

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor



Glory be to Jesus Christ!

Glory be Forever!

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21st Sunday after Pentecost-Christ heals the Demoniac

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We have probably all been surprised at some point by a family member, friend, or acquaintance who behaved out of character. We get to know people and have some idea of who they are, but then they say or do something that makes us wonder if we really know them. If we are honest, we will acknowledge that the same is true of each of us. We say, do, and think things that surprise even our-

selves. Sometimes we handle a problem or respond to a temptation better than we thought we would, but so often our actions reveal a brokenness that we do not like to see. That is why we can so quickly become defensive when others see our weaknesses, and especially when they point them out.

In today's gospel reading we read about a man whose situation was beyond miserable. He surely had no illusions about himself, for he was so filled with demons that he called himself "Legion." His personality had disintegrated due to the power of the forces of evil in his life. That is shown by the fact that he was naked, like Adam and Eve who stripped themselves of the divine glory and were cast out of Paradise into our world of corruption. He lived among the tombs, and death is "the wages of
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+ 21st Sunday after Pentecost +

++Martyr Anastasia the Roman++

Epistle: Galatians: 2: 16-20

Gospel: Luke 8: 26-39

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and teachings of the Church.

We worship God in Trinity - Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to Christ's commandment, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, ad with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

What does it mean to believe in God, by St Arsenia

Abbess Arsenia (1833-1905) came from a notable family of the Don region. At the age of seventeen, she entered the Ust-Medvedits Monastery of her own accord. The monastery reached its highest peak in the forty years of her abbacy, from 1864 until her repose on August 3, 1905.

What does it mean to believe in God? It's necessary to believe not only in the existence of God the Creator and in the salvation given us through Jesus Christ, but we must also believe un-

waveringly, in all circumstances of life, no matter how difficult, that God is merciful, that He desires our salvation; and seeing in this and knowing not only our temporary well-being, but also eternal, leads us to Him as a loving but wise father for His children, guiding them with equal love, tenderness, and firmness.

Therefore, we must accept everything with hope in the mercy of God, asking only for His help in every trial or temptation, whether it

comes from outside, from our infirmities, or from men—God's instruments for our salvation, and often mutual. Our humility will save even those who grieve us.

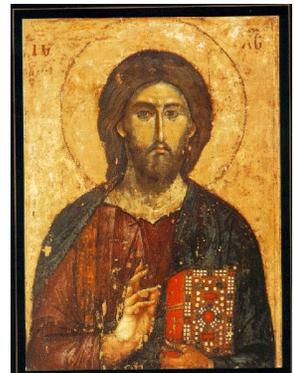
Remembrance of God

The unceasing remembrance of God is hindered by the dispersion of our thoughts, which draw our mind into vain cares. Only when our entire life is completely directed towards God do we become capable and begin to see God in everything by faith—both in
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We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

If you have any questions about the church or would like to speak with our pastor, please call Fr. Matthew at 607-280-1586

Glory be to Jesus Christ.
Glory be Forever.





As the deliverer
of captives
and defender
of the poor,
healer of the infirm
and champion of kings,
victorious great
martyr George
intercede with Christ
our God that our souls
may be saved.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are with us today and invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Larissa, Jack, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Daniel, Michael, Abraham, George, Rochelle the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

From St. John Kronstadt

There are innumerable and various ways by means of which the Devil enters into our soul and removes it from God, pressing upon it with all his being, dark, hateful, and destroying. Whatever the motion of passion may be, he finds a way, and does not neglect the least opportunity of entering the soul.

Likewise there are innumerable and various ways for the Holy Ghost to enter it: the way of sincere faith, of true humility,

of love to God and to our neighbour, and so on. But, to our misfortune, the destroyer of men from time immemorial makes every effort to obstruct, by all possible means, all these ways for the Holy Ghost to enter the soul. The most usual way to God for us sinners, who have strayed from Him into a far-away land, is the way of painful suffering and bitter tears.

