

Feast of the Annunciation of the Theotokos 2012

Today's Reading: Luke 1:24-38

In those days, Elizabeth the wife of Zacharias conceived and for five months she hid herself, saying, "Thus the Lord had done to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men." In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you! But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God." And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Thoughts on the Gospel

For anyone that has read the Book of Exodus (specifically, Exodus 3) – or for those who have seen the movie *The Ten Commandments* – they know about the encounter of Moses and the Burning Bush. On the mountain of God, Moses saw the Burning Bush and heard a voice to take off his sandals, for where he was stepping was "holy ground." This encounter is one of the three readings said during yesterday's Great Vespers service. Yet, how is this encounter related to today's feast?

For those that know Greek, the word for "Annunciation" is Ευαγγελισμός, or "good news." The good news for Moses and the Israelites of that time was that they would be free from the tyranny of the Egyptians. For today's feast, the Annunciation of the Theotokos is that God is revealed to us, born in the flesh for our sakes and to save us. It was a great moment for Moses himself to step on holy ground; however, what a greater moment to see God incarnate!

As for the woman to bear Him in the flesh, the Most-Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary was not a "random personality" that was chosen. She is "higher in honour than the Cherubim and more honourable than the Seraphim". She is the representation of humility, the one whose trust in God is unwavering. She is the Queen of Heaven, the womb in where Jesus Christ – God the Son, the One who is uncontainable – dwelled for nine months before his birth.

Upon seeing her, the Archangel Gabriel greeted her with the famous words, "Hail, you who are full of grace! The Lord is with you!" The Virgin Mary asked how it was possible for her to be pregnant, as she was not married and "did not know a man" (cf. Luke 1:34). The Archangel answered her that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her.

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In the Matins (morning) reading, we hear the continuation of the narrative. After the Archangel Gabriel left the Theotokos, she went to her cousin Elizabeth. Once they greeted one another, Elizabeth proclaimed that the Virgin Mary was “blessed among women and blessed was the fruit of her womb!” (cf. Luke 1:42) Then, the Theotokos gave us one of our most beloved hymns, the *Magnificat*: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden; for behold, from henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is Mighty has done great things for me and holy is His Name!” (Luke 1:46-49)

Another lesson we learn from today’s Gospel is that life, indeed, begins at conception; otherwise, why would the Orthodox Church celebrate the conception of Christ, the Theotokos and St. John the Baptist? Human life is precious and God has shown us from His own incarnation that it begins from the womb and not merely when we are born into this world.

The greatest message we are called to follow is that we are called to emulate her and become *holy by grace*, to become *saints*. Our Church has so many ministries that we offer to parishioners: **Re-Catechism**, an English-language faith discussion group; **Altar Servers**, where young men offer their services to the Church; **the Philoptochos**, who are set to be “friends of the poor”; **the Greek Bible Study**; and much more. Starting this Friday, a new ministry begins – the **St. Paraskevi Girls Group**, a ministry for young women aged 12 to 19 in our Church. This ministry is to involve girls in the life of our Church and to show them (and all of us) that women are just as much a part of the Church as their male counterparts. We must remember that the Theotokos, a woman, is the greatest of all saints.

This is a great feastday in the calendar of the Church. After examining the feast, we have a choice: to say “I will follow my own way,” or to emulate the Theotokos and say, “may it be as you have said” and submit our will to our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom is due all glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

A Blessed Feast to all!

Discussion Questions:

For Children

1. What is the feast of the Annunciation all about?
2. What does the word “Evangelismos” (Ευαγγελισμός) mean? Why is that word linked with today’s feast?
3. How can we follow God’s will as Panagia did?

For Youth/Young Adults

1. With what words would you have addressed the Theotokos if you were the Archangel Gabriel?
2. What ways would you want to get involved in the parish?
3. Why is it difficult for people to follow God’s will?