

# A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church

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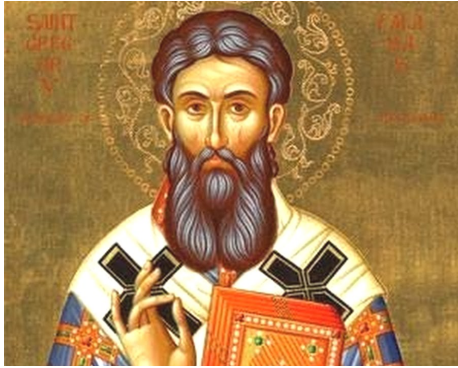
*Glory be to Jesus Christ!      Glory be Forever!*



Volume 12 Issue 557

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Great Lent—St. Gregory Palamas

March 12, 2023



Today is the Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas, where we commemorate St. Gregory as the defender of the Christian's experience of God. St. Gregory became involved in a confrontation where his opponent claimed that Christians (specifically those who practiced interior prayer) did not experience God directly.

St. Gregory defended the opposite position and affirmed that this is how the Orthodox Church's theology came

to be - by direct revelation from God to holy men and women in the Church whom the grace of God had transformed.

It is no coincidence that the Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas follows the Sunday of Orthodoxy on which the *Synodicon of Orthodoxy* is proclaimed. This document celebrates the Faith (doctrines), and proclaims "Memory eternal" to all those who have stood for the truth. The Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas affirms how these truths are known.

St. Gregory explains: There is a starting point and perfection, and an intermediate stage in between. The grace of baptism inaugurates this action in us, providing remission of all our sins and of the guilt of Adam and Eve's fall. Perfection will come with the Resurrection which believers hope, *(continued p.3)*

++ 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Great Lent ++  
+Holy Fathers of the Kiev Caves+

Epistle: Hebrews 1:10-2:3

Gospel: Mark 2: 1-12

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.*

## ***Understanding the Faith by Archimandrite Barnabas***

Do you want to be saved? The Apostle Philip not only wanted to be saved, but, having studied the Law and Prophets, was awaiting the Savior of the world. He was able to meet and get to know this God and Messiah through Peter and Andrew.

Seeing his genuine desire for salvation, Christ called on him to follow Him. As Saint Teofylakt of Bulgaria remarks, Christ's voice sparked such a flame of love towards Him in Philip's heart that he ran off to

pass on the message to his friend Nathaniel.

In bowing to the pressing request of his friend 'Come and see'- Nathaniel overcame his reservations concerning the ill repute of Christ's home town and was startled to hear Christ receive him with the words: 'Here's a true Israelite in whose heart there is no guile'. 'How do you know me?' he blurted. Christ revealed that, before Philip had called to him, He'd seen him sitting under a fig tree.

Nathaniel was aston-

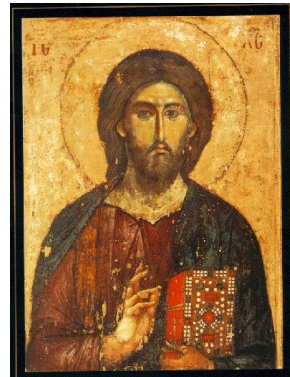
ished that Christ had seen him in a place where the human eye couldn't have travelled. He confessed Him to be the Son of God and King of Israel. Christ replied: 'If you believe in me just because of what I've told you, you should know that you'll see much greater signs than that'. He reminded him of the vision seen by another Israelite without guile, Jacob: the heavens opened and a ladder appeared upon which angels ascended and descended, praising God.

*(continued p.2)*

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, Fr. Michael, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Jessica, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, Joann, Skip, Georgia, Colleen, Stan, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Grace the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

### Insight into Lent-Fasting

Over the course of the centuries, the Church has shown itself to be a real treasury of God's wisdom and the experience of generation after generation of the God-bearing Fathers. When it accentuates the fast, it doesn't do so out of contempt for the body, as is sometimes glibly claimed, but because it regards the body as a gift and possession of God; a 'member of Christ', and 'temple of the Holy Spirit',

as Saint Paul puts it. Christians don't hate their flesh, they don't abstain from food out of disdain, but they don't allow anything to have power over them. The balanced use of food or the abstinence from it for a time keeps the psychosomatic equilibrium of the body and is a way of glorifying God in our 'body and spirit', as Saint Paul says.

