

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor

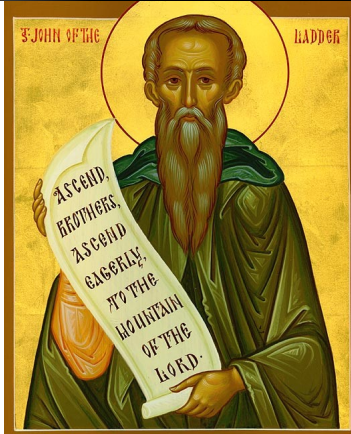
Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory be Forever!



Volume 10 Issue 455

4th Sunday of Great Lent-St. John of the Ladder

March 14, 2021



Self-reliance has its place, but also its limits. Deep problems that we cannot overcome by our own abilities show us that we are not as powerful as we had imagined. The father in today's gospel reading had learned through bitter experience that he could not relieve his son's suffering, which was why he asked Jesus Christ to cast out the demon.

The man was apparently not sure that the Savior could do so either, for he said "if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." When Christ responded, "If you can believe, all things are possible for him who believes," the father was brutally honest, saying "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" Not only did the man know that he could not relieve his own son's suffering, but also that his faith was far from perfect and mixed with doubt.

When the Savior cast out the demon, the scene was so disturbing that most people who saw it thought that the boy had died. Imagine how terrified the father must have been. The disciples' concern in that moment seems to have been only for themselves, for they wondered why they had not been able to deliver the young man. When Christ told them it was because, "This kind
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4th Sunday-St. John of the Ladder
* St. Benedict of Nursia *

Epistle: Hebrews 6: 13-20

Gospel: Mark 9: 17-31

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 living out Christ's commandment to, *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.*

St. John of the Ladder by Archmandrite Georgios

Great Lent is a period of repentance, during which our stony hearts must become, through God's grace, softened in the flesh, and move from being callous to being sensitive, from cold and hard to warm and open to others, particularly God Himself.

Lent is a time of renewal when everything, as is the case every spring, makes a new beginning and our sunless lives are again brightened by all the intensity that God can give us, making us

His confidants, through the Holy Sacraments and His costly gifts. This reconciliation is a joy; for both us and for God – a new beginning.

The fourth Sunday of Lent is dedicated to Saint John of the Ladder and I'd like to present a few of his sayings which are related to the period we're going through now: "Repentance, that is the return to God, is the renewal of our baptism, the renewal of our pact with God, our promise to reform our lives.

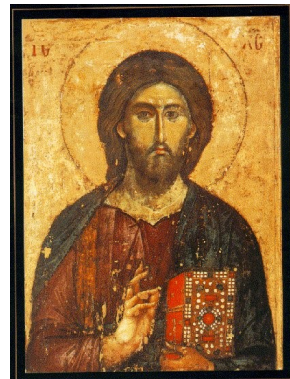
It's a time during which we can acquire humility, which is peace, peace with God, with ourselves, with the whole of the created world.

Repentance is born of hope, that is when we reject despair. And those who repent are the very people who deserve a guilty verdict- and yet leave the court without shame, since repentance is our peace with God. And this is achieved through a life which is worthy of us, far
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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.





Troparion to St. George

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
for our souls
salvation.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshipping with us today. Because of COVID-19, our social hour has been canceled until we receive further instructions from the Department of Health.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Louise, George, Evan, Ryan, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, Skip, Doug, Heidi, Laura, Elizabeth Matthew, Corella, Ron, Daniel, Frankie, Pat, Kathleen, Terena, Loretta, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

Words from St. John of the Ladder

Fire and water do not mix, neither can you mix judgment of others with the desire to repent. If a man commits a sin before you at the very moment of his death, pass no judgment, because the judgment of God is hidden from men. It has happened that men have sinned greatly in the

open but have done greater deeds in secret, so that those who would disparage them have been fooled, with smoke instead of sunlight in their eyes.

The lover of silence draws close to God. He talks to Him in secret and God enlightens him.

Forgetting offences is a sign of sincere repentance. If you keep the memory of them, you may believe you have repented but you are like someone running in his sleep. Let no one consider it a minor defect, this darkness that often clouds the eyes even of spiritual people.

Repentance lifts a man up. Mourning knocks at heaven's gate. Holy humility opens it.

Meekness is an unchanging state of mind, which both in honor and dishonor remains the same. Meekness consists in praying sincerely and undisturbedly in the face of afflictions from one's neighbor. Meekness is a cliff rising from the sea of irritability, against which all the waves that strive against it break, but which is itself never broken.

