

12-29-2019 Be of Good Cheer  
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As another year slips away into history, I find myself looking back and contemplating and appreciating the great mercy with which God has blessed our parish. The love and dedication to Christ, experienced and expressed in our love and dedication to each other, is itself a great blessing. God continues to send new members to our parish, both the adults wanting to enter into the fullness of the faith, firmly established in Christ's holy Church, and as you see, a steady supply of newborns, two of which were baptized today. But, of course, you have heard me say many times, we are especially blessed to have such a fabulous choir, who add such majesty and joy to our services. Thank God for their dedicated and faithful service. They have made the Christmas services so beautiful along with the chanters. I love it.

It's just a good time to be alive. There is so much to be thankful for. Sure, of course, there are lots of problems in the world. There always have been, there always will be until the end. This should not distract us in our journey. As Orthodox Christians, we are in the world but not of the world. Our Lord was no stranger to the evils of men and demons, their relentless pursuit to destroy him. The devil employed all of his power to destroy Christ, even using the tyrant Herod to murder 14,000 little children, trying to be sure that he killed the Christ Child. These Holy Innocents were the first martyrs for Christ. Their souls were escorted into the mansions of Paradise. The Lord told his disciples, "In the world, you shall have tribulation but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world."

We live in this world. We are subject to this world. There are struggles. There are trials, there are hardships, there are disappointments. This is all part of our journey and even in all of this, in all of this, the Lord tells us to be of good cheer. We must always keep our life in context with our faith, our hope, our goal, which is Paradise, in communion with God. Of course, we want to live peaceful, meaningful lives with purpose and contentment. Of course, we do. We even see this in the scriptures, in the Epistle of Timothy. It says, "I urge, then, first of all that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for all people, for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." The reason there is all the struggle is because there is sin. There is the broken relationship between God and man. There's the misuse of our free will.

When Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the perfect relationship with God and man was broken. This brokenness has passed down throughout history. Christ came to restore us, to heal the wounds, the brokenness, to reopen the gates of Paradise to all who believe in his holy name, confessing him as their Lord God and Savior. During this festal Nativity season, we are reminded of the immeasurable love and mercy that God has for each one of us, for you and for me, for everyone. However, it's up to us, it's up to us to embrace the joy that God offers us through the indescribable gift of the Nativity. We must do more than just hear God's commandments; we must do what God has commanded us to do. Obedience, obedience and joy, this is what Joseph did.

Obedience is very much the theme in the life of Joseph the betrothed. He was obedient to the will of God. He always submitted his will to God's will. Remember, it's not the hearers of the word that are justified, it's the doers of the word, those who do the will of God. They are the ones who are justified. No matter what trial we have in life, we must remember what the scripture teaches. If God is for us, if God is for us, who can be against us? Can you imagine what poor Joseph the betrothed went through?

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Think of all the things that he was asked to do. Joseph was already an old man. He was 80 years old. He had already raised his family. His wife Salome had died just a year or so before and now he was made to take guardianship of Mary. Most of you know the story. When it was time for Mary to leave the temple because she was of age, her parents were already reposed, and she refused marriage. She had pledged herself completely to God.

The temple priest had to figure out what to do with her. It was a dilemma. When by God's Providence, Joseph was selected among all the widowers of Israel. The truth of the matter is, he didn't want the job. He didn't want to do it. He even complained that he was already an old man with grandchildren older than Mary. The temple priests, in no uncertain terms, let him know that it was God's will that he be Mary's guardian, and so he was obedient to take her under his care. When Mary was found to be with child, Joseph the betrothed, was troubled and understandably so. In the Akathist to the Theotokos in Kontakion Four says, "Having within a tempest of doubting thoughts, the Joseph, the chaste Joseph was troubled for knowing thee to have no husband, he suspected a secret union, oh blameless one. Having learned that that conception was of the Holy Spirit he said, 'Hallelujah.'"

As Mary's guardian and the Lord's guardian as well, Joseph encountered life and death situations many times. In every circumstance, he was obedient to do whatever God told him to do and they were preserved. First of all, as we have already said, he was selected by Divine Providence from all the widowers of Israel to take Mary, a young lady, fifteen years of age from the temple and to be her betrothed guardian. Then when he returned home from being away in his trade building houses, he finds that she was pregnant with child. At first, he is greatly troubled by this. It's only after he is told by an angel that she has conceived of the Holy Spirit that he is able to accept. And now the Christ Child is born, and the angel again visits him and tells him to flee to Egypt because the child's life is in danger. He has to leave his own country, his friends, his family, and flee to a foreign land. He even leaves by night, so as not to be seen.

