

Saturday – January 1 – Genesis 17:1-2, 4-7, 9-14
First Reading at Vespers for the Circumcision of Christ

Fulfillment: Genesis 17:1-2, 4-7, 9-14, especially vs. 7: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be your God and the God of your seed after you.” A hymn of the Feast of the Circumcision says: “Verily, the Creator of the ages who fulfilled the law is circumcised in the flesh as an eight-day old child, is wrapped in swaddling clothes like a man and is fed with milk, He who is the All-Controller through His boundless might, since He is God, and the Maker of the law in flesh.”

After the words “the Creator of the ages . . . fulfilled the law,” the hymn further describes how the Lord Jesus fulfilled the law of the created order by being clothed as a child and fed with milk. These actions are modest human components of a great, divine fulfillment. Overturning the course of nature, God the Word was born as a tiny, dependent Jewish infant and, after the eight days required by Law of the Covenant with Abraham, He was circumcised.

The *laws* of the created world require infants to be fed and clothed for survival, yet the Lord, in taking our flesh upon Himself for our salvation, set aside His limitless and eternal freedom for our salvation. Yes, we see God the Word assuming our natural restraints and the demands of creation when he is diapered and nursed. We observe His humbling, a truth expressed in icons of the Nativity that show Him being washed and cared for, as well as being “wrapped . . . in swaddling cloths” (Lk 2:7). Thus He fulfills life’s simple necessities.

These mundane actions direct us to the Apostle Paul’s point: when the Lord Jesus was “found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself” (Phil 2:8), lowering Himself to our human state. In other words, He joined Himself to us fully as a man to address our own helpless and weakened state of separation from God, wedded as we are to death even from the moment of our birth.

God in Christ became a perfect flesh-and-blood man for our salvation, reestablishing our fallen humanity to Himself while He remained sinless. Our race has produced many flesh-and-blood men, but as the spiritual descendants of Adam we lack the ability to produce a perfect man. *We keep giving birth to sinners.*

Who can respond to that which God asked of Abraham: “Be pleasing before Me and blameless” (Gn 17:1)? Christ gave our answer by fulfilling God’s command. Through the action of the Holy Spirit overshadowing the Holy Virgin, God produced a Man who lived perfectly and blamelessly. By death He trampled down death, and as God He bestows life upon all those in the tombs and upon us of us who are yet destined for the tombs.

Note also that the Lord’s circumcision fulfills another level of *law*. Observe God’s words to Abram: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly” (vs. 2). For this reason God says, “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations” (vs. 5). God requires that all males who would inherit these promises be circumcised on the eighth day after birth (vss. 9-12). Hence, the Theotokos and Joseph fulfill this requirement with the infant Jesus, thereby making Him an inheritor of God’s promises to Abraham for all peoples.

Abraham became the father of several—but not all—nations (see Gn 25). Then, as a natural descendant of Abraham, his own *seed after him* (Gn 17:7), Christ our God became the Savior for all peoples, nations, languages, and cultures. Now not only Jews but anyone joined to Christ may receive His eighth-day fulfillment of eternal life. The Lord’s circumcision assures us that God did fulfill and is fulfilling His promise to Abraham, all for our sake.

O Thou who art ever above the law, Thou hast submitted to it, granting us blessing from on high. Wherefore we extol Thee, praising Thy condescension of transcendent goodness!

Sunday – January 2 – Proverbs 8:22-30, Tone 3
Second Reading at Vespers for the Circumcision of Christ

Eternal Wisdom: Proverbs 8:23-30, especially vss. 23-25: “*The Lord created me in the beginning of His ways for His works; He established me in the beginning before time, before He made the earth, and before He made the abysses, before the going forth of the fountains of waters, before the mountains were created; and He begot me before all hills.*” In time, as a matter recorded and always to be remembered, our Lord Jesus Christ revealed Himself as the Wisdom of God through whom all that was made was brought into being. As Saint Nikolai of Zicha declares, “In His Person, the Wisdom of God was proclaimed in the flesh and shown forth to men in its wonderful strength and beauty.”

Since Pentecost, the Church has proclaimed Wisdom Incarnate to be the unique miracle that defends against all heresies (see Acts 2:24-28). He came so “that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16). The present passage from Proverbs reveals the Lord Jesus 1) as the Incarnate Wisdom of God, the creative Word of God “by whom all things were made,” 2) as God the Son, “begotten not made,” and 3) as both God and man at once, He who ever wills what God the Father wills (Jn 5:30).

The passage serves as a commentary on various portions of Holy Scripture that especially address God’s creation out of nothing: “In the beginning God made heaven and earth” (Gn 1:1); “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof, the world, and all that dwell therein. He hath founded it” (Ps 23:1-2); “Who appointeth the clouds for His ascent, who walketh upon the wings of the winds” (Ps 103:4).

All these passages harmonize with the declaration of Proverbs that Wisdom *accompanied* God as He made the world and “when He prepared the heaven” (Prv 8:27). Saint John the Theologian clarifies *accompanied* when he says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (Jn 1:1-3).

The preexistence of Wisdom is assumed throughout Proverbs: “The Lord created me in the beginning of His ways for His works; He established me in the beginning before time, before He made the earth” (Prv 8:23). The Arian heretics used this very phrase to try to prove that the Word was a created being that assisted God in making the rest of creation. But Saint Athanasios rightly rejected such speculation, pointing out that God the Son, as Creator, placed His image in man so that men might recognize Him in all His works, acknowledging and worshipping God the Father through Him, as the first Disciples learned to do (Jn 14:8-11).

Furthermore, to defend the truth of the preexistence of God the Word, the Creed speaks of the Lord Jesus as *begotten not made*. Here, the Holy Fathers use the same verb that appears in Prv 8:25: “Before the mountains were created; and He *begot* me before all hills.”

This passage affirms the indissoluble unity of will between God the Father and God the Word – Incarnate Wisdom: “I was working beside Him; I was He in whom He rejoiced; daily and continually I was gladdened by His face” (vss. 29-30). The accounts of the Crucifixion are used frequently by the Holy Fathers to underscore the unity of Christ’s will with the Father. For example, Saint Hilary of Poitiers says, “Wherefore, as Man he prays for men.” He fulfills David’s words, “I am come (in the heading of the book it is written concerning me) to do Thy will, O my God, and Thy law is in the midst of my bowels” (Ps 39:11).

O Master of all, who endured humiliation for the iniquities of mankind, for Thou art good and grantest salvation to the world: O Lord, Wisdom from on High, Glory to Thee!

