

Vespers March 19, 2009

Martyrs Crysanthus and Daria.

Genesis 7: 6-23

On that day – “All the fountains of the great abyss burst forth, and the floodgates of the sky were opened. For forty days and forty nights heavy rain poured down on the earth [...] As the waters increased, they lifted the ark, so that it rose above the earth. The swelling waters increased greatly, but the ark floated on the surface of the waters. Higher and higher above the earth rose the waters, until all the highest mountains everywhere were submerged...”

I. As I prepared for this sermon I was struck by the deep relevance that the story of the flood has for the state of our tradition in what many are calling a “post-modern” world.

We read in Genesis that: the waters of the flood rose higher and higher above the earth, “until all the highest mountains everywhere were submerged.” The mountains are a profound primordial symbol, a central landmark to the mind of Israel. The mountains signify Israel’s childhood in covenantal relationship with God. Theophanies occur on the mountain.

But in the flood, the mountains disappear.

The very geography of the world is wiped away.

Indeed, today, as Orthodox Christians we find ourselves in an analogous situation. Today we are inundated by information and overwhelmed by a flood of crises in the realms of cultural, linguistic and religious identity.

Today we are overwhelmed by an oceanic free-market of ideas.

Today all the familiar landmarks of every culture are rapidly subsumed by the onrush of nihilism, just as the waters rose above the mountains in the story of the flood.

And as Orthodox Christians, a tiny minority, a marginal community of faith, we may find ourselves asking several questions:

Why does this kingdom of secularism prosper above all else?

Why is it Lord, that today authentic Christian faith is increasingly marginalized while fundamentalism and extreme liberalism occupy the center of attention?

In the story of the flood, it is the wicked who are punished while the righteous live above the water – Lord, have we no ark? No means of escape?

Finally, if we are honest with ourselves, I think we will also ask:

What have we done, Lord, that the world has abandoned you?

It is our world, the familiar landscape of our soul as the Orthodox Church that seems to be wiped away beneath the many waters of the age, reduced to formlessness, to nothing.

II. For some this is a time for giving up, for others, it is a source of anger, a time to fight.

There are some that fight for cultural and linguistic preservation by withdrawing into sectarian communities that wear tradition like a suit of armor. But this kind of brittleness cannot last long before it will be shattered by the prevailing culture. They may look as hard as steel, but they are rooted in a temperament that is as delicate as an eggshell.

There are others that grow so lax in their despondency that they ultimately become revisionists of the faith. Having taken up the nihilistic mantra that there is no world that is not subjectively created, they set out to create a brave new world for Orthodoxy as well.

III. But surely these cannot be our only two options, either to drown with a firm grip on the past, tethered to the bottom of the sea for an age, or to release our hold and be washed away to an indefinite, subjectively constructed future.

They cannot be our only two options because we do not worship a weak God.

We are children of the resurrection.

Despair is not an option for us.

The Lord has made all things. As the Psalms would have it, he has established the earth on the waters so that it should never be moved. He brought forth the waters from the abyss and covered the mountains, sparing only Noah and those with him in the ark. And then at the sound of his voice the waters fled.

In the Gospels our incarnate Lord exercises that same authority again.

He comes to his disciples in the midst of the storm, walking on the water, *and at his word the storms cease.*

But then, in order to show just how great, how abysmal, and unfathomable his love for the world is, he willingly gave himself up to injustice, to chaos, perishing in the flood for the life of the world.

Yet lying in the grave, as at the beginning of creation, he once again brings form out of formlessness, light out of darkness.

The waters are turned back!

And now he also brings something greater--life out of the grave!

IV. It is because of this resurrectional triumph that we can remember martyrs, such as Crysanthus and Daria, or those who perished at the monastery of St. Savas with pangs of joy, rather than despair.

Brothers and sisters, all the martyrs suffered terribly at the hands of the world.

There was no ark to rescue them.

It is as they are overtaken by the flood for love of Christ that they witness to Christ.

And when today many are saying that the world has gone mad, when we are overwhelmed by its confusion, we can endure the maelstrom, the fragmentation, and reduction to formlessness of contemporary life without fear, because Christ has overcome the world!

A Joyful light has appeared in the darkness!

V. Furthermore, because of this reality of the word made flesh, it seems an ark, that is, an escape, is no longer an option for us.

A people baptized into the death of Christ, and anointed with his cross cannot think otherwise.

As children of Christ we do not have the option of "building a bubble and living in it."

VI. So, as we continue Lent, let us boldly and courageously continue to enter the flood of contemporary thought with prayer, fasting, and most especially, with loving mercy and compassion for everyone that we encounter.

Let us gladly seek a share in the sufferings of Christ our Lord who courageously entered the abyss for our sake, not counting the cost.

For in so doing we will find that "deep waters cannot quench love, nor floods sweep it away." (Song of Songs)

We have no need of fear, perfect love has cast it out!

Christ is in our midst! Whether in life or death his love is steadfast and unfailing in its reach.

Rejoice in the Lord as you struggle to keep the faith in the rolling seas of contemporary life!

Hoping in him we obtain the courage to meet the struggle before us, trusting that it is only he who will make our old faith young again.

At the end of all things, it is the Lord Jesus Christ who says,
"Behold, I make all things new!"

Let us pray:

"O Lord, Lord, my only happiness, will You provide shelter for Your injured pilgrim? O Lord, my ageless youth, my eyes shall bathe in You and shine more radiantly than the sun. You carefully collect the tears of the righteous, and with them you rejuvenate worlds." (St. Nikolai Velimirovic)

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