St. John of the Ladder, continued from p.1

removed from the sins which we committed in the past. Repentance is the cleansing of our conscience. It involves a complete liberation from sorrow and pain”.

It’s worth listening to these few words on prayer if we wonder how we are to achieve this, how we can respond to God, Who receives us like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, to God Who awaits us with longing and Who, though we’ve rejected Him, has never left our side: “Don’t us fancy words when you pray, because it’s often the simple and plain murmuring of children that delights our heavenly Father.

When you speak to God, don’t try to say much, because otherwise your mind will be looking for words and will get lost in them. The few words spoken by the Publican brought him the mercy of God; a few words, full of faith, saved the robber on the cross. Varying the words when we pray scatters the mind and inflames the imagination.

One word addressed directly to God

harnesses the mind to His presence. And if, while you’re praying, this one word touches you on the inside, if you feel it deeply, stay within it. Stay, because at moments such as that, our guardian angel’s praying with us, because we’re truly ourselves and are



with God”.

Let’s not forget those words by Saint John of the Ladder. Let’s remember his words because he was a person who knew what it means to

turn to God, to be God’s joy and to exult in Him. This period is offered to us, as we proceed towards the days of the Passion, as an example of what the grace of God can achieve in transforming an ordinary and normal person into a light for the world.

Let’s learn that, let’s follow his example, let’s rejoice at seeing how the power of God can work within people and, with faith, with confidence, with triumphant and also peaceful joy, let’s follow his example, let’s listen to God imploring us to find the path of life and telling us that with Him and in Him we shall truly live, since He is the way, the Truth and Eternal Life.

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From the Vespers...

O holy Father, John, hearing the Lord’s voice in the Gospel, you spurned the riches and glory of the world. You cry out to all: “Love God and find eternal grace! Set nothing higher than His love; thus, you will find rest with all the saints, when He comes in glory!”

(Homily on St. John of the Ladder, cont'd from p.1)

cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting,” He made clear that they lacked the spiritual health to do so. They had neglected the most basic practices for the healing of their souls and consequently were powerless in the face of such great evil. As the Lord said, they were part of a “faithless generation.”

The disciples, who had the benefit of literally following Christ in His ministry and hearing His teaching daily, had not yet embraced genuine faith in Him. However, the Lord delivered a child from the deadly clutches of evil through the honest, imperfect faith of his father.

The deep pain and challenge presented by his son’s suffering over the years had humbled the man. He knew that no version of self-reliance could help in this situation. He had faith, but was not ashamed to admit that it left much to be desired.

If we are making use of the disciplines of Great Lent with integrity, we will develop at least a bit of the spiritual clarity shown by the father in our gospel lesson. The constant struggle to pray, whether at home, church, or elsewhere, reveals our weakness in controlling our own thoughts and turning away from distractions as we open our hearts to God. The more that we open our hearts and see our true spiritual state, the more we know our own need for healing beyond what we can accomplish by our own power.

Our difficulty in fasting shows how little control we have over our desires for pleasure and getting our own way. The more that we seek to orient our lives to God, the more aware we will become of the weakness of our faith and of how devoted we remain to the false gods of this world, including especially our own will.

The irony is that the only way to find strength is by acknowledging our weakness. The greater our spiritual clarity, the more we will know the infinite distance between the present health of our souls and the fullness of our calling to become like God in holiness. The only way to climb The Ladder of Divine Ascent, as described by St. John Climacus in his advice to monks, is to embrace the brutally honest humility of the father who was not ashamed to acknowledge the brokenness of his faith even as he cried out with tears on behalf of his demon-possessed son.

As we continue the Lenten journey, we must remember that this season is not about us and what we think we can achieve spiritually by relying on our own willpower or virtue to perform acts of religious devotion. Spiritual disciplines are not exercises in self-reliance, as though we earn something from God by being diligent in performing them. Instead, they are simply ways of helping us share more fully in the life of Christ as we grow in recognizing our sinfulness and opening ourselves to receive His healing mercy.

No amount of piety could conquer the power of death

and make a path for us to participate personally in the eternal life of God by grace. Only the God-Man, in His full Self-offering on the Cross, could do that. Lent is preparation to unite ourselves to Christ in His Passion, for “The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and after He is killed, He will rise on the third day.” He is the eternal High Priest Who “has gone as a forerunner on our behalf” into the Heavenly Tabernacle where He intercedes for us eternally (Rom. 8:34).