Monday – January 3 – Proverbs 10:32-33; 11:2; 10:2; 11:7, 19; 13:2, 9
Third Reading at Vespers for the Circumcision of Christ

Seek Wisdom: Selections from Proverbs, especially vs. 22:12: “*The Lord loves holy hearts. . . .*” Over the centuries the faithful have identified the Lord Jesus as the Word of God and the Wisdom of God, the One who upholds “all things by the word of His power” (Heb 1:3). Of greatest importance for us is the Lord Jesus’ present and active power within us and among us. As we draw into closer union with Him through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, He strengthens us against every word and deed that mars the soul and, in turn, He increases our godly understanding and enlightenment. Wisdom imparts wisdom – an intelligence and understanding far superior to the knowledge or so-called “wisdom” of this world (1 Cor 1:30). As Wisdom *within*, Christ will transform us into the *righteous* who have the ability to distill wisdom and grace, and to attain humility and light (Prv 10:32-3; 11:2; 13:9).

If you focus on the first fourteen verses of the present reading, you will find a concise portrait of those seeking to receive wisdom from divine Wisdom Incarnate. This portion of the reading depicts those who seek wisdom from Christ as refusing the *bright ideas* of this world that are attained by independent human effort. Human information and Christ’s wisdom are polar opposites in every situation, whether it involves speaking, business dealings, self-valuation, estimation of others, coping with troubles, one’s stance before God, or one’s contribution to the security of family, community, and nation.

We expect the righteous, whom Christ informs, to grasp the essence of wisdom and grace when they speak (Prv 10:31-32), and to be humble before others (Prv 11:2). In the world today, we are more likely to encounter those who pervert language, abuse speech, and sneer at their fellow men. Such individuals are numerous and often influential, and thus a high value has come to be placed on one-upmanship and the quick, off-color comebacks so prevalent in popular culture.

The present passage specifies what is most admirable in the character of the godly: distilling wisdom from the lips. The wise cut through verbiage in order to speak the truth in brief, to-the-point words that give life, for “a righteous son is begotten unto life” (Prv 11:18). How beautiful are those who assimilate grace (Prv 10:33). The surly, the bored, the indifferent, the abrupt and pushy find good words, kindness, gentleness, and truth, expressed with honest firmness – in a word, *grace*.

Through the centuries Christ our Wisdom has strengthened the graciously humble who meditate on Him (Prv 11:2). Yes, death surrounds us on all sides along with betrayed trust, abuse of power, mad cruelty, and violence, “but righteousness delivers from death” (Prv 10:2). Those whose memory lasts in our hearts, who are eternal before the Lord, have overcome death: “When a righteous man dies, his hope does not perish. . . . [for] a righteous son is begotten unto life” (Prv 11:6, 18). Christ our Light “is with the righteous continually” (Prv 13:9) unto the ages!

How attractive is the image of a *good heart*! The reason is simple. “There is wisdom in the good heart of a man” (Prv 14:34), and we can be certain that “the Lord loves holy hearts” (Prv 22:12), for as He says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8).

The true miracle of the Wisdom who imparts wisdom is the light that He creates in those who embrace and follow Him. He fills those who strive through repentance and prayer to be ever more blameless and acceptable to Him (Prv 22:12) so that their faces *shine* (Eccl 8:1) with an illumination that comes from Him, the Source of all wisdom. After all, Christ “is radiant and unfading and is easily perceived by those who love” Him (Wis 6:12). Seek Wisdom!

O Lord, our true Wisdom, open the eyes of our hearts to receive Thee as a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our paths. (See Ps 118:105).

Tuesday – January 4 – Isaiah 35:1-10

First Reading at the Blessing of the Waters on Theophany

Saving Waters: Isaiah 35:1-10, especially vs. 4: “*Be comforted, you fainthearted. Be strong, do not fear. Behold, our God renders judgment and will render it. He will come and save us.*” Saint Gregory of Nyssa instructs us, the children of the New Covenant, to explore the riches of the words of the Old Covenant. He observes: “I find that not only do the Gospels, written after the crucifixion, proclaim the grace of baptism, but even before the Incarnation of the Lord, the ancient Scripture everywhere prefigured the likeness of our regeneration; not clearly manifesting its form, but foreshowing, in dark saying, the love of God to man.” Today’s reading from the Prophet Isaiah superbly illustrates exactly what Saint Gregory declares.

The salvation won by the Lord Jesus provides us with abundant reasons to comfort one another, for God saved us by coming in the flesh. Each one, having passed through the waters of holy baptism, now has his feet set upon *a pure way* that he might “not go astray” (vs. 8). As the redeemed of the Lord Jesus, we are freed and gathered to Him that we may “come to Zion with gladness,” that is, to the Church of Christ where joy “shall possess” us (vs. 10).

The particular joy experienced in the Church contrasts sharply with the aridity that the child of God meets in this world. As Saint Gregory of Nyssa says, all water now serves to refresh “the soul that is parched and unadorned” – the soul that cries out with David: “My soul thirsteth after Thee like a waterless land” (Ps 142:6). When water is blessed at Theophany, the priest says, “Thou art our God who didst cleave the rock in the wilderness, so that the waters gushed out and the valleys overflowed, thus satisfying Thy thirsty people.”

How is this so? When the Lord entered the waters of the Jordan, He sanctified every drop of water on the face of the earth. Thus water is no longer a mere object flowing out of the tap to be either used or abused. Rather, water is now a medium for cleansing the heart, blessing the soul, and healing infirmities, for every drop has touched the sacred flesh of the Lord Christ!

In being baptized, the Lord Jesus gave us not only an example to follow – to be baptized ourselves – but He also prepared all the waters of the earth that they might be give us His thirst-quenching Holy Spirit, who “doth overflow with streams and passages of grace.”

Today’s reading speaks to our weakness, infirmity, grief, and despair: “Be strong. . . . Behold, our God renders judgment and will render it. He will come and save us” (Is 35:3-4). God promised and acted through His only begotten Son. What did the Lord Jesus do when He came to save us? He opened the eyes of the physically blind, yes; but greater yet, He is opening many eyes that are spiritually closed, illumining those who seek life, who seek *Him*.

As one who received physical healing said, “Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing” (Jn 9:32-33). That which was desert before is now “water. . .burst forth in the desert” (Is 35:6). God is saving us, opening blind eyes, unstopping deaf ears, strengthening your walk and mine before Him, and putting praise on our stammering lips (see vss. 4-6).

Last of all, take note of the new, living Way established by the Lord Jesus, the way of the Orthodox Church, of Zion, the Temple of the living God (vs. 10). Our Lord discloses through His prophet a way that is holy, pure, and unassailable by Satan, that devouring lion (1 Pt 5:8). Christ, for our sake, defeated our ancient enemy and his “ravenous animals” (Is 35:9) by the power of His life-bearing Tree. Now let us walk on the Way and we “shall not go astray” (vs. 8), but we shall be gathered to the Lord “and gladness shall possess” us (vs. 10).

Grant us, O Lord, to draw water in joyful faith and receive the grace of Thy Holy Spirit.