Each time Joseph is told to do something that he most certainly would not have chosen to do on his own, he was obedient to the will of God and he obeys. This, brothers and sisters, is what we are called to do, to obey, to do what God calls us to do. Our life consists of both hearing and doing. While traveling through Egypt with Mary and the Christ Child, they were confronted with countless difficulties, where to find rest, shelter and food, where to go, what path to take, and countless other challenges.

One of my favorite stories is the story of them traveling through an area known to be infested with gangs of thieves. They chose to go by night hoping to avoid being seen, but they came across two men keeping watch over the road. When the thieves spotted them, but before they woke the other gang members, one of the men looked at the Christ Child and was moved in his heart with compassion. He even had to bribe his partner, bribe him, to allow them to go by undetected without waking the other thieves.

Mary told them as they were leaving that her son would someday have mercy on him and reward him for his kindness. This came to pass at the Crucifixion. You remember the two thieves that were crucified on each side of Christ. These are the same two men that they encountered on the road in Egypt many years before. The thief on the right is the same one that allowed them to pass unharmed. What greater joy could the thief possibly have experienced, while hanging on the cross dying, than the words that Christ spoke to him? "This day you will be with me in Paradise."

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If we focus only on the struggle, on the hardships and the disappointments, we will lose focus of the joy set before us in Christ Jesus. We lose sight of that joy. It's easy to feel self-pity. Woe is me. I'm struggling. Things aren't going well. Life is difficult. We've all experienced that.

Remember the words of Saint Paul, and I've read this before but it's always pertinent, from Romans, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or the sword? No, no. In all of these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loves us."

We have every reason to be joyful, to be thankful, to have hope even in the midst of hardships and trials. There is even joy in the heavens when one sinner repents. Luke 15: "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who have no need of repentance." Joy and sadness are not mutually exclusive terms. Consider the encouragement the Lord gives his disciples, John 14: "Let not your heart be troubled. Ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many mansions."

Living in Santa Cruz, I couldn't help but chuckle. He didn't say there are really good two-bedroom apartments that are priced much cheaper than Santa Cruz. No. "In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am you may be also." In Psalms 51 it says, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit." Even the unborn child of Elizabeth, John the Baptist, leaped in his mother's womb for joy when Mary, pregnant with the Christ Child, came to visit. There are many things in life that bring sadness and sorrow and we have to go through these difficult times.

In Paul's Epistle to the Romans he gives a blueprint of how to conduct ourselves in all circumstances. Romans 12 verse 9: "Let love be without hypocrisy. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil." Children, do you know what that means, abhor, the word of abhor? To have a great disdain, even to hate that which is evil, to stay away from it. It's destructive. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Love, mercy, compassion, generosity, patience, hang on to those things. Grab on to them. Don't let them go. Cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Give preference to one another in honor, not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope. What is the hope? It's the hope of our salvation in Jesus Christ. Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer. We can all do this, devoted to prayer. Pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality, and the list goes on. If we strive to live this way, then joy can be ours no matter what the difficulties and struggles that we encounter in life.

This is a good time to do some personal inventory, a time to look at the storehouse of our soul and see what we have, what we lack, what we need. Read through Romans 12 and see what Saint Paul says about how a Christian is to live their life. Compare it with how we live our life. The more that we are able to put our trust in the Providence of God, this is important, the more we are able to put our trust in the Providence of God, the more we will find peace in the circumstances of our life. Saint John of Tobolsk wrote an entire book in the Providence of God, and every time I open it to read a chapter or two, I am challenged to accept all that God brings into my life with a deep sense of joy in the hope of my salvation. By the way, it's available in the bookstore, it's called The Sunflower by St. John of Tobolsk.

The circumstances of our life should not be an emotional roller coaster. We need to be focused on the 'one thing needful' to sit at the Master's feet, ready and willing to do whatever he desires to accept his

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providence, to do his will. May we enter this new year with a determination, a zeal, to do the will of God, to be faithful to the high calling of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we may be worthy to be called Christians.

Amen.