

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME NEAR

to his room for a cup of tea. He pulled down a cloth-wrapped manuscript which had been stored with some cups and dishes on a shelf above the door. Tischendorf immediately recognized the pages as the remainder of the book whose 43 pages he had rescued from the trash pile. He suggested the monastery present the manuscript to the Tsar of Russia as protector of the Greek church, which they agreed to do. The sum: The tsar paid the monks \$7,000.00.

### Part 2: The English and Joseph Stalin

When the communists took over Russia, the new atheistic government had little use for such a Christian manuscript. In 1933 the Soviet Union sold the manuscript to the British Museum for £100,000. The manuscript became known as the *Codex Sinaiticus* (*book from the Sinai*). It is one of the most important early manuscripts of the Bible. Dating from about the middle of the fourth century, Sinaiticus is among the earliest of the surviving complete manuscripts of the New Testament. Some scholars have even speculated this might be one of the fifty Bibles the Emperor Constantine commissioned the historian Eusebius to prepare after the emperor had made Christianity a legal religion in the Roman Empire. Thinking that it might be the oldest Bible in the world, the count named it *Α*, *Aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew Alphabet. It is in fact the second or third oldest Bible, but more complete than the older books. Sinaiticus also contains two books that are no longer included in our Bibles, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, and *The Epistle of Barnabas*.<sup>4</sup>

### Lenten Solemn Prayer over the People

*Deacon or Celebrant.* Bow down before the Lord.

*All kneel*

*Celebrant* Grant, Almighty God, that your people may recognize their weakness and put their whole trust in your strength, so that they may rejoice for ever in the protection of your loving providence; through Christ our Lord. **AMEN.**

<sup>4</sup> Both books can be found on the Internet.

## THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT



### The Baptism of Christ

(Icon, source unknown)

**Today's Gospel St. Mark 1:9-15** [Year B, Lent 1]

✠ IN THOSE DAYS JESUS CAME FROM NAZARETH OF GALILEE AND was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming

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up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' [© NRSV]

### The Symbol of Christ's Baptism

There are two salvation stories of the Jewish people. The first story is the tale of Moses and the 12 Tribes in Egypt. Remember how it goes? The Jews had first gone to Egypt because Isaac's son, Joseph had been sold into slavery. Joseph wound up in jail on a trumped up charge. There he interpreted the prophetic dreams of two prisoners. Eventually he was recommended to Pharaoh as a fellow who might explain the king's dreams about fat and starving cattle. Joseph interpreted that there would be seven years of bumper harvests followed by seven years of crop failures. Joseph was rewarded by being put in charge of the royal granaries. In the starving seven years his brothers came to Egypt to buy grain. They did not recognize their Egyptian-looking brother who spoke through an interpreter. After many adventures and disconcerting punishments Joseph revealed himself with many tears. His entire family went to Egypt where they flourished.

A subsequent Pharaoh gave the Jews short shrift, enslaved them at hard labor and killed their sons. One boy, Moses, escaped death and was raised by Pharaoh's daughter. He eventually stood up to Pharaoh, threatening horrors if the Jews were not released. Pharaoh refused. After 10 horrible plagues the Jews left Egypt in the midst of the final plague that killed the Egyptian first born, both of both man and beast. They reached the Red Sea <sup>1</sup> pursued by the Egyptian army. The sea opened at Moses' command, the Jews crossed, and the sea closed drowning their pursuers.

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<sup>1</sup> Actually the Hebrew says the *Sea of the Reeds*, a swampy area where the Suez Canal now runs.

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For the next 40 years Moses and the tribes wandered the desert. They fed on divinely provided food, were given God's laws on Mt. Sinai and at last came to the Promised Land.

Do you see the repeating pattern of salvation? Jesus' story is the second salvation story. He recapitulates the history of Israel. Like Moses, he too escapes death at the Slaughter of the Innocents, like Moses, he too lives in Egypt, passes through the water, enters the desert for 40 days and is fed by Divine action. He is the *New Moses* who teaches us the *summarized* law <sup>2</sup> and leads us to the Promised Land.

### Our Oldest Bibles

#### The Incredible Discovery of Codex Sinaiticus

#### Part 1: The Scholar and the Monks

In 1844, the German scholar Count Lobegott Friedrich Constantin von Tischendorf was touring the East in search of old manuscripts. In the library of the Greek Orthodox monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai he noticed a basket filled with old pages. Tischendorf was shocked! This was the oldest Greek writing this seasoned scholar had ever seen. The pages were from the Greek Old Testament and Apocrypha. Taking 43 pages out of the basket, Tischendorf asked the librarian about them. To his horror he learned the pages had been placed in the trash basket for fuel and two basket loads of such papers had already been burnt! Though the monks admitted there were more pages of the manuscript, Tischendorf's enthusiasm made them wary; they would not show him any more. He took the 43 sheets back to the University of Leipzig where they are still be found. Tischendorf urged the monks to use something else to kindle their fires!

In 1853 Tischendorf returned to the Sinai monastery but the monks would not show him the remainder of the manuscript. Six years later, Tischendorf again returned to the monastery, this time under the sponsorship of the Russian Tsar Alexander II <sup>3</sup>, patron of the Greek Orthodox Church. On this visit, a monk took Tischendorf

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<sup>2</sup> Remember it? Briefly, "Love God and your neighbor as much as you love yourself."

<sup>3</sup> The tsar Had given Tischendorf his noble title!