Wednesday – January 5 – Isaiah 55:1-13
Second Reading at the Blessing of the Waters on Theophany

Living Water: Isaiah 55:1-13, especially vs. 1: “*You who are thirsty, go to the water. . . .*” In these verses, the Prophet Isaiah presents God Incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ – He who by coming in person as a man enables us to meet the Holy, Life-giving, and undivided Trinity. Truly, this God directs everyone to turn to Him, to *go to the water*. Essentially, God speaks here in a manner reminiscent of His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well: “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water” (Jn 4:10). The word in Isaiah also parallels Saint Ambrose of Milan’s encouragement: “Buy Christ for yourself, then, not with what few men possess, but with what all men possess by nature, but few offer on account of fear.”

We know the Lord Jesus as food or as bread that is priceless, yet offered freely – bread that truly satisfies. For He is “the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (Jn 6:35).

In the sacrifices of ancient Israel, the fat of animals was considered the best portion. The fat was therefore reserved exclusively for God as a holocaust (Lv 3:16). Those who partake of Christ drink wine and have the fat; they “eat and drink without money and price” (Is 55:1). Christ Jesus offered Himself entirely to God, for He is best gift our race has ever presented to God.

Understand from this reading that whoever comes to the Lord Jesus and heeds Him will live (Is 55:3), a truth that Christ God Himself reiterates: “Come to Me that you may have life” (Jn 5:40) and “have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

The prophecy of Isaiah calls the Lord Jesus “an everlasting covenant” (Is 55:3). For those who are baptized and united to Christ, who remain united to Him, He *is* eternal life: “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life” (Jn 6:40). May Christ give you light, life, and every good thing (Eph 5:14)!

Also, Christ is the fulfillment of the promise to King David (Is 55:3). Remember God’s solemn promise to David: “I will not lie; his seed forever shall abide. And his throne shall be as the sun before Me, and as the moon that is established forever” (Ps 88:34-35). Now this is fulfilled, for the Lord Jesus is, indeed, “exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:33).

Being seated at the right hand of God, our Lord will one day be fully revealed as “a ruler and commander to the Gentiles,” that is, to all nations (Is 55:4). The word for Gentiles in the Septuagint is *ethne*, referring to all peoples and nations other than Jews. Christ our God is the divine Witness to the true nature of the Godhead before all nations (vs. 4). As a result, for many of the world’s peoples today, He also is *ruler and commander* (vs. 4). Nations that He did not know have turned to Him because “the Holy One of Israel . . . glorified [Him]” (vs. 5).

Therefore, we seek God through Christ, “and when [we] find Him, call upon Him [knowing that] He draws near to [us]” (vs. 6). Indeed, “He shall forgive your sins abundantly” (vs. 7). Do not hesitate to do this. As Theodoret of Cyrus admonishes, “He will give you a portion in His mercy and make you a gift of deliverance from your sins.”

Above all be confident, for Christ our God is the Word whom the Father sent, and who did “not return until” He had accomplished “whatever I willed” (vs. 11). He created and is the new condition beyond human comprehension (vss. 8, 9).

The Lord Jesus accomplished, is now accomplishing, and will accomplish that for which God the Father sent Him (vss. 10-11). May He give you unfailing *joy* and *gladness* (vss. 12, 13).

Great art Thou, O Lord, and no word sufficeth to hymn Thy wonders.

Thursday – January 6 – Isaiah 12:3-6

Third Reading at the Blessing of the Waters on Theophany

The Name of the Lord: Isaiah 12:3-6, especially vs. 4: “Praise the Lord; call upon His name. Declare His glorious things among the Gentiles and make mention that His name is exalted.” Saint Peter of Damascus observes that given names “in both the Old and the New Testament . . . are appropriate. Thus, Adam was named from the four cardinal points; for the four letters of his name are the initial letters of the Greek words for East [anatole], West [dusme], North [apo borra] and South [mesembria].” In Hebrew, of course, *Adam* is the word for *man*.

Scripture records that names were sometimes changed when God gave someone a new direction in life, as when Jacob was renamed Israel. Because he was born clutching the heel of his twin brother Esau, his parents named him Jacob, or he who “took hold” (Gn 25:26). However, after wrestling with God, who met him in the form of a man at a ford in the river Jabbok, Jacob asked for a blessing from his opponent. The answer was: “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have prevailed with God and with men” (Gn 32:28).

The most significant name in Scripture, “the name which is above every name” (Phil 2:9), is *God*. Moses, desiring support for his leadership from the people of Israel, asked God to tell him His name, to which God replied: “*I AM the Existing One*” (Ex 3:14). Grammatically, this name in Hebrew takes on the present tense (first and/or third person singular) of the verb *to be*. However, this form is not ordinarily used in Hebrew but implied; one says, “The tree tall,” instead of “The tree is tall.” The Greek Septuagint version of Exodus 3:14 writes the name of God as *ὁ ὢν*, or *The One Who Is*. These letters appear in every icon of the Lord Jesus, inscribed inside the halo around His head. We hear this name as well in the blessing at the end of Vespers: “Christ our God, *the Existing One*, is blessed, always, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages.”

Saint Maximus says that “the Father’s name is not something . . . He has acquired. . . . He does not have a beginning, so that at a certain moment He begins to be Father or King, but He is eternal and so is eternally Father and King.” Thus “the name of God the Father exists substantially in the eternal, only-begotten Son,” who teaches us to call God “our Father.”

When Isaiah directs us to “call upon His name” (Is 12:4), the prophet reveals our dependency on God, our inability to save ourselves. We are to call on Him who saves, on Jesus our Lord, whose very name means *Savior* (Mt 1:21). We do this preeminently through the Jesus Prayer, as Saint Theophan the Recluse says, “because it unites the soul with our Lord Jesus, and the Lord Jesus is the only door to union with God.” After all, union with Christ is the aim of the prayer and the reason for its continual usage among Orthodox Christians.

Isaiah tells us to “make mention that His name is exalted” (Is 12:4). Doing so ensures that God’s name is never used disrespectfully (Ex 20:7) but uttered only in prayer, worship, or the confession of faith, as in “Thank God,” “God knows,” “Leave it to God,” “God forbid,” “Glory to God.”

How blessed it is to “sing to the name of the Lord” (Is 12:5), to worship and adore His holy name. No wonder Orthodoxy has such a rich musical tradition of *a capella* singing, of lifting the voice alone in praise to our Creator and Savior! It is not essential that one be a great musician, merely that singing be fostered among us – even the tone deaf! Saint Romanos the Melodist was illiterate, lacking in musical training, and despised by certain educated clergy. Yet, through the intercessions of the Theotokos, he composed more than a thousand of our most beautiful kontakia while a deacon of the great church in Constantinople.

Sing unto the Lord, bless His name; proclaim from day to day the good tidings of His salvation. Declare among the nations His glory (Ps 95:2-3).