Both the Holy Scriptures and actual experience testify that, in order to draw near to God, it is necessary for the sinner to suffer, weep, shed tears, and to amend his deceitful heart: "Draw nigh to God be afflicted, and mourn, and weep." Tears have power to cleanse the wickedness of our heart, and sufferings and affliction are necessary, because through suffering the sinful expansion of the heart is salutary contracted, and when the heart is thus contracted, tears more easily flow.

When the Devil is in our heart, then we feel an unusual, overwhelming load and fire in the breast and in the heart. The soul contracts extremely and darkens, everything irritates it, it feels an aversion to every good work.

What does it mean to believe in God? cont'd from p.1

the most important circumstances of life and in the smallest—and to submit to His will in all things, without which there can be no remembrance of God, no pure and unceasing prayer.

Emotions and passions are even more harmful to the remembrance of God, and therefore to prayer. Therefore, we must strictly and constantly pay heed to the heart and the things that attract it, firmly resisting them, for attraction leads the soul into impenetrable darkness. Every passion is a suffering of the soul, a sickness, and demands immediate treatment. Despondency and other forms of the heart's cooling towards spiritual activity are diseases. Just as a man who was sick with a fever remains weak, sluggish, and unable to work even after the sickness has passed, so the soul, sick with a passion, becomes indifferent, weak, infirm, insensitive, and incapable of spiritual work.

These are spiritual passions. To be armed and battle against them and defeat them is our main work. We

must labor fervently in this battle with spiritual passions. Prayer reveals to us the passions that live in our hearts. Whatever passion hinders our prayer, we must urgently battle against it; and prayer itself will help in this battle, and by prayer the passion will be uprooted.

On Prayer

The prayer of faith, prayer with the consciousness of one's own sinfulness, overall infirmity, and insufficiency—this is the sole form of non-deluded prayer of a man who has not achieved pure prayer. It is improper for me to speak of pure prayer, as one not having it. It's a gift of God; it's possible with the action of God's grace in the heart, or better yet—it is the very action of grace. The path to it is purity. It's not difficult to acquire purity of thoughts and purity of senses by means of solitude, reading, and exercise in prayer; but purity of heart is acquired by many deaths—it is the cessation of the passions.

Try to repair to seclusion for a time, try to renounce all cares and con-

cerns, give yourself over to prayer, and you'll see how the distraught thoughts will subside, how swayed feelings will calm down, and you'll begin to pray with a peaceful and attentive disposition. But there, in the chest, there is an incomprehensible heaviness that presses and presses.

Without any impulses, without any desires, it lies like a stone on the heart, causing darkness and tightness that stand like a



wall between the soul and the Lord. This wall can only be destroyed by the grace of God, with our resolute struggle against the passions according to the commandments of God. And for us, living in the darkness of the passions, we need contrite prayer with faith in the Lord Who saves.

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Homily on the Gergesene Demoniac, (cont'd from p.1)

sin” that came into the world as a consequence of our first parents’ refusal to fulfill their calling to become like God in holiness. This naked man living in the cemetery was so terrifying to others that they tried unsuccessfully to restrain him with chains. People understandably feared that he would do to them what Cain had done to Abel. But when this fellow broke free, he would run off to the desert by himself, alone with his demons. In the Gadarene demoniac we have a vivid icon of the pathetic suffering of humanity enslaved to death, naked of the divine glory, and isolated in fear from loving relationships with others.