From this perspective, Lent is an empirical journey into the depths of our being. It's a journey in search of meaning, of our discovery of God's meaning in our life, of its hidden depths. And, to use an example, by abstaining from food, that is by fasting, we rediscover the sweetness of life and relearn the lesson that we should receive it from God with joy and gratitude. By restricting relaxations, entertainments, music, endless conversations and trivial social interactions, we finally discover the value of genuine inter-personal relationships. And we rediscover all this precisely because we rediscover God himself, because we return to him and, through him, to everything he's given us out of his perfect love and mercy.

### Thoughts on Lent, cont'd from p.1

It's no coincidence that it's today, the Sunday of Orthodoxy, when the Church reminds us of this event, the meeting and acquaintance of Philip and Nathaniel with Christ. The extract reveals the fundamental requirements for our entry into the Orthodox Church. People aren't Orthodox because they know the Creed by heart or they observe certain external formalities of piety which they've simply inherited from their grandmother.

You're Orthodox if you strive steadfastly, with a guileless and sincere heart, to build a conscious relationship with Christ, through His One Holy Church, constantly examining your life and words and humbly implementing His will. Once God had assumed human flesh and became describable and tangible, this relationship was not restricted merely to visual contact through His holy image, but culminated in the partaking of His most pure Body and precious Blood at the Holy Eucharist.

The heavens open for us, too, at

least at every Divine Liturgy. At the time of the Small Entrance, when the priest enters the sanctuary with the Gospel, he prays to the Lord of Glory that the angels may come to the altar and celebrate with him. There are



more than a few occasions when God manifests the 'open' heavens, even to those of other religions, not, of course, to justify their delusion, but to reward their genuine search and to call them to recognition of the One Truth.

At the beginning of the 16th centu-

ry, there was a Turk in Constantinople who took his possessed wife to the holy Patriarch Niphon. When Niphon began reading the prayers, the Turk saw the roof of the church open and light descending from on high. His wife was cured. He revealed what had happened to a friend of his, a Greek merchant, a certain Iakovos, from Kastoria: 'You Christians really do have great faith'.

We don't know whether the Turk became Christian or not. What we do know, however, is that, because of this theophany experienced by a non-Christian, Iakovos, who had until then been lukewarm in his faith, became a monk and was later martyred for the sake of Christ. We honor his memory on 1 November.

For us, it's enough to envy Nathaniel's guileless faith and true thirst for salvation in Christ and imitate it. Before he saw the heavens opened, he confessed Christ as God and followed Him with all his heart. To God be the Glory. Amen.

and the promise of the age to come.

The intermediate stage is life according to Christ's gospel, by which the godly person is nourished, grows, and is renewed, making progress day by day in the knowledge of God, righteousness, and sanctification. Gradually he reduces and cuts away his eagerness for things below, and transfers his longing from what is visible, physical and temporary to what is invisible, spiritual, and eternal.

Although the type of knowledge St. Gregory highlights is loftier and more exalted than most of us will ever experience, the principle, which he also emphasizes, is also the same: by using the tools God has given us to live the ascetic life, Orthodox Christians come to know God by their experience of Him.

St. John Cassian describes these more common experiences which are had and notes that God *is* clearly perceived not only through nature and the grandeur of His creation or our marvel at His awareness of the number of grains of sand in the sea, but He is also recognized intimately and personally through His daily assistance and providence as is evident through the lives of the Saints, His rule over the nations, or when we contemplate with wonder His ineffable gentleness, His unwearying patience, and in the many ways he brings salvation to His children.

Moreover, why would we not come to know and experience God, even in some small way. Christ teaches us, His children, that we live in a reality in which He also lives. That is why, when we pray, He urges that we should not be discouraged and fainthearted but should pray always and not tire because our Father in Heaven hears our prayers (Luke 18.1-8).