Friday – January 7 – Isaiah 49:8-15

Reading at the Royal Ninth Hour of the Feast of Theophany

Types of Baptism – A Covenant of the Nations: *Isaiah 49:8-15, especially vs. 8:* “Thus says the Lord: ‘In an acceptable time I heard You, and in the day of salvation I helped You. I give You as a covenant to the Gentiles, to establish the earth and to inherit the inheritance of the desert. . . .’” A Nativity hymn of the Church urges us to “cry unto the Son, born of the Father before the ages without change, Christ our God, who hath been incarnate in these last days of the Virgin without seed, shouting, O Thou who hast elevated our state, Thou art holy, O Lord.”

In this exhortation the Church joins with the ancient Prophet Isaiah in entreating us to heed God the Father’s declaration that, through the work of God the Holy Spirit, God the Son will elevate *our state* and have “mercy on His people” (Is 49:13). But the words spoken by our Heavenly Father through Isaiah also bring us back down to earth and to history where – in an acceptable time, the day of salvation – God the Son was formed in the womb and given to us as a covenant for the nations to establish the earth under the reign of the Kingdom of God (vs. 8).

Our Father in Heaven wants us to understand through His prophet’s voice that we are to affirm the impact on the world caused by its Creator entering into the stream of the Jordan. Rejoice with the heavens and be glad, “For the Lord had mercy on His people, and comforted the humble of His people” (vs. 13). He has neither forsaken nor forgotten us (vs. 14). Rather, He causes His formidable dominion to appear on earth – that which we have learned to call the *Kingdom of God*, a sovereign rule to “establish the earth” (vs. 8). God’s Kingdom means freedom, illumination, nourishment, mercy, and the removal of all impediments between man and God. Be in awe! These results are coming upon the earth.

“To those in bonds,” God says, “Go forth” (vs. 9). Saint Nikolai of Zicha asks, “Who is more utterly a captive than he who is bound by sin?” Sadly, all of us are bound by the chains of our sins, yet the One who stands in the waters comes to affirm His Father’s word, “Go forth.” He assumed our sins in the Jordan by receiving a baptism of repentance (Lk 3:3), although He knew no sin. Thus He shouldered the sins of everyone and took them to the Cross, so that with the thief we might cry, “We all have sinned, O Son of God. Have mercy upon us, O Thou who hast abolished the might of death and taken hades captive.”

In addition, the Lord was baptized in order to enlighten us, to bid “those in darkness, ‘Reveal yourselves’” (Is. 49:9). The “true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world” (Jn 1:9) came to fill us with Light, making us “the light of the world” (Mt 5:14).

Now “the living bread which came down from heaven” (Jn 6:51) also nourishes those who partake of Him, for “whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life” (Jn. 6: 54). These “shall not hunger, neither shall they thirst” (Is 49:10).

The One who stood in the waters of Jordan brings mercy to the afflicted: “For the Lord had mercy on His people and comforted the humble of His people” (vs. 13).

God has removed every impediment that stood between Him and us, for He Himself has come to us. “I will make every mountain as a road, and every path as a pasture for them. Behold, these come from afar” (vss. 11-12). Now it is up to us to receive Him.

Despair not! He has not forgotten us. Frail, fallible, human parents may, on occasion, forget their children, but “nevertheless, I shall not forget you,” says the Lord” (vs. 15).

O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever. To Him that established the earth upon the waters; for His mercy endureth for ever (Ps 135:1, 6).

Saturday – January 8 – Isaiah 1:16-20
Reading for the Royal Third Hour of Theophany

Types of Baptism – Inner Godliness, Obedient Actions: *Isaiah 1:16-20, especially vs. 19: “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good things of the land.”* Through the Prophet Isaiah, God urges us to obey in order to enjoy the good things He promises. God also cautions us through Saint Paul to strive after baptism rather than continuing in sins, as Israel did after passing through the Red Sea, by lusting “after evil things as they also lusted” (1 Cor 10:6).

Isaiah reveals that God not only commands (vss. 16-18), but also promises (vss. 18-20) as a reminder that baptism and membership in Christ do *not* guarantee salvation. As members of Christ, we do have a promise that “in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22). Yet as the Prophet and the Apostle both assert, because we are joined to Christ we should “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). Baptism only guarantees that “God . . . works in [us] both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). Thus salvation requires our effort, for God blesses those who strive to keep His commandments against sin. Reflect, then, on what Isaiah shows us concerning God’s eight commands and two promises.

First, we are to wash (Is 1:16). Baptism is not optional. The risen Lord specifically included the baptismal mystery in the *Great Commission* on the mountain, promising to be with us in the Church to the end of the age (Mt 28:19-20). Baptism assures us of Christ’s presence.

Second, we are to cleanse not only what others see, but to “put away the evils from [our] souls” (Is 1:16). God looks within, where the eye of man cannot penetrate. As the Lord Jesus says, “First cleanse the inside of the cup” (Mt. 23:26). And Saint John Cassian likewise urges us to “establish purity of heart . . . it is for this that we should do everything.”

Third, the acquisition of virtues must follow inner purification. God says, “Learn to do good” (Is 1:17). The root of the verb *learn* is *mathete*, which also forms the noun *disciple*. It implies training in what is good through practice, reflection, and correction, with much repetition so that the good developed within manifests in loving actions and healing relationships.

Fourth, God commands us to “seek judgment” (vs. 17). This verb may be applied to objective matters – judicial findings, for example – but it also refers to discrimination or discernment of the heart, by which we are able to make God-pleasing choices.

Fifth, as Christians, we should seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit above all else.

Sixth, the internal work of the Christian life may come to nothing if it does not lead us to “redeem the wronged” (vs. 17). Or, in Saint Paul’s words, “Though I have *the gift* of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor 13:2). Good feelings, thoughts, and intentions have to be put to work lovingly on behalf of others and their needs.

Seventh, our loving actions need always to be extended to the socially and economically defenseless. Thus, God requires us to “defend the orphan and justify the widow” (Is 1:17).

Eighth, having first stated what He expects of us after baptism, God invites us to consider His promises, already well-known to us from the Gospel: “Although your sins are like crimson, I shall make them white like snow,” says the Lord (vs. 18). And so too the Apostle reminds us: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19). Note that forgiveness is the touchstone of our faith. Still, we must be “willing and obedient . . . [to] eat the good things of the land” (vs. 19), otherwise we shall “be devoured by the sword” (vs. 20).

O Lord, manifest Thyself in us who are baptized with water in Thy Name, and grant that we may be transformed, putting away the old man and putting on the new man in Thine image.