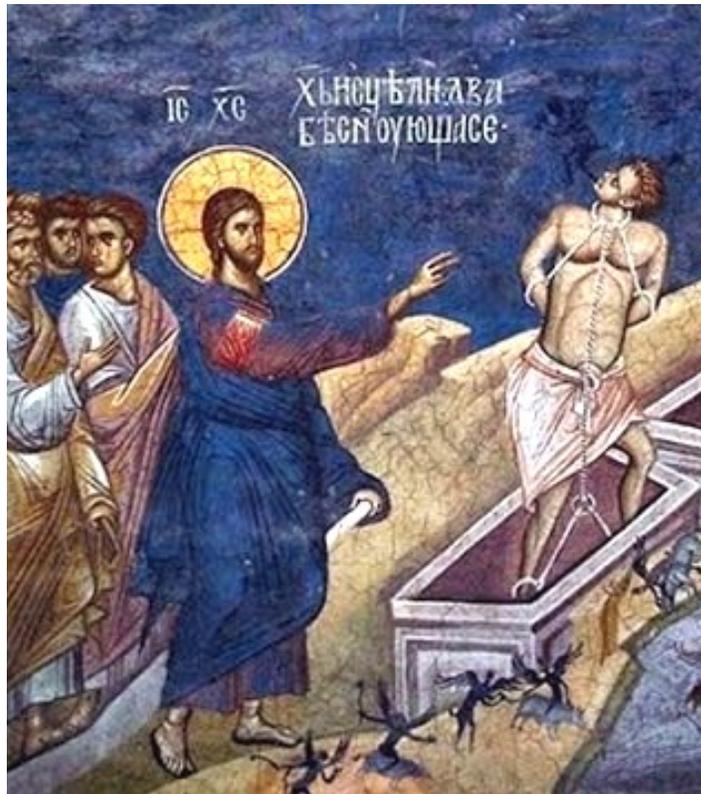
Evil was so firmly planted in this man’s soul that his reaction to the Lord’s command for the demons to leave him was “What have you to do with me?...I ask you, do not torment me.” His brokenness was such that he had no hope for healing and perceived Christ’s promise of deliverance simply as pain. By telling the Lord that his name was Legion, he was acknowledging that the line between the demons and his own identity had been blurred. He was in such bad shape that it was not clear where he ended and where the demons began. The Savior then cast the demons into the herd of pigs, who ran into the lake and drowned. In the Old Testament context, pigs were unclean, and here the forces of evil lead even them into death.

Perhaps there is no clearer image of human brokenness in need of the healing of Christ than this miserable man. He represents us all in many ways. He did not ask Christ to deliver him, even as we did not take the initiative in Christ’s coming to save sinners. The corrupting forces of evil were so powerful in his life that he had lost any sense of what it meant to be someone in God’s image and likeness. Whenever we are driven by our distorted self-centered desires, we think, speak, and act similarly. We too are often so wedded to our favorite sins that, like him, we would rather that Christ leave us alone than that He set us free. We are often so weak and confused that we fear His healing mercy will torment us, for we have lost all hope of being set free from them. We are afraid of what life would be like without them.

After the spectacular drowning of the swine, the man in question was “sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and

in his right mind.” The one who had not been recognizably human returned to being his true self, was back in society, and was learning from the One Who had set him free. That was very disturbing, however, to the people of that region. In fact, they asked Christ to leave out of fear at what had happened. We may find their reaction hard to understand. What could be so terrifying about this man returning to a normal life? Unfortunately, we all tend to get used to whatever we get used to. What we have experienced in ourselves or in others becomes normal to us. Even as the scary man in the tombs was afraid when Christ came to set Him free, his neighbors were afraid when they saw that he had changed.

It is no surprise, then, that the man formerly possessed by demons and still feared by his neighbors did not want to stay in his hometown after the Lord restored him. He



begged to go with Christ, Who responded, “Return to your home, and declare all that God has done for you.” That must have been a difficult commandment for him to obey. Who would not be embarrassed and afraid to live in a town where everyone knew about the wretched and miserable existence he had experienced? It would have been much easier to have left all that behind and start over as a traveling disciple of the One who had set him free.

