the “spirited” or “incensive” part of the soul. It arises in us to protect our ego, an imaginary “self,” constructed in light of how we want others to view us. When we feel attacked, anger is the *fallen* natural response to protect our ego. Sometimes we become angry when we do not receive what we want. I want the last cookie on the tray but the person in front of me is taking it. I want to be at Church on time, but the kids are not cooperating. I want you to agree with my opinion but you obstinately will not. When we do not receive what we want, we are tempted to feel slighted, unimportant, imposed upon, disrespected; we may not consciously think of these situations as attacks, but our irritated responses indicate that we are indeed defending our fabricated “self”. In protecting our ego, however, we are polluting our *nous*, diverting it from communion with God.

With St. Isaiah’s teaching as background, we are in a position to understand St. Paul’s admonition: “Be angry and do not sin” (Eph 4:26; Ps 4:4). Purifying anger, in accordance with our created nature, is the God-given energy to resist the temptation to sin, and even to expel those impurities of the soul that allow temptations to grab hold of us. How do we access this God-given energy? How do we redirect and even transform that poisonous anger into purifying anger? “Whatever is not of faith,” St. Paul says, “is sin” (Rom 14:23). To be angry and not sin is to be forcefully intolerant of any inner state that diverts us from faith in Christ, from reliance on Him. It is for this reason that St. Isaiah continues his instruction by saying, “He who wishes to acquire the anger that is in accordance with nature must *uproot all self-will*, until he establishes within himself the state natural to the intellect (*nous*)” (#1 in *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p.22; emphasis added). Cultivating purifying anger is not something we do by our own strength or effort, but rather it is divinely infused in us as we relinquish our self-will in favor of reliance on God—as we gradually learn to deny ourself, take up our cross daily, and follow Christ (Lk 9:23).

Finally a caution: In discussions about the dangers of judging others, we often hear the advice: Hate the sin; love the sinner. This is *not* what

St. Isaiah is teaching us. He is not saying to hate *other* people's sins, but our own. We are called to participate with God's grace in the purification of our own lives, not to clean up other people's lives. Our hatred of other's sins (as we perceive them) is simply thinly-veiled judgment. Let us work on removing the logs in our own eyes by cultivating purifying anger in place of searching for a speck in our brother's eye. ■

**FEAST OF THE NATIVITY & THEOPHANY
2019 - 2020**

SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

Tuesday, December 24 Eve of Nativity	Royal Hours & Typica Vesp. Liturgy of St. Basil Vigil Service	8:00 am 10:00 am 6:00 pm
Wednesday, December 25 Nativity of the Lord	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. John Vigil Service	9:00 am 10:00 am 6:00 pm
Thursday, December 26 Synax of the Theotokos	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. John Lunch & Caroling Vigil Service	9:00 am 10:00 am 12:30 pm 6:00 pm
Friday, December 27 Protomartyr Stephen	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. John	8:00 am 9:00 am
Tuesday, December 31	Vigil Service Thanksgiving Service	6:00 pm 11:30 pm
Wednesday, Jan. 1, 2020 Circ. of our Lord St. Basil the Great	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. Basil	9:00 am 10:00am
Sunday, Jan. 5, 2020 Eve of Theophany	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. John Blessing of Water follows.	9:00 am 10:00am
Monday, Jan. 6, 2020 Feast of Theophany	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. Basil Blessing of Water Vigil Service	9:00 am 10:00 am 11:30 am 6:00 pm
Tuesday, Jan. 7, 2020 Feast of St. John	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. John	8:00 am 9:00 am