Sunday – January 9 – Genesis 1:1-13, Tone 4
First Reading at the Vigil for Theophany

Toward Illumination: Genesis 1:1-13, especially vss. 3-5: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. God saw the light; it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day; the darkness He called Night. . . .” It is to Christ our God that we turn for illumination, He who illumines every man (Jn 1:9). In creation He brought forth light, dividing it from darkness and calling the two day and night (Gn 1:5), for He is the Creator of all. And He “has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness” (Lk 1:78-79). His divine acts of creation and Theophany reveal two kinds of light to us: created light, which He makes in many forms, and the divine or uncreated light. Created light serves our physical need to see but also allows us, through our *mind’s eye*, to apprehend the existence of the uncreated light, which is one of God’s energies.

Saint Nikolai of Zicha identifies four revelations of God embedded in the creation account which are associated with light: 1) God is a changeless Creator, a light “with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning” (Jas 1:17). 2) He is wise and most merciful, a light to our paths (Ps 118:105), the One guiding us towards our intended goal in Light. 3) He is the Creator of physical light and will ultimately bring all such light to an end, along with the rest of His creation. 4) As Creator of “two worlds, the earthly and the heavenly, the material and the immaterial,” God has arranged that in His “light shall we see light” (Ps 35:10).

As a creation, mankind is changeable. Always we find ourselves in flux and variation, which disrupts our ability to establish a relationship with God, the unchanging. However, as Vladimir Lossky says, the “uncreated, eternal, divine, and deifying light is grace . . . [the] divine energies as they are given to us accomplish the work of our deification. . . . Being the light of the divinity, grace cannot remain hidden or unnoticed, acting in man, changing his nature, entering into a more and more intimate union with him . . . revealing to man the face of the living God. . . . Those who are worthy of it attain the sight of the ‘Kingdom of God come with power’ in this life, as the three Apostles saw on Mount Tabor.” While the light of God does not change, His grace and energies change us, moving us toward illumination and stability in Him by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God gives us the task of purification through ascetic labors by faith. As Saint Makarios of Egypt says, “If through faith and effort we are enabled to become partakers of the Holy Spirit, then to a corresponding degree our bodies also will be glorified on the last day. For what is now treasured up within the soul will then be revealed outwardly in the body.” God guides us toward divine light, for it is His light that guides us toward Christ, the Light.

Many obstacles face us as we seek to become glorified through the ineffable light of God, especially the allure of the distracting pleasures of the flesh and our inner instability and restlessness. God kindly reminds us in Scripture that He has called us to be children of the light and heirs of eternal good things – and, at present, we are *on the Way*. However, in the words of the baptismal mystery, we are asked to “prove ourselves as children of the Light.” God helps us keep our eyes focused on this end toward which we are striving.

The Theophany of Christ is a gracious reminder that we are not merely material beings, but special creatures capable of participating in the immaterial, spiritual world around us. The saints urge us to seek God’s uncreated light with heart, mind, soul, and body, for, as Saint Gregory Palamas says, he who participates in this light “is united to the Light and with the Light he sees in full consciousness all that remains hidden for those who have not this grace.”

Illumine us, O Master who lovest mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge.

Monday – January 10 – Exodus 14:15-18, 21-23, 27-29
Second Reading at Vespers for Theophany

Types of Baptism – The Red Sea: Exodus 14:15-18, 21-23, 27-29, especially vs. 28: “Then the waters returned and covered the chariots, the horsemen, and all of Pharaoh’s army.” The Feast of Theophany is one of the most glorious holy days of the Church. The Gospel read at the Divine Liturgy of the feast recounts the first overt manifestation of God as the One, Holy, and undivided Trinity (Mt 3:13-17). God the Son, the Incarnate Word, is baptized by the Forerunner in the waters of Jordan; God the Father audibly voices His infinite pleasure in His Beloved Son; God the Holy Spirit confirms the Father’s word with His descent upon the Lord Jesus in the form of a dove.

In ancient times, the Church kept an all-night vigil in preparation for this feast. Holy baptism was administered during this service. The vigil began with catechumens and the faithful sharing in thirteen lessons of catechesis from the Old Testament. The catechumens were then led to a separate building called the *baptisterion* while the faithful continued with the services of Little Compline, Great Vespers, Litiya, and Artoklasia. The newly baptized arrived in procession to join the faithful for Orthros and the Divine Liturgy.

The vigil lessons that we continue reading today derive from that Old Testament catechesis. They describe events that foreshadow, as antitypes, the wonders of baptism now revealed within the Mystery of Christ. Like all antitypes, these events participate in the eternal prototype that they herald.

Each Christian participates in the Lord’s baptism through his own baptism in order to express the full mystery of Christ. These foreshadowing events serve to illuminate our salvation: Israel’s escape at the Red Sea, the sweetening of the bitter waters of Marah, the entrance into the Holy Land at the Jordan, Elijah’s assumption into heaven, Naaman’s cleansing from leprosy, Jacob’s illumination at Mahanaim, infant Moses’ rescue from the Nile, Gideon’s fleece, Elijah’s sacrifice on Mount Carmel, and Elisha’s cleansing of the waters at Jericho.

The present reading from Exodus clearly discloses our deliverance through holy baptism, likening it to Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea. In baptism the Lord fights for us, and He Himself delivers us from the enemy. Our old slave master is vanquished as the Lord blesses us through the hand of His priest and servant. We come to know salvation by passing through water. We rejoice in our liberation by God, for now we share in what Christ achieved with His own baptism. The truth is that we are defended, delivered, and blessed by our God, for “the Lord shook off the *Egyptians* in the midst of the sea” (Ex 14:27).

You and I have tasted defeat by sin, that overwhelming, crushing power that enslaves and dehumanizes us. We assent with Saint John of the Ladder that one passion always gives place to another, and that the “spirit of despair rejoices at the sight of increasing vice.” Yet we stand amazed, for we are the Lord’s and He has taken up the overwhelming battle against sin on our behalf. The cross made by Moses over the waters of the Red Sea is the invincible power standing between us and our sin, preventing its advance.

The Lord yokes Himself to us and delivers us from our ancient enemy, vanquishing in and throughout our flesh the slave master who held us. Death comes by chariot, horse, and sword, and we find no escape from his tyranny. Yet behold Moses “trac[ing] the Cross, thus symbolizing that invincible weapon” as his hands are stretched over the waters.

When the Lord’s priest plunged us beneath the waters, we knew the blessing of the Master who “could[st] not endure to behold mankind oppressed by the devil” and “did[st] come and save us.” The hands that baptized, lifted us up, and anointed us were Christ’s own.

We confess Thy grace. We proclaim Thy mercy. We conceal not Thy gracious acts. Thou hast delivered the generations of our mortal nature. All creation magnifies Thee.