The healing of our souls is found by sharing in the life of Christ. We will be able to unite ourselves to Him in holiness only when we know the weakness of our faith as we turn away from self-reliance and receive His mercy from the depths of our

souls. The disciplines of Lent are teachers of humility that should help us “commend ourselves and one another, and all our life, unto Christ our God.” He accepted the imperfect faith of the father of the demon-possessed boy, and He will do the same with us if we come to Him in the same humble spirit. Doing so is really the only way to prepare to follow the Savior to His Cross and empty tomb.

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Troparion to St. John.

O dweller of the wilderness and angel in the body, you were a wonderworker, O our God-bearing Father John. You received heavenly gifts through fasting, vigil and prayer, healing the sick and the souls of those drawn to you by faith. Glory to Him Who gave you strength Glory to Him Who granted you a crown!/Glory to Him Who grants healing to all!



The Meaning of Great Lent in Our Lives

The Resurrection of Christ is for many of us something of the past, something that was done for us and we enjoy its fruits today. We don't know anymore what is like to wait for the moment when the time "is ripe", to long for the coming of the Messiah. For us the Anointed One is here already. But He should never be perceived as One from the past, but a very actual presence. The cycle of Feasts and Fasting helps us in this respect reminding us every year of the immediacy of all the events that happened for our salvation. The great self-chosen discipline of the Lent is forcing us, spoiled children as we are, to realize what great things have already been done for us and how many things we are taking for granted.

The expectation set forth by the Great Lent has enormous transforming power. If we could just let ourselves be embarked in this journey we could be molded into God's shape, we could be ascending towards His likeness through the means the Church is offering us: repentance, prayer, fasting and charity. But you might very well say I don't need transformation, I'm as good as I can get. A losing proposition. That is exactly what the self-righteous Pharisee said, and yet, God loved more the sinful but repentant Publican.

The comfort of our lives is a great brake in our development as Christians. It gives us a false impression of achievement. The American dream is liberty and the pursuit of happiness, right? We are free today, to a certain extent, we are happy, most of us, so many times we don't see any need for more and we stop our engines midway.

Oppression and hunger, material or spiritual, on the other hand, is a stimulant. Think of the Greek Church during the Turks, how it has survived miraculously and did not cease to give Saints to God. Think about the Church under the Communist regime and the martyrs that never gave up hope. Also look today how many people from the Orthodox majority in those countries attend Divine Liturgy on Sundays. The statistics are downright depressing. All this happens because freedom is misunderstood and abundance becomes the expression of happiness and the very goal of life.

But St. Seraphim of Sarov says that the goal of life is acquiring the Holy Spirit. Live a life full of the true Spirit and your dreams of liberty and happiness will be attained for eternity. If we want this to become reality we have to break from the false sense of achievement that our prosperity is inducing on us, and realize that we are far from our target in a true spiritual sense.

We have to acknowledge our shortcomings, get rid of the mask of pride and unveil the humility residing in the image of Christ within us. God emptied Himself of His glory and has shown us that under His ineffable glory, that can be very intimidating, lays great love for mankind; love that allowed Him to go as far as to sacrifice Himself so we can have life.



Our goal should be the same, to empty ourselves of the vain glory of spurious achievement whispering in our years: you're good, you're smart, you're spiritual, and realize that the poor man underneath our mask needs help to grow in Christ.

This is the gift of Lent, a true image of ourselves that we receive through contrition, a truthful reflection showing clearly how poor in Spirit we are and how hungry our soul is for God. With a clear understanding of our shortcomings the prayers will feel more natural, not long anymore, not boring, not someone else's words, but real life giving water for a thirsty soul. Loving the others will also come natural when we take down our armor of arrogance, because in humility we'll recognize

that we are not superior to our brothers and sisters, but we are all equal under God, equal in weaknesses, equal in sin, equal in needing the mercy of God.

Fasting can change us, can make us blossom like cherry trees in the spring, growing in appreciation of what is in front of us, but we are too busy otherwise to notice. *"The springtime of the Fast has dawned, the flower of repentance has begun to open..."* (Vespers on Wednesday of Cheesefare Week). Embrace the gift of Lent with its spiritual discipline, confess your sins, pray more, love more, forgive more and a new world of meaning will open calling you higher and higher, closer to God. To God be the Glory. Amen