

Like a Thief in the Night

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



Most of us are familiar with the prayer, "The Father is my hope, the Son is my refuge, the Holy Spirit is my protection." On November 4th we remember Saint Joannicius, who created the prayer as a refrain after singing Psalm verses.

Born into extreme poverty in a Bithynian village in the year 752, Joannicius had to spend much of his youth tending and guarding the family's only valuable possession: their herd of cattle. But from the time he was very young he had a strong desire to pray in solitude, and seems to have been blessed to do so. Often he would make the sign of the cross over the herd and retreat for hours to a secluded place to pray. Never once were the cattle bothered by predators; not one animal was ever stolen or found far from the rest, having wandered off.

Like many other young men of his time, Joannicius was drafted into the Emperor's army. Husky and strong, he proved to be a valiant soldier despite his love of solitude and peace, and served for several years. But even though he was well-liked and was respected for his courage, he longed for the life of quiet prayer he had always loved. After leaving military service, he went to a monastery near Mount Olympus and became practiced in the monastic way of living. Finally he went to a more secluded place in the wilderness, and after many years spent alone and in great spiritual effort, he was tonsured a monk.

But Saint Joannicius did not ignore, or retreat from, the troubles of the Church. Living as he did during the turbulent iconoclastic controversy, he at first supported those who denied that icons should be honored. But once he saw that the Church's Tradition includes reverence toward the holy images, he humbly admitted that he had been wrong. He became a champion of icon veneration.

During his years of ascetical labors, Joannicius was granted many spiritual gifts. He was a wonderworker who healed many people, foretold events, and was able to tame wild beasts. Sources tell us that he could make himself invisible to people if by doing so he could help someone in need. Once he led a group of captives out of prison right in front of their guards.

Troparion - Tone 8

By a flood of tears you made the desert fertile,
And your longing for God brought forth fruits in abundance.
By the radiance of miracles you illumined the whole universe!
O our holy father Joannicius, pray to Christ our God to save our souls!

On this day we read I Thessalonians 5: 1-8. In this passage Saint Paul assures believers that the Lord will come again, and that they will be with Him forever. But he also tells them that they have no need to know the "times and the seasons" of the Lord's coming. It is noteworthy that Joannicius, blessed with so many insights, never speculated about the specific time when Jesus Christ would come again. For him it was enough to know that the Lord will, in Paul's words, come "like a thief in the night." There is nothing in that to fear because we "belong to the day" and are destined by God not for wrath, but for salvation.