

Blessing Water, Homes, Fire Engines, and Beehives

It was said of Abba Arsenius that on Saturday evenings, preparing for the glory of Sunday, he would turn his back on the sun and stretch out his hands in prayer towards the heavens, till once again the sun shone on his face. Then he would sit down.
—*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

This description of Abba Arsenius has much to teach us about holy waiting and keeping vigil. Just as importantly, it describes the wonder a heart senses when it experiences God's limitless glory in the everyday things of life.

Such otherworldly, "Arsenius-like" experiences are not fantastic legends, reserved for the few. Rather, wonder, and the joy associated with it, lie at the center of Christian life, and are given to those who have "eyes to see and ears to hear." As Orthodox Christians, we believe that we were created to behold God's glory in all things—as we sing weekly at the Divine Liturgy: "Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory."

The ancient Jews recognized that all things, both small and great, came from God's hand. King David wrote, "The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims His handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). The Jews believed that God's extraordinary hand worked through ordinary objects and circumstances; thus, food, clothing, sexual relationships, birth, and death, were all "regulated" by the Jewish Law to reflect God's glory. Every speck of earthly dust could reflect heavenly light. In fact, God intended for the terrestrial to unite with the divine. He intended for the "sun to shine" on our faces to remind us of His glory, and, He even intended for our "smudged" faces to shine with His glory!

The late 20th-century author and Jewish rabbi, Abraham Heschel, wrote about seeing the world through this "lens of wonder":

Worship is a way of seeing the world in the light of God. Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement; get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually; to be spiritual is to be amazed. —*Between God and Man*

Heschel's perspective is as radical as it is ancient. It challenges our present-day view, in which we compartmentalize our lives, separating the sacred and profane, the earthly and heavenly. Heschel invites us to see the earth imbued with the heavenly. He invites us to live beyond the temptations of selfish consumerism and ever-more-electrifying entertainment, both of which simply lead to boredom. For when God's Spirit is absent from the things of the earth, those things become lifeless shells and hollow containers that simply lead to endless yearning for "more stuff" and "more stimulation." But when God's Spirit invades the "stuff of life," earthly objects become not "supernatural" but "natural": they find their place within the cosmos as intended by the Creator; and, when used as intended, they lead to our peace, joy, and fulfillment.

Heschel's perspective comes from his understanding of the *berakah*—the ancient Jewish prayer of blessing, the predecessor of our Christian Eucharist, which begins: "Blessed be Thou, our God, King of the Universe, who...." The *berakah* can conclude with blessing a myriad of objects: bread, drink, rain, first fruits, and so forth.

Berakah transcends thanksgiving and praise: it confesses the wonders of God and opens us to God's active participation in our lives. Every prayer of blessing (*berakah*) refers back to God each item that is blessed. In doing so, the blessing establishes a relationship, a covenant, with God. The *berakah* links the human with the divine, by acknowledging God as the source of all of creation and His Spirit as the fulfillment of all of creation.

A "blessing" is not a magical act. Nor does it endow the object with a supernatural force. Instead, a blessing recognizes the earth as belonging to God, and earthly objects as means of communication with Him. As such, a blessing reclaims and restores earthly things, and allows us, as Oliver Clement, an Orthodox writer of the 20th century, said, "to see the extraordinary in the ordinary."

On the Feast of Epiphany, we acknowledge the importance of "blessings." The priest stands before a font of water and, in awe, proclaims three times: "Great art Thou, O God, and marvelous are Thy works, and there are no words to suffice to hymn Thy wonders." In blessing water—material liquid—we acknowledge it as the gift from God that supports all of life. "Holy Water" is not supernatural water, but rather water that is recognized as gift and sustenance from the hand of our Creator.

We use Holy Water, sanctified waters, to bless the things of everyday life. The priests' Book of Needs index includes blessings for homes, icons, crosses, fruit, flowers, beehives, vehicles, fire engines, ambulances, and so forth. Some of these blessings may seem strange and funny to us. But each blessing is a reminder that God provides for us and that He remains active in our lives.

Each blessing also reminds us of our proper relationship to the holy and to the everyday: in fact, how we are to become the human link between the divine and earthly. "Holy Water" cleanses the lenses of our eyes, so that we see and understand how we are to live spiritual lives within earthly bodies; how we are to utilize earthly objects in a spiritual manner; how to become godly humans.

Blessings, by word or by water, reaffirm our covenant with our God. Through blessings, we reaffirm His presence and activity in our lives; we reaffirm His desire to communicate Himself to us through His creation. And like St. Arsenius, we stand in wonder at His graciousness.

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