

9-21-2019 Nativity of the Theotokos  
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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy spirit. Amen.

Happy birthday, Theotokos.

We gather together today, as Christians always do, in the temple of God to celebrate the wonderful things that have been done for us by God. To gather as His people in His house, to put aside the worries and the cares, the distractions of the world just for an hour and to remember what God has done for us. And the glorious, the glorious manner, the mysterious manner, the really unexplainable and often seemingly irrational manner in which He works to save us. Lowly us. Little us. Us who secretly, many of us don't really even believe that we're worth saving, do we? That little voice on the inside saying, "Everybody is loved but not us. Everybody is lovable, but not me. God came to save everyone. I do believe that, but maybe I'm not sure about me."

I recently watched a teaching by another priest. He said, "If anyone comes to me and says, Father, I just have a hard time believing that God loves me." He just says, "No, don't say anything else. I don't want to hear any more about that." And he said, "I actually use that tone. Don't say that. Are you so special that God came to save the entire world except for you? Are you so unique in your sin and your rebellion and your struggle to love God that he came and he gave his life for everyone on the face of the earth throughout time, that they would be saved, that they would have the opportunity to be saved. But he has a special arrangement for you?"

It's a weird, weird pride that we have where we think that we are so special that our unlovability is more powerful than God's ability to love. It's ridiculous. We like to think that we are rational beings. We have the ability to be rational beings. We are not very rational most of the time.

And so we come on this particular day, the birth of the Theotokos. And I wanted this year to really stop and for all of us, whether it was in the Academy catechism or here today, to really stop and think why do we celebrate this feast? Why? We can be so enamored in our love and our respect for the Theotokos knowing, as Orthodox Christians, how incredible she is, the greatest of all the saints, the Mother of God. The one that God himself, Christ, wants us to honor because it is his mother in the flesh, that we start losing sight as to really why? Why do we do this? We can go in a relationship with another person, with God, even with a saint, to where we have such a deep relationship and respect and love that we forget why they are important. And for us that might not be very, very important. I don't need to know all the time why I love my wife. Convince myself constantly that I do. I just love her.

But our love for God is intended to be shared. To be shared with other people. And as Orthodox Christians, we cannot make the mistake of getting into the place of such great comfort and an assumption, good assumption, in our understanding of the faith and the church and our relationship with God and the sense that we forget why, because we need to know the why in order to share our faith with other people who are going to ask why. Why?

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So why are we celebrating the birth of the Theotokos? We have several feast days through the year where we honor the Mother of God. We celebrate her conception, which is amazing. Whole other lesson to learn in that. The icon that we typically refer to as the icon of Joachim and Anna is actually not the icon of Joachim and Anna. It is the icon of the conception of the Theotokos rather than Joachim and Anna standing straight and facing forward next to each other, which would be typical when you portray two saints together. They are rather sideways reaching for each other, and in the background of the icon there's a bed.

Don't be embarrassed. We're not embarrassed. Her conception was miraculous. She is a child of promise. Her parents, I asked the kids at Academy catechism this week, in their complete innocence, is it natural that these two old people, and I pretended I was old, I had a cane, and we're going to have a baby. And they all laughed and said, "No, that's strange." "You're right. It is strange. It's a miracle." She's a true child of promise. From nothingness, from barrenness, from a state that nothing naturally could come from. She comes miraculously, born, conceived, and we celebrate that conception. We celebrate also her nativity, which we are celebrating today. That her birth, the day that she comes into the world as a human being, an infant born, a new creation, a new person, no one else like her, like the birth of every child, a wonderful event.

We also, we see of course, Theotokos in the nativity of Christ, but technically that's Christ feast day. But later we see another face of the Theotokos that many of us miss, which is the presentation of Christ in the temple. This is her feast. It is her 40-day celebration, a coming back from a time of purification, presenting herself in the church with her newborn child as the women in the church still do. To be brought in and received back having participated in this incredible miracle of bringing another person into creation. Of participating in the creative power of God to bring life into the world that didn't exist before. Then, of course, we celebrate her Dormition at the end of the liturgical year. This glorious death where we see that, with us, she endured death. God did not tolerate her the corruption of her body, and he takes her body up into heaven miraculously. But she endures death with us.

