

THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM

The story of Our Lord's Life is the story of His journey to Jerusalem. He grew up in Nazareth, preached in Galilee, and turned to Jerusalem to fulfill His mission. St. Luke tells this story most clearly, witnessing that “when the days for His being taken up were fulfilled, He resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem.” (*Luke 9:51*) Later, Jesus explains, “I must continue on My way today, tomorrow, and the following day, for it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem.” (*Luke 13:33*) Jerusalem was the Holy City for Jesus and His people. The temple that was erected there symbolized the presence of God among his people; its altar was the footstool on earth of His heavenly throne. It was here that Jesus began His mission at the age of twelve, telling his mother, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (*Luke 2:51*)

Jesus had a great love for Jerusalem and its temple. When He finally arrived, He was received as a King, with cries of “Hosanna.” The people’s acclamation was, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.” (*Luke 19:38*) Jesus, however, in His love for the city, wept, “If this day you only knew what makes for peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes.” (*Luke 19:42*) Then He entered the temple and cleansed it, He “proceeded to drive out those who were selling things, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.’” (*Luke 19:46*)

In Jerusalem, Jesus fulfilled the plan of the Father. He became the temple, the place of God’s presence on earth. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, “When Christ came as the high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, He entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with His own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.” (*Hebrews 9:11-12*). The gospel reveals that God does not dwell in buildings of stone (*1 Peter 2:5*), but in the human heart. On November 21, therefore, we celebrate the feast of the Entrance of the God-bearer, Mary, into the temple, because God was to dwell in her womb, making her the new “and living temple of the holy glory of Christ our God.” (*Sticheron at Psalm 140, Vespers*) In the Gospel of St. John, when Jesus cleanses the temple, He tells the people, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” St. John then observes, “He was speaking about the temple of His body.” (*John 2:19.21*) Since we are united in Communion with Christ, our bodies also become the temple of God: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you.” (*1 Corinthians 6:19*) Because Christ came to Jerusalem and, there, offered Himself for the life of the world, we now have the hope of freedom from sin and resurrection.

Jesus did not become the temple of God at his passion in Jerusalem. Indeed, from the very beginning of His human life, from the time of His conception in the womb of Mary, He was Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” the Savior. The story of Christ’s birth into our world, therefore, is also a Passover, a passage from death to life. Just as Jesus had to go to Jerusalem to accomplish the plan of the Father, so also, at the beginning, He had to come to Bethlehem to be born. This was to fulfill the prophecy of Micah, “And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.” (*Micah 5:1-2; Matthew 2:6*) Bethlehem is a small village only five miles south of Jerusalem, so this first journey foreshadowed the future journey to Jerusalem.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He was greeted by similar words that the people of Jerusalem were later to offer, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.” (*Luke 2:14*; cf. *Luke 19:38*) At his birth, these words were proclaimed by the angels. The coming of Jesus in human flesh was His first act of salvation, for “He emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance; He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” (*Phillipians 2:7-8*) The two mysteries, Jesus’ conception and birth, and His death and resurrection, are one. In the second century, Melito of Sardis in the second century, preached, “[Christ] came on earth from heaven for suffering man, becoming incarnate in a virgin’s womb from which He came forth as man; He took on Himself the suffering of human suffering through a body capable of suffering, and put an end to the sufferings of the flesh, and through His spirit incapable of death became the death of death which is destructive of man.” The Church, then, declares that Christmas is a Paschal Feast. It is a feast of life, for God, in becoming human, has given us the promise of the abundance of life, victory over sin, and eternal life.

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