



Coming and Going, Gathering and Sending

Words are wonderful. June 30 is the *Synaxis* of the Holy Apostles. What is a *Synaxis*?

Interestingly, *synaxis* is a Greek word directly related to *synagogue*, both which mean “gathering. On June 29, we celebrate the memory of the Chief Apostles, Peter and Paul, martyred at Rome, and on June 30, we celebrate the *Synaxis*, the gathering, the congregating, the collection of, the *sobor* (to use a Russian cognate) of the twelve Holy Apostles. I had the blessing two weeks ago to stand on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where our Lord preached and healed; there I visited the beautiful “Church of the Twelve,” named for this feast.

In the Orthodox Tradition, we have such a “gathering” on many days in the Church calendar, following major events. The day after Christmas is the Synaxis of the Mother of God. On February 3, Saints Symeon and Anna, following the Meeting of the Lord. On March 26, the Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel, following the Annunciation on March 25. It is an important day, remembering important saints, following a previous day, on which we commemorated a major event in Christianity.

Synaxis also refers to the cycle of services related to the Divine Liturgy, and perhaps particularly in the Resurrectional cycle — that is, the Great Vespers-Matins-Divine Liturgy of Saturday night through Sunday morning. In early desert monasticism, the monks frequently spent the weekdays out in the barren wilderness, fighting the demons in solitude, but gathered together—gathered, had a “synaxis”—for the Resurrectional services on the weekend.

The Synaxis of the Holy Apostles — remembering that words are wonderful — is an amazing feast of opposites. If Synaxis is a gathering, Apostle means “sent one.” When it was time, Jesus “sent” a number of people out — 12, then 70, as we read in Mark 6:6ff: “And he went about among the villages teaching. And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, ‘Where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. And if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them.’ So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.”

And according to Luke 10:1ff, “After this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them on ahead of him, two by two into every town and place where he himself was about to come. And he said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house!’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages; do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off against you; nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.’ I



tell you, it shall be more tolerable on that day for Sodom than for that town.”

He sent them on their mission: Go, bring peace, heal, and say, “the Kingdom of God has come near you.”

These Apostles did what they were told. They were sent, they went, they preached. In some places they were received; there they built congregations — *synaxes*. These we read about in the Acts of the Sent-Ones every day during the Paschal Season. To these were written most of the letters of the New Testament—“To the Philippians,” “To the Ephesians,” “To the Corinthians.” These are letters to the faithful in Philippi, in Ephesus, in Corinth. I remind my parishioners that if such a letter were written today, to us, it would be “to the Charlestonians” or “to the Carolinians.”

The Apostles’ faithfulness to the command of the Lord yielded harvests of individuals, families, neighborhoods, and regions. Think of the Ethiopian eunuch who was baptized by Philip. Think of the Philippian jailor, who was baptized and saved with his whole family. Think of the 3000 who repented and were baptized at the preaching of Peter in Acts 2. Yes, these were faithful sent-ones, who went and did as they were commanded, in the power of the Holy Spirit. They turned the world upside down in the Name of the Lord.

Eventually, the Apostles were sent out. For us in North America, it is so vital to recall their faithfulness. Two brothers from Thessalonica (whose faithful were established by the first Apostles, and to whom Saint Paul wrote not only one, but two letters), whom we know as Saints Cyril and Methodius, were sent from home to the land of what is now essentially Bulgaria. There, the two talented Christians gave an alphabet (we know it as the Cyrillic alphabet, named for Saint Cyril) to the unlettered people who received them, and translated for them the Scriptures and services. A hundred-plus years later, the Prince of Rus’, Vladimir, sends emissaries to find the True Faith, which they found most beautifully in Constantine’s City in the Mother Church of Christendom. Thus, the Baptism of Rus’ in 988. 802 years later, the Russian Monk Herman and his band of brothers were sent across the continent — on foot and by sled, etc. — and arrived in Kodiak, Alaska. There he would obey, along with Saint Innocent and others 50 years later, the same command given the first Apostles, and Saints Cyril and Methodius, and Saint Vladimir. Eventually, these would bring Orthodox Christianity to California, and across to New York, and their sent-ones even to me in South Carolina.

The faithful obedience of the first sent-ones, the first Apostles, eventually brought the faith from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth. For this we also sing the Psalm, “their proclamation has gone out into all the world and their words to the end of the universe!” No matter who is reading this short, unworthy essay, some Sent-One, in obedience to the command of Jesus, gave you this Word of Life. And as a result, you worship the One True God, in spirit and in truth.

With the Synaxis of the Twelve, we gather to celebrate their faithful and enduring memory. Without their faithfulness and witness, neither you nor I would be Christian today. So humbling and fascinating to gather to celebrate the Gathering of the Sent-Ones. But if it stops there, we are doubly unfaithful. We show our disobedience to Jesus himself by not “going home to tell all the good that God has done for us” — as He commanded the Gerasene demoniac in Mark’s Gospel. And we show our ingratitude to the Twelve, and to the Seventy, and to the many whose faithful labors brought you and me the gift of salvation and new life in Christ.



So with this feast, we do gather, to celebrate the Gathering of the Sent. But we gather not just to remember their faithfulness and to thank God and them for the gifts they've bequeathed to us. But we likewise have our Synaxis, our gathering, our congregating, in order that we, too, will be sent out — apostles to the world. Like sheep among wolves. Where the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. To reap a harvest of one, or five, or five thousand, as the Lord wills.

“Go,” commanded Jesus. “Make disciples of all Nations. Baptize them, and teach them to obey all that I have commanded you.” “Lo,” comforts Jesus, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” The first-gathered, the proto-synaxis, went, and told, and baptized. Don't be the broken link in the Golden, Apostolic Chain.