Tuesday – January 11 – Exodus 15:22-16:1
Third Reading at the Vigil for Theophany

Types of the Gospel – The Tree: *Exodus 15:22-16:1, especially vs. 25: “So he cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet.”* Consider the sweetening of the water of Marah in this passage from the Exodus account and notice how carefully Moses records the string of encampments by the people of Israel after they celebrated their *baptismal* liberation with singing and dancing (Ex 15:1-21). First, they entered the wilderness of Shur, going three days away from the Red Sea until they came to Marah, the spring of bitterness (Ex 15:22-23). There, God revealed to Moses the means for sweetening the water, but the Lord also announced a statute and an ordinance for His people to keep diligently thereafter (vss. 25-26).

The people continued on to Elim with its twelve springs and seventy palm trees (vs. 27). Leaving Elim, they entered the wilderness of Sin (vs. 16:1). At last, on the peninsula of Sinai, they made their long, historic encampment at the foot of the mountain, where they received God’s Law with its requirements of a host of exacting sacrifices and regulations (Ex 19-40).

Origen, the insightful master of the catechetical school at Alexandria, observes that “if we follow only the simple record of facts, it does not edify us much to know to what place they came first and to what place second.” But he bids us remember that there are no accidents, no incidental bits of information in Holy Scripture. Rather, we are to read that we may be led to inquire, “What significance, then, is there in the deliberate accounting of the campsites?”

Origen encourages prying “into the mystery lying hidden in these matters [until] we discover the order of faith.” The *order of faith* to which the wise catechist refers is the Gospel, which contrasts with the commandments as an archetype contrasts to a type. For example, the manna eaten in the wilderness is a type of the true bread, Christ our Savior (Jn 6:49-50), and the Israelites’ passage through the sea is a type of cleansing baptism, as the Apostle Paul notes (1 Cor 10:2).

The campsite at Marah received its name because the water there was unpalatable (*marah* being the Hebrew word for *bitterness*). At the site, near present-day Howdra, there is still a pool of bitter, salty water that the Bedouins consider the worst in the entire region. By prying into this bitter water as a type, we connect it with the Lord’s appeal to His people: “Diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is pleasing in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His ordinances” (Ex 15:26). What refreshment can be found in drinking the cup of the Law, when sin makes every commandment that it touches bitter? Within the environment of sin, the Law creates only despair and prompts us to cry out as Moses did (vs. 25). Yet at Marah God revealed a *tree* that, when cast into the water, turns the bitter taste of the Law into the sweet fount of the Gospel. Are we not speaking of the Tree of the Cross, by which God Himself sweetened our sin and our bitterness of soul?

After Marah Israel went on to Elim, a place with twelve springs and seventy palm trees (vs. 27). Following the pattern of the type already suggested, we recognize in this account the need to pass from the choking bitterness of the Law to the abundant waters of the twelve apostolic springs and the food of the Seventy who preached the saving word of Christ our God. As Origen declares, “It is not sufficient for the people of God to drink the water of Marah, even though it has been made sweet, even though all the bitterness of the letter has been cast out ‘by the Tree of Life’ and the mystery of the Cross. . . . They must come also to the New Testament from which they are given a drink without . . . any difficulty. . . .”

Glory to Thee, O Christ our God, who didst sweeten bitter sin on the life-giving Tree.

Wednesday – January 12 – Joshua 3:7-8, 15-17
Fourth Reading at the Vigil for Theophany

Types of Baptism – Entering the Land: Joshua 3:7-8, 15-17, especially vs. 17: “So the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all the children of Israel crossed on dry ground, until all the people crossed the Jordan.” What a contrast between the crossing of the Jordan and the earlier escape through the Red Sea! The two events were markedly different. At Jordan, Joshua led the people instead of Moses. Ancient Israel was not fleeing now, but rather advancing to receive the land promised them as an inheritance. They came to the banks of the Jordan with neither fear nor threat driving them. They came with expectations – a free people, not fugitive slaves, stepping into the dry watercourse. This was not a fleeing mob but an army with divisions, leaders, and a chain of command – a seasoned force.

Look upon your baptism through the lens of this triumphant crossing of the Jordan. Learn from our ancient forefathers in the Spirit how to press forward toward the Kingdom, the *land* that God sets before us. Reflect on the example of ancient Israel as a reminder that we depend wholly on the power of our *Joshua*, the “one who saves,” for Jesus restrains the floods of life. Finally, let this crossing of the ancient people of God keep us ever mindful of the need to remain within the ranks of the saints so that we, too, may pass over dry-shod in the company of the faithful.

“All the children of Israel crossed on dry ground” (vs. 17). Note how this happened. When God directed Joshua to have the priests march forward, they lifted the Ark of the Covenant and stepped into the rushing waters of the Jordan, already overflowing its banks (vs. 15). They never hesitated to obey. How readily the flesh holds back whenever we see *objective evidence* of threatening events! Our logic screams out, demanding that we turn back before seemingly insurmountable obstacles. As a result, we often settle for second best, forgoing our claim on the “heavenly calling” (Heb 3:1).

How tragic to let the “persuasive words of human wisdom” (1 Cor 2:4) defeat us! We are baptized into Him who rose from the dead. We are united to Him who stilled the raging of the wind and waves. Never define defeat, loss, or shame in this world’s terms. Step into difficulties knowing that God commands us to go forward, for God is with us!

The name of Joshua, son of Nun, is the very same name given to our Lord Jesus Christ by angelic command (Mt 1:21, Lk 1:31). As written in Exodus, the Hebrew name *Joshua* is pronounced *Yehoshua*, a combination of the unspoken divine Name with the word for *saves*. The later Hebrew version of the name is *Yeshua*, transliterated into Greek as *Iesous* and then into English as *Jesus*. The name means *God saves*, or simply *Savior*.

How can God urge us, as baptized members of Christ, to step without hesitation into the improbable circumstances of this life? He knows that we cannot be defeated *in Him* except by sin, fear, or despair. As God said to Joshua, “Today I shall begin to exalt you in the sight of all the children of Israel” (Jos 3:7). The world may call us *losers*, *stupid*, or *narrow-minded*, but in baptism God promises to exalt us in Christ our God before the angels and in the Church, in heaven and on earth, and in all the world. Baptism is a beginning; let us advance that God may save us through Yeshua our Savior.

Finally, let us always remember that “all the children of Israel” crossed. Yielding to worldly wisdom breaks ranks and weakens resolve – mine, yours, and that of others.

“The Church is revealed to all as a brilliantly lit heaven, leading the faithful in the way of light. Standing therein, we cry: Make firm the foundation of Thy house, O Lord!”

Thursday – January 13 – Fourth Kingdoms 2:6-14
Fifth Reading at the Vigil for Theophany

Crossing Jordan: 4 Kingdoms 2:6-14 (2 Kings 2:6-14), especially vs. 6: “Then Elijah said to him, ‘Stay here, please, for the Lord has sent me on to the Jordan. . . .’” When Alfred Lord Tennyson poetically writes, “And may there be no moaning of the bar, when I put out to sea” and an African-American spiritual sings of “going over Jordan,” we understand that these passages by water are metaphors for dying. The solemn overtones of *going over Jordan* are reflected in today’s reading from Kingdoms, as well as in Joshua’s account of crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land (Jos 3-4). Similar imagery is found in the Orthodox funeral service: “As I behold the sea of life surging high with the tempest of temptations, I set my course toward Thy tranquil haven and cry aloud to Thee: Lead Thou my life forth from corruption, O Most Merciful One.”