But that was not what Christ wanted the man to do. Perhaps that was because the Lord knew that the best witness to His transforming power was a person who had been healed from the worst forms of depravity and corrup-

tion. Why should people believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of the world? Surely, the lives of His followers must bear witness to His power in order to convince them. When someone moves from slavery to the glorious freedom of the children of God, that person has moved from death to life. Such a radical change is a sign of the truth of Christ’s resurrection, for He makes us participants in His victory over death by breaking the destructive hold of the power of sin in our lives.

Our Lord makes it possible for us to become our true selves in Him, the Second Adam. That means being united with Him in holiness such that, by His gracious

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mercy, we become “partakers of the divine nature” who fulfill humanity’s original vocation to become like God in holiness. He has overcome our nakedness by clothing us in a robe of light in baptism, filled us with the Holy Spirit in Chrismation, and nourished us with His own Body and Blood in the Eucharist. He Himself forgives and restores us through Confession and repentance.

Our Lord is even more present to us than He was to the man in today’s gospel lesson, for He has made us members of His own Body and dwells in our hearts. Our challenge, then, is not to ask Him to go away out of fear that He will torment us. Sin only has the power in our lives that we allow it to have, and we all have a

long, challenging journey to turn away from it. Nonetheless, we must take the small steps of which we are capable to turn our hearts more fully toward God through prayer, fasting, almsgiving, forgiveness, and all the basic spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. When we fail, we must use our weakness to grow in constant dependence on the Lord’s mercy and strength. We cannot save ourselves by our own power any more than the man could cast out his own demons.

We may be as terrified to think about life without our favorite sins as the man’s neighbors were to see him in his right mind. Sharing more fully in Christ’s victory over death will always be terrifying in a sense, for we must die to sin in order to rise up with Him in holiness. His Kingdom is not of this world and we must crucify the distortions of our souls that have become so familiar to us.

When the struggle is hard and we want to give up, remember the difference between a naked and isolated person out of his mind due to the power of evil in his soul and that person “sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.” That is really what is at stake in the question of whether we will do all that we can to welcome the Lord’s healing presence in our lives or run away from Him in fear. May He grant us all the wisdom and strength to choose blessedness over despair, to choose life over death.

To God be the Glory. Amen.

The Jesus Prayer is an expression of a living sense of faith. When we have no prayer because of laziness or distraction, we must search for it with great effort; when it departs because of the rebellion of the passions, then we must wrestle against and cut off all causes of the passions; when the soul can’t find it due to despondency, due to spiritual darkness, then it’s best to remain in the confession of the One Who saves.

Prayer requires purity of soul, and it is acquired by self-sacrificial activity according to the commandments of God.

On spiritual peace and prayer

Spiritual peace is needed not only to constantly abide in prayer, but even to fulfill the rule of prayer. If spiritual peace is somehow violated, then prayer becomes either only oral, or is said with the mind with great effort; it will never be said with the heart. Spiritual peace as the property of the “pure of heart” is acquired, or more correctly, is sent down by the Lord after many labors and feats of struggle with spiritual passions and after many renunciations. But let us sinners, who feed upon crumbs from the tables of the rich, strive to acquire peace at least during prayer.

This also requires a difficult and long-lasting struggle: completely cutting off the thoughts during prayer, renouncing the senses and the whole surrounding world, surrendering everything to the will of God, the unshakeable affirmation of

the heart in faith, unquestioning faith in the power of God. With this affirmation of the heart, prayer becomes peaceful. But if this state is achieved through our labors, and isn’t a gift of God’s grace, then sometimes our inner world is suppressed and clouded by two opposing states: either the coldness of the heart, or the joy of the senses, replacing the turmoil of thoughts and agitation of emotions.

Coldness of heart is such a beast that human strength can’t defeat it. It takes many feats of love for neighbor, much mercy towards the shortcomings of others and forgiveness of them to soften the heart. And during the prayer of hope in the power of God, we must pray for our neighbors, for the whole world, for the forgiveness of sins of all sinners, *of whom I am chief.*

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