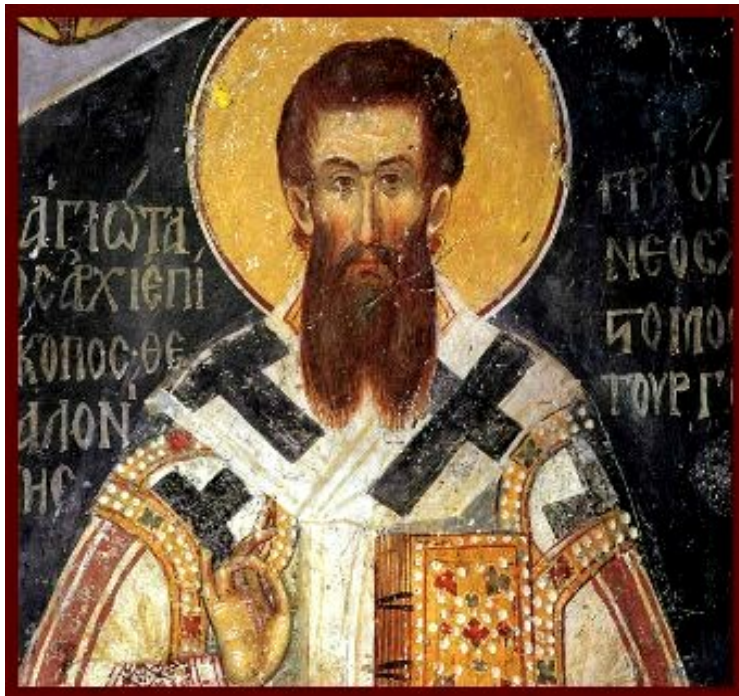
However, so that we do not think that the distance to Heaven is too far for us to traverse, Christ Himself says that to those who love Him, those who keep His commandments, will be loved by the Father, and the Father and the Son will come and make their abode with him (John 14.23). The Apostle Paul repeats the same saying that those who are spiritually minded are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and Christ (Rom. 8.1-9). Christ will be with us, even until the end of the age (Matt. 28.20).

Therefore, we should expect times of solace and times of being aware of God's presence and help even despite

long periods of dryness and silence. Continuing on the topic of the Christian's experience of God. We cannot add to the importance and warning that we stay far away from "knowing better" than our Fathers in the Faith and our spiritual fathers; they have trod further and longer on the path than we have, and sometimes in a shorter period of time, and have been placed in their position by God to guide us and not to be abused by us. It is they who help us to determine the value, the weight, and the importance, or lack thereof, of our experiences, of what is from God and what is from the Devil.

Who among us being deceived, or in delusion, knows that they are? Their first error, as our homilist noted, was to trust their own opinion. To not trust ourselves is an ascetic feat and is part and parcel of the Christian life. St. Isaac the Syrian writes, Many have accomplished mighty acts, raised the dead, toiled for the conversion of

the erring, and have wrought great wonders; and by their hands have led many to the knowledge of God. Yet after these things, these same men who quickened others, fell into vile and abominable passions and slew themselves, becoming a stumbling block for many when their acts were made manifest. For they were still sickly in soul, and instead of caring for their soul's health, they committed themselves to the sea of the world in order to heal the souls of others, being yet ill in health; and they lost their souls and fell away from their hope in God.



St. Gregory Palamas addresses the same concern saying: "Trust those who have experience in the spiritual life because you will obtain a certain 'image' of the truth." May we place our trust in the Lord and focus our prayer on the Divine Energies that God makes available to all. May we have the same care for our own souls and that of our neighbor; and may we know what is that one thing needful in our lives, direct all of our energies on attaining that, and taste the fruit of our labors.

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From the Feast of Vespers:

What hymns of praise shall we sing to honor the holy bishop? He is the trumpet of theology, the flaming mouthpiece of grace, the chosen vessel of the Spirit, the unshakeable pillar of the Church, the great joy of the inhabited earth, the river of wisdom, the candlestick of the Light, the shining star that has made all creation bright.

