



My Beloved Ones,

I pray that all of you have experienced a healthy and productive beginning to 2024. This Sunday's Gospel also looks ahead, connecting the Nativity season, and the Triodion.

In the Gospel for the Sunday after Epiphany, our Lord hears that John the Baptist has been arrested. Knowing that the Forerunner's ministry has ended, Christ leaves His home in Nazareth, journeying to "*...Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali...*" (Matthew 4:13) This was done so, "*...that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.'*" (Matthew 4:13-16). The Messianic prophecies of

Isaiah of course bring to our minds the feasts of the Nativity and Theophany: the light of the Star of Bethlehem has now begun its work, spreading across the land.

For all the peace and merrymaking that the holidays bring, the hymns we heard on the Feast of Theophany are like those of Good Friday. When He entered the River Jordan, Christ took His first steps to the Cross. The work of the Incarnation is only complete when we think of the empty tomb. Christ's own birth predicts His death: wrapped in cloth and lying in a cave, he will be presented once again with gifts of myrrh. But as the Troparion for the Sunday of the Myrrhbearers proclaims, "*The angel came to the myrrhbearing women at the tomb and said: Myrrh is meet for the dead; but Christ has shown Himself a stranger to corruption!*" Every feast ultimately points us toward that Feast of Feasts: Pascha.

Matthew ends his Gospel, looking away from Isaiah, and towards the fulfillment of John's work. The Evangelist stresses that Christ began to use a phrase that would have been familiar to all were baptized by John: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 4:17). It seems appropriate that we are being called to begin walking with Christ on His ministry, just as the secular world begins its New Year. Each signals a time for new beginnings, working towards, not just earthly betterment, but Theosis.

My New Year's wish is that we use the spiritual lessons we have gained this Nativity season—love, peace, forgiveness, and joy—to better our souls, as we approach the Greatest moment of our liturgical year as well.

**+ALEXIOS**

Metropolitan of Atlanta