

# 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.*



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In religion or anything else, we get used to whatever we get used to. We tend to take for granted whatever becomes normal, expected, and routine in our lives. Once we learn to see ourselves and the world in a certain way, it is easy to become blind to even the most obvious truths that challenge our perspective.

The chief priests and Pharisees cer-

tainly missed the point of our Lord's raising of Lazarus from the dead after four days in the tomb. They were so afraid of losing their own position and power that they were unable to recognize Him, as Lazarus' sister Martha did, as "the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

The Savior showed that He is "the resurrection and the life" by resurrecting Lazarus, but all that the religious leaders could see was a threat to themselves. Though they had the great blessings of the Old Testament law and the worship of the Temple in Jerusalem, they made themselves blind to a Messiah Who was different from what they had expected.

We see something similar in the crowd's reaction to the Savior's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. They received Him as the Messiah everyone  
*(continued p. 3)*

\*\*\* Palm Sunday \*\*\*

\* Christ's Entry into Jerusalem \*

Epistle: Philippians 4:4-9

Gospel: John 12: 1-18

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.

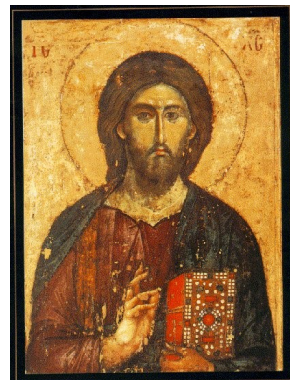
We worship God in Trinity - Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

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.*

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.



## *Our Private Pascha by Elissa Bjeletich*

I have been working on Virtual Sunday School lessons and lists of ideas for Holy Week and Pascha, and on materials for my own parish as we gear up for what promises to be a very different celebration. Today, as I'm working, every time I get to Pascha, I start tearing up.

For weeks I have quietly grieved the idea that my own family's Pascha experience will be different, but today I am looking at all of the parish celebrations that we put

together every year. Not just the services, but the community experiences, from folding the crosses to decorating the tomb to corralling little girls in white for a Holy Friday procession... the cooking and the feasting and the talking... The parish part. We just won't have that this year. I already miss all those kids and the hustle and bustle and the pure joy of it all.

But as we all gear up for this new kind of Pascha, I think we're missing something really

important: there's a good chance that this will be one of the most beautiful Paschas we ever experience.

If we can stop picturing the Holy Weeks that have come before, we might begin to start seeing in our minds' eyes an image of ourselves, in the dusk of evening, lit only by candlelight, praying the services of Holy Week, whether in our service books or with a livestreamed image of an iconostasis and a lone  
*(continued p.2)*



*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 and invite you down to the church hall for our social hour.

**Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)**

We ask that you keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Olga, Lillian, Meg, Larissa, Stephen, Louise, Marcia, George, Lorraine, Evan, Ryan, Kathleen, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, Skip, Doug, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & the persecuted for their faith in Christ.

**Words of Wisdom**

Metropolitan Antony (Bloom) once wrote, “It seems to me, and I am personally convinced, that the Church must never speak from a position of strength. It ought not to be one of the forces influencing this or that state. The Church ought to be, if you will, just as powerless as God himself, which does not coerce but which calls and unveils the beauty and the truth of things without imposing them. As soon as the

Church begins to exercise power, it loses its most profound characteristic which is divine love [i.e.] the understanding of those it is called to save and not to smash...”

St. Mary of Egypt’s pilgrimage in the desert was the opposite of the call to worldly power and happiness. She left everything behind to reconstruct her life through absolute abstinence and self-denial. She sought not to master others, but to master herself. In fact, that is the rule we must follow: master yourself; love and serve your neighbor.

So, Christ tells us “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” Don’t attach to things that are dying, but to things that are undying. Since the kingdom of heaven is within, that is where we must search. Matthew the Poor, the great Egyptian monk and ascetic, wrote that the only place we can meet God is within. When we turn within to discover what is there, after a while we discover a great secret: we discover that there is something within us that is also undying: the image of God and the Kingdom of heaven.

**Our Private Pascha, (cont’d from p. 1)**

priest before us. It looks peaceful and prayerful. We might begin to imagine a Pascha that brings our little household together in real celebration. We might imagine ourselves shedding a few tears of joy that Christ is risen — truly He is risen — even this year, as we shelter in place.