This incredible woman, the greatest of the saints, but one of us. We do not, like the Roman Catholic church, and believe in the immaculate conception of the Theotokos where she didn't suffer the effects of the fall. We do not believe that. That is heresy. She is one of us. And when we look at her birth, when we look at the Dormition of the Theotokos, the God bearer, and in the scripture today you heard this emphasis in the epistle on Christ being God. Why? Because we need to think about Christ more today than the Theotokos? No. Because if Christ is God, she is the Mother of God. She is not the mother of just the Christ, as was argued in the early church. She is not the Christotokos only. She is the Theotokos, the bearer of God.

But when we look at her Dormition, we see this is the Mother of God. Look how she's treated. Look how much Christ the son loves her, that he took her bodily up into heaven after her death. That there's all these miracles surrounding her death. At the presentation of Theotokos in the temple, there's this wonderful juxtaposition between the fact that she is coming to offer her son to God, which that is the perfect thing for her to be doing, and her son is the son of God.

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But when we look at her conception and her birth, there's an emphasis that we have to remember. And although the greatest thing that could happen is to give birth to God, we can't in that in that state of her being Theotokos, we cannot forget who she was as Mary. In the Gospel reading we hear this all the time, that the woman from the crowd cries out to Christ, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts which nursed you. Absolutely. You're the Mother of God. You're the mother of the savior, the Christ." And Christ says, "Yes." He says, "Yes, you're right. But even more so, even more so, less it is he who hears the word of God and keeps it."

Saint Dimitri of Rostov says, "We cannot forget about Mary." That the thing that she did that no other woman had ever done, ever. From Eve to even Anna, her mother, she kept perfectly the word of God. She fulfilled the Old Covenant. So, remember, historically, 2200 years approximately before the birth of Christ, God talks to Abraham and says, "I promise it from your seed, the savior will come forth." With Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and David. David is promised the same thing. 1500 years before the birth of Christ God speaks to Moses. And the reestablishment of Israel begins with the Mosaic Law. Over 600 laws, by the way. It's a lot. And that entire time, our God, outside of time, the creator of the cosmos who can do anything that he wills, is waiting for someone to keep the law, to return mankind to obedience with God from the time that Adam and Eve disobeyed all the way to someone finally reversing the effects of the fall and being perfectly obedient to God voluntarily.

And we have two people that do that. John the Baptist and the Theotokos. John the Baptist, unfortunately, can't be the Virgin prophesied to bring Christ into the world. So, we're glad that a man finally did it. Thank you, John. But we have to have a woman do it as well. We have to have a new Adam and a new Eve to bring Paradise back to us, to open it up to us again. Adam and Eve haven't been driven out of Paradise. And in this weird sense, this God that is outside of time, who has no limit to his power and his will, is waiting, waiting and waiting for someone to do what they are supposed to do. From the time of Moses on for 1500 years, the people of Israel know exactly how-to live-in order to reverse the effects of the fall, to be a perfect person voluntarily, and no one can do it.

Even afterwards when the Jews start arguing that the Gentile Congress Orthodoxy had to be circumcised in order to be saved, the Apostles who are Jews themselves saying, "Nope, not going to do that because no one, no one can keep up the law of Moses. No one. It's too hard." What they don't say that we know is true, is that is what this woman did. And so, in her conception and her birth, we are thrilled. Not only that she's going to be the Theotokos, but that someone came into the world who kept the word of God. Who heard it and kept it. Who actually did it. Okay. Who struggled with every fallen predisposition that we have and voluntarily did not sin? Voluntarily she was perfectly obedient. And the minute she does that, the minute as a young adult, her voluntary obedience to God is complete, the Archangel Gabriel appears. And we have the Feast of the Annunciation to the Theotokos. The evangelization of the Theotokos.

She has so prepared herself that God evangelizes her. He comes to her. He reveals himself to her, and he comes, and he dwells within her. And so in these early feasts of the Theotokos in the liturgical year, remember who Mary is, because before even she was the Theotokos, which no greater a lesson could be given to a person than to bring God into the world. But before that greatest of blessings

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occurred, she is Mary, who heard the word of God, kept it and fulfilled the prophecies that a virgin would be so prepared, herself voluntarily, that God would use her to incarnate himself into the world.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.