Saint Gregory Palamas was an Athonite monk who later became the Archbishop of Thessalonica. Born in Constantinople to a noble family, he had always been interested in the monastic life. Around 1318, he and his two brothers went to Mount Athos and became monks. However, with the Turks encroaching upon Greece, he fled to Thessalonica, where he entered the priesthood in 1326 A.D. Shortly afterward, he took up the ascetical life at a mountain near Beroea, and eventually returned to Athos in 1331. Six years later, he became involved in a controversy with Barlaam, a Greek monk from Calabria, Italy.

In the early 14th century, a man named Barlaam of Calabria encountered the monks of Mount Athos. These monks practiced the spiritual art of hesychasm, or unceasing prayer, and testified that through this type of prayer they could see the uncreated light of God. Barlaam claimed that the monks wasted their time in fruitless prayer when they could instead come to truly know God through their intellect. In other words, he believed the highest knowledge of God came only from rational means or through the created world. We could not, according to Barlaam, have a direct and unmediated communion with God. Naturally, Saint Gregory Palamas sensed the danger in Barlaam's teaching here, and he stepped up to defend hesychasm.

After Palamas' initial criticism of Barlaam, Barlaam replied with a vicious attack on the hesychastic life of the Athonite monks. In rebuttal, Saint Gregory wrote the *Triads* in defense of the Holy Hesychasts (c. 1338), a brilliant work affirmed by his fellow Hagiorites. A synod held in Constantinople in A.D. 1341 supported Palamas' views, condemning Barlaam. Three years later, the opponents of hesychasm in the West secured a condemnation for heresy and excommunication for Saint Gregory. Despite this, two additional synods in Constantinople (A.D. 1347 and A.D. 1351) reaffirmed his theology. Many Orthodox Christians and several prominent theologians consider these three synods to constitute the Ninth Ecumenical Council.

Perhaps the most important contribution Palamas made to Orthodox Christian theology was his distinction between the essence and energies of God. While we cannot know God in His essence (God in Himself), we can know Him in his energies (the work of God's

grace in our lives, and who God is in relation to the creation and mankind). Both essence and energies are fully God. Therefore, when interacting with God's energies, we interact with the uncreated God Himself, while His essence still remains unknowable and unreachable. Imagine that God is the sun.

We all experience the power and energy of the sun every day. We experience its warmth and light (both of which are energies) through the rays that shine down on us. These rays don't give us a mere impression of what the sun is; they are not a substitute for the sun, nor do they merely illustrate what the sun is like. They are a real participation in the very energies of the sun itself. In other words, by our contact with the sun's rays, real changes occur in our human chemistry. At the same time, however, we cannot participate in or experience the essence of the sun. If we tried to approach the essence of the sun, it would overwhelm and annihilate us.

Like the sun, we can experience God in His energies, while His divine essence remains unknowable and unreachable. So it is with God and His grace. God's grace is not a participation in the transcendent and unknowable essence of God. However, it is a real experience of God through His divine energies. And it is these energies that were experienced: in the burning bush (Ex. 3:2) and on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:16); by the priests in the ark of testimony (1 Kings 8:10); as a cloud and pillar of fire in the



wilderness (Ex. 13:21); upon the dedication of the Jerusalem temple (2 Chronicles 7:1); by Saul when a blinding light knocked him from his horse (Acts 9:3-4); by Peter, James, and John on Mount Tabor during the Lord's Transfiguration (Matt. 17); and on many other occasions. In fact, according to Saint Gregory Palamas and many other theologians, the Apostles actually witnessed the uncreated light of God; and it is possible for others to see that same uncreated light of God with the help of repentance, spiritual discipline and contemplative prayer.

Saint Gregory Palamas holds a special place in the heart of the Eastern Orthodox Church. His defense of hesychasm and his clear teachings on how to truly commune with God greatly shaped Orthodoxy as it developed. This is why we remember him during Great Lent, a time when returning to God is the entire purpose of spiritual struggle.