It has been said that only the present moment is real. We see the past through rose-colored glasses, and the future is simply what we imagine to be. Perhaps it is time to stop looking back to the Holy Weeks and Paschas we have seen before, and to look up at this moment in which we find ourselves today. In this present moment, time touches eternity; this moment is where we will encounter God. Love looks to the present. It is in the present moment that we take care of one another, that we love God and neighbor with all of our hearts.

If we can look squarely at this moment and not at the moments gone past, we can immerse ourselves in Holy Week and in Pascha, and God will reward the effort we make. This

year, you will not be distracted by the hustle and bustle of the parish. You will be free to let Holy Week and Pascha unfold just between God and you. Instead of a public Holy Week, we will celebrate a private, intimate Holy Week. This is a gift. This mo-



ment is a tremendous gift, and we must not miss it by watching some other moment (whether past or future).

Another gift: we have all heard stories from older generations who endured Ottoman rule or communism,

or stories from faraway places where it is not safe to gather for worship. We know that these things happen, and we see the amazing fruit of the people who cling to Christ through adversity. Perhaps the most profound Paschas have not always happened in church, but in homes and in concentration camps and gulags, when old bedsheets were transformed into vestments and tin cups became chalices. More difficult Paschas have been endured, and indeed, they have been beautiful beyond words. Other Christians have had it harder. Perhaps we should thank God that He is granting us a small window into their experience.

We must trust God. We must know that if we offer ourselves up to Him, He will receive us. Christ will rise on Pascha whether we sing His praises at home or in our church buildings. But we will have to attend to the present moment, or we’ll miss Him.

God knows your effort, He sees your heart, and He will grant you the Pascha you need.

anticipated, a conquering military hero ready to liberate Israel from the defilement of Roman occupation.

“Hosanna! Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord, the King of Israel!” The irony is that Christ arrived not as a fierce warrior, but peaceably on a humble donkey. When in the following days it became clear that He is the Prince of Peace Whose Kingdom is not of this world, the same crowds yelled “Crucify Him.” The Roman governor Pontius Pilate quickly saw that there was no reason to do so, but as a practical administrator, he could tolerate the death of an innocent man more easily than civil unrest.

Irony abounds in the events leading to the Savior’s Passion. Raising a dead man somehow made people want to kill Him. Those who praised Him enthusiastically on Sunday called for His death on Friday. He died as a failed Messiah, rejected by Jewish religious leaders and abandoned by His disciples. When the women went to His tomb, they did so in order to complete the proper burial rituals for the deceased. They did not expect to find the stone rolled away and the grave empty; neither did they anticipate the astonishing message of the angel. The tension between what anyone thought of Jesus Christ and Who He revealed Himself to be in the final days of His earthly ministry are truly shocking and beyond normal human comprehension.

Our challenge in the coming week is to enter into the tension between our conventional expectations and the Lord’s strange victory over death through His Cross and empty tomb, for it is through that tension that He has brought salvation to the world. If we approach His Passion as simply part of a story that we take for granted because it is so familiar and we have watered it down to fit our sensibilities, we will miss the point of this week entirely.

Those who sought Christ’s death were highly religious, upstanding members of their society, but they were ultimately idolaters of their own will. We must not shy away from facing the truth that we are often very much like them. As well, we are not much different from those who denied and abandoned the Savior when things did not go as they had hoped. There is much within us that wants to run away from the dark night of the Cross and the grave.

Even though it goes very much against our inclinations, we must struggle to abide with Christ as He offers up Himself for our salvation to the point of death. We must resist the temptation simply to disregard Him because we do not like what His Passion reveals about our need for healing that we cannot give ourselves. We must behold Him in the tomb, facing the astonishing mystery of the death of the God-Man, of the Eternal Word of God Who spoke the universe into existence, if we are to share in His great victory over Hades and death itself. We must dare to disorient ourselves from our usual schedules and preoccupations, turning away from the temptation to make the world our god and to use religion for our own self-centered purposes.

As we follow our Lord to His Passion this week, we will come face to face with the profound tension between our ways and God’s ways. We will not merely have thoughts and feelings about what happened long ago, but will instead enter mystically into Jesus Christ’s great Self-Offering for our salvation. We will encounter personally the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world in a way that calls us into question from the depths of our souls. The more fully we open ourselves to the unfathomable mystery of the God-Man Who enters into death, the more we will die to the prideful illusions that so easily blind us to the truth about who we are and Who He is.

We will see that conventional religion that helps us get what we want on our own terms in this world is powerless to deliver us from the clutches of death. Such

distorted religion is precisely why the chief priests and Pharisees rejected their Messiah and insisted on His crucifixion. It is precisely why they chose death over life. That is a tragic irony that we must avoid, if we are to share in the eternal life of our Savior, Who triumphs over the worst that corrupt human powers and death itself can do.

Let us do so in obedience to the instructions of St. Paul in today’s epistle reading: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Regardless of what else is going on in our lives in the coming week, there could be nothing more important than opening our hearts to the Savior Who offered up Himself for our salvation.



## *Establishing the Church in our Homes during the Covid-19 Pandemic, by Fr. Bassam Nassif*

The Church is not limited to the stone building, but rather the Church is the Body of Christ, and we are members of this Body. This is why the Christian family members form at home a “little church.” Now, where do we begin in our endeavor to establish the church in the home?

First, since Christian life revolves around prayer, the home is a place where we learn prayer. I still have impressed in my childhood memories the scene of my grandmother praying the morning and evening prayers and the psalms by heart, while standing in front of the icon that my grandfather brought from his pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulcher as a blessing for his family. Therefore, we begin our endeavor by allocating a place or a table for prayer in the house, on which we display the icons of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Theotokos, the patron saints of the family members, our parish patron saint, and other icons. This table or icon corner becomes the home altar in front of which we, together as a family, stand and pray to God. When we pray together, the Lord Himself is actually present! How is that? The Lord Himself affirms: “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Mat. 18:20). When we stand to pray, and together call on the Holy Spirit to “come and abide in us,” the Lord Jesus comes and blesses us, and the power of the Divine grace overwhelms us and blesses not just our home and family, but also our neighborhood, town, and even our country and the whole world. Nowadays, we need to pray more for all those victims of the pandemic and all the paramedic teams and officials.

Second, what prayers do we need to say when we stand together? If we consider for example the Holy Week services, we know that they are available not just in printed books, but also digitally, which makes it very easy for us to use. Anyway, there isn’t a single recipe of prayer rule for all families. We light a candle before the icons, and burn fragrant incense as a sign of our love for, and devotion to, the Lord and His saints. The most important thing to remember as parents is not to impose on our children to participate and force them to pray, but rather set ourselves as examples for them to imitate. Slowly, children will begin to imitate their parents. Also, the parents can discuss the subject of prayer during their daily exchange, offering persuasive arguments. This requires patience, much

like any other subject in education.

Third, when do we pray? It is necessary to consecrate a specific time during the day devoted to prayer, a time chosen by the family and suitable for all its members. There is no doubt that choosing a time to pray suitable for everyone is not easy. However, the Church’s experience reveals an important fact about how a Christian ought to spend his or her day. Our prayer time help us discover that we need to “structure” the works of the day, and have a “healthy rhythm” in our daily life. Also, when the time for prayer is set, we need to abandon temporarily all

worldly cares, stop watching TV, or handling our mobile messages, in order to concentrate fully on prayer, since the majestic King of all is present.

Fourth, we learn at home to pray without ceasing. How? When the father faces an unresolved issue at work, he turns to the Lord’s icon, thanking Him, and begging for help: “Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” And when the mother is tired of the household chores, and from homeschooling her children, she turns to the Sweet Virgin’s icon, asking for inspiration and grace, and sighing: “O Tender Mother of the Most-High God, help me!”

Fifth, prayer goes hand in hand with action. One needs to practice the faith, turning from selfishness to self-giving, and daily repent. Each family member is called to have some moments of stillness during the day, in which one “comes to oneself” (Luke 11:17). In doing so, one puts away all anger or hidden grudges, especially when one falls into a disagreement with his or her spouse, children, or siblings. By examining our thoughts, we make peace with ourselves, and propagate a peaceful atmosphere in the home. While resolving daily differences and being keen on not making these differences become conflicts, parents need to refer to their spiritual father or parish priest, in addition to having personal prayer and self-examination. This labor is one of the most important spiritual lessons for children. It is living the Gospel, which the children see and hear live! The children absorb the Christian Gospel through seeing how their parents are dealing with each other in a Christian way, possessing the spirit of humility and the attitude of forgiveness. In this manner, the scent of joy spreads in every corner of the house. All this is a preparation for our unity in Christ, which occurs through the Holy Eucharist that we partake in the Divine Liturgy.