The association of death with passing through or across water to a better life also resonates in the mystery of holy baptism. The priest says, “But do Thou, Master of all, show this water to be the water of redemption, the water of sanctification, the purification of flesh and spirit, the loosing of bonds, the remission of sins, the illumination of the soul, the laver of regeneration, the renewal of the spirit, the gift of adoption to sonship, the garment of incorruption, the fountain of life.”

The crossing of the Jordan by the Prophets Elijah and Elisha just before Elijah’s assumption into heaven – in itself a type of baptism – is meant to awaken us to the importance of death to self and the new life in Christ that occurs when we are baptized. The Lord Jesus Himself connects baptism with death when the mother of James and John asks that her sons be seated “one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your Kingdom” (Mt 20:21). When Jesus asks whether the sons of Zebedee are prepared to be “baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with” (Mt 20:22), He is referring directly to His Passion.

By likening His Passion to a baptism, the Lord Jesus reveals the intimate link between His immersion in the Jordan and His death on the Cross. First, by receiving the baptism of repentance from John the Forerunner (Mt 3), Jesus took upon Himself all of mankind’s sins. Being without sin, He fulfilled what God required of Israel: to become a light to the nations (Is 42:6). Then, at His Passion, He nailed the sins of all peoples throughout all time to the Tree, so that all transgressions died with Him.

When the Lord asks James and John if they are willing to be baptized with His baptism, their naive response (“We are able,” Mt 20:22) suggests that they remain ignorant of the fateful events that Jesus has just foretold (Mt. 20:17-19). Instead, they hearken back to Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan at the hands of the Forerunner. After all, tradition holds that the Apostle John was one of two disciples who first followed the Lord at the behest of John the Baptist (Jn 1:35-37).

Note that the *crossing* of Elijah and Elisha participates in a pattern that every follower of Christ, including James and John, is required to follow. Although Elisha is warned of Elijah’s death, he asserts that he will not leave his master (see 4 Kgs 2:3, 5). Likewise, the true disciple of Christ follows the Lord even to the Cross (see Mt 16:24). Elisha desired to share in Elijah’s spirit (4 Kgs 2:6) just as each Christian desires to be united to Christ and receive His gift of the Holy Spirit. Elijah’s mantle fell upon Elisha (4 Kgs 2:13), even as the ministry of Christ falls upon every member of the Church (Mt 28:19-20).

O Maker of heaven and earth, although Thou art sinless, Thou didst come to the Jordan in the flesh seeking baptism to purify the world and grant us cleansing. Glory to Thee!

Friday – January 14 – Fourth Kingdoms 5:9-14
Sixth Reading at the Vigil for Theophany

Types of Baptism – Cleansing: 4 Kingdoms 5:9-14 (2 Kings 5:9-14), especially vs. 14: “So Naaman went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to Elisha’s instruction, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was cleansed.” Saint Irenaeus connects the baptismal mystery with the cleansing of Naaman the leper as follows: “It was not for nothing that Naaman of old, when suffering from leprosy, was purified upon his being baptized, but it served as an indication to us. For as we are lepers in sin, we are made clean by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord from our old transgressions. . . .”

The cleansing of Naaman points to the mystical nature of holy baptism but also warns against excessive rational defenses or explanations of the Church’s initiatory rites. Certain well-meaning analysts observe that there are numerous instances in which those who were baptized as infants apostatize as adults from the Christian faith, and as a result they condemn the practice of infant baptism. These critics assert that initiation into Christ should be reserved for those who fully understand the commitments they are making. Thus, they say, candidates for the rite should reach the “age of discretion.” But does anyone really understand what God accomplishes in the sacraments?

It is certainly regrettable that that some children leave the Church as adults, and we may find ourselves wondering whether specific Church practices contribute to this unfortunate outcome. The problem, however, lies not in baptizing infants but in the loss of connection with what Father Alexander Schmemmann calls “the dimensions of the baptismal mystery, its truly cosmic content and depth.” The initiatory rites of the Church are best served when they are reverentially celebrated as holy mysteries – as a divine means by which one becomes “a member of the Body of Christ, a consecrated vessel of the Holy Spirit, a fellow citizen with the saints.” Baptism is neither magic nor an honorable tradition based on one’s culture, society, or ethnicity.

In the account of Naaman’s cleansing, we are struck by his comic rage when Prophet Elisha asks him to carry out a simple ritual that logic tells him could just as easily have been accomplished by bathing in “the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus” (vs. 12). His reason and practicality are exposed as foolish, which even his servants are able to see. Ultimately, human rationality cannot penetrate the workings of God. Not even the most devout and well-catechized adult comes to baptism fully *understanding* what God is accomplishing in his life – either in this age or in the age to come. Baptism is a mystery!

The cleansing of Naaman does emphasize the importance of being willing to comply humbly and in the fear of God with the requirements of the Church when we approach Her holy mysteries. This holds true at any point in the life in Christ, whether we are children or adults. The great Syrian general finally goes to the Jordan and baptizes himself a full seven times – not five or six, but seven (vs. 14). Then, and only then, his leprosy is healed.

Why did the prophet not direct Naaman to bathe in the waters of Damascus when he returned home? It was to teach us that baptism is an act of the Church, in which the Church celebrates her passage through death to life, her holy Pascha in the Lord. The normal practice is to perform baptisms within the gathering of the Church, in her precincts, with her waters. Even when laypersons baptize in extremity, the act remains the mystery of incorporation into the Church.

O Christ our God, may all Thy baptized servants be worthy partakers of Thy death and resurrection, preserving their baptismal garments undefiled until the dread day of Thy coming.

Saturday – January 15 – Genesis 32:1-10
Eighth Reading at the Vigil for Theophany

Types of Baptism – Guilt and Grace: Genesis 32:1-10, especially vs. 5: *“I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find grace in your sight.”* At one time or another, those who mature and prosper in the faith report experiences similar to that which the Patriarch Jacob tasted at *God’s encampment* (vs. 3): personal guilt, fear, the presence of God, and the miracle of God’s grace. This is true especially for those who arrive at the life in Christ hungry to embrace the spiritual realities of baptism, chrismation, and holy communion for the first time.

Orthodox Christians may not necessarily associate baptism with a transforming experience, since many receive the Christian mystery in infancy. We may only come to discover the blessings described in this account of Jacob following a grievous sin against a best friend, a loved one, or the Church community, when God prompts us to seek a priest and beg of “the righteous and compassionate Judge remission of sins and grace to sin no more.” For God would not have us remain in the grip of despair for our sins: we taste God’s presence and meet Him – merciful, forgiving, and gracious – in the mystery of confession.

Consider how Jacob’s life and experience serve as a type of confession, that wonderful second baptism. Born the younger of twins, Jacob connived against Esau to take away his brother’s birthright (Gn 25:29-34). Later, by plain deception, he also stole his brother’s rightful blessing (Gn 27). Scripture reports that Esau “hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him; and . . . said in his mind, ‘Let the days of mourning for my father draw near, then I will kill my brother Jacob’” (Gn 27:41). Jacob knew all too well what he had done to incur his brother’s wrath, so he fled for his life to Mesopotamia, to the house of his uncle Laban (Gn 28:5).

Jacob spent years in virtual servitude to his uncle in the distant east, and yet he prospered despite Laban’s efforts to take advantage of his youth and energy. Finally, as the relationship between Jacob and Laban deteriorated because of the latter’s jealousy, God prompted Jacob to gather up his wives, his household, and his flocks and return to Canaan, promising that He would be with him despite Esau’s hatred (Gn 31:3).

The present account begins as Jacob approaches the Jordan River, preparing to cross over into his homeland, the land promised to his forefathers Abraham and Isaac. However, as “Jacob went on his way, [he] saw the hosts of God encamped” (Gn 32:2). With the threat of deadly confrontation yet before him, Jacob now meets the hosts of the Lord. What is required for God to break through to our hearts and minds? Remorse, fear, and guilt can motivate us, as can shame. But knowledge of God’s promises creates another expectation (Gn 28:10-15). Meeting God Himself is a momentous and inexplicable event, which is why we identify the sacraments of baptism, chrismation, and confession as holy *mysteries* of the Church.

The presence of the living God, on the one hand, and the potential threat of Esau, on the other, focuses Jacob’s awareness on his sin and danger. He makes frenzied attempts to manage the coming confrontation (Gn 32:4-8). When God confronts us, often our first awareness is of our guilt, of the wrong committed against our brother, and we struggle to resolve the guilt.

But frenetic action does not work for Jacob, nor will it for us! Jacob embraces the grace of God and asks to be satisfied with “all the righteousness and all the truth You have shown Your servant” (Gn 32:10). He pleads for and receives God’s grace and then, wonder of wonders, his brother even embraces him! (Gn 33:4).

O Lord, we pray for mercy, life, peace, health, salvation, and visitation according to the multitude of Thy great and rich compassions toward us.

Sunday – January 16 – Exodus 2:5-10, Tone 5
Ninth Reading at the Vigil for Theophany

Types of Baptism – The Astounding God: Exodus 2:5-10, especially vs. 10: “Now when the boy was grown, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son; and she called his name Moses, saying, ‘Because I drew him out of the water.’” The deliverance of the infant Moses from death by exposure and drowning prompts us to consider the astounding nature of God – to contemplate Him who, beyond all expectation, shapes impossible events to His sovereign will. We who have been drawn out of the waters of baptism can certainly agree with Moses, “The Lord became my helper and the shield of my salvation; He is my God, and I will glorify Him; My father’s God, and I will exalt Him” (Ex. 15:2). Our God does not abandon those who trust in Him, but crowns faith with salvation and receives them “out of many waters” (Ps 17:16), turning devastation into glory.

Dependent and helpless, like the infant Moses, most Orthodox Christians are brought to the waters of baptism by their parents. Borne to the font in the arms of godparents, they are unaware of what is taking place and do not understand the riches and blessings being bestowed upon them; instead, they are upheld by the faith of family, sponsors, and the entire Body of Christ. Even those who come as adults to the mystery of baptism understand only in part what God is accomplishing. Who truly comprehends what God has done, is doing, and will do for those whom He draws out of the water?

Moses’ parents were people of God. They disobeyed Pharaoh’s command and placed their faith in God as the giver of life. As the earlier verses in Exodus 2 explain, when they see that “he was a beautiful child” (Ex 2:2) they hide the infant, refusing to submit to death in any way. They *correctly* resist temptation because they perceive that their child is “beautiful.”

Understand that this perception is not based on physical appearance alone but comes from the purity of their hearts, as a vision seen through noetic eyes. When Moses’ mother beholds his comeliness, she sees evidence that God wants her child to live. Once he outgrows his parents’ capacity to hide him, the mother places the boy in an ark woven from reeds and carefully caulked to keep it afloat (Ex 2:3). All of these actions, like the efforts of modern parents who bring their children to baptism, are carried out in the trust that God acts with astounding love toward those who seek His will.

God repeatedly astounds us, revealing Himself as our Savior and delivering us through many waters. He saved the human race by means of an ark that floated on the great floodwaters, keeping Noah and his family safe while hordes of unbelievers drowned (Gn 6-8). Through the obedience of Moses, He saved His chosen people through another baptism when they faced the Red Sea, thwarting yet another Pharaoh. Our astounding God saves all who call upon His name in the waters of holy baptism, thousands of times each year.

What this present reading particularly reveals is that He Whom the Church proclaims is always ready to contravene the very worst of human intentions. Throughout history God has transformed what men intended for evil and turned sinful acts into life-bestowing blessings “in order to . . . save many people alive” (Gn 50:20).

Is it not astounding – and yes, ironic – that the daughter of Pharaoh contravened her father’s efforts to destroy Israel’s newborns and saved Moses the Liberator? Similarly, God’s amazing response to sin-induced death was to assume our sins in His baptism in order to become our death-defeating Savior “that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21).

O Christ our God, save Thy world that Thou hast sanctified in the waters of Jordan. Crush the might of sin and save mankind from error.

Monday – January 17 – Judges 6:36-40
Tenth Reading at the Vigil for Theophany

Types of Baptism – Dependency on God: Judges 6:36-40, especially vs. 37: “I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You said.” At baptism, prayers are offered to remove delusion and fill us with *faith, hope, and love*, so that we might walk “in all of God’s commandments.” However, if we persist in “evil before the Lord” (Jgs 6:1) we shall not avoid delusion but instead fall under self-induced afflictions and be “brought very low” (Ps 141:8). *Destitution* (Jgs 6:1-6) comes from not obeying the voice of God (Jgs 6:10).

By contrast, Gideon is revealed in the sixth chapter of Judges as a man who cultivates godly virtues which enables him to depend always on the Lord, obey whatever God commands, and find life and victory as a result. Review the virtues he reveals:

1) Gideon lives *humbly* before God despite the conditions of idolatry in his society (Jgs 6:10). He accepts the necessity of threshing his family’s wheat covertly, inside a winepress, revealing that it is important to accept afflictions when God allows them to happen.

2) Observe Gideon’s response when “the Angel of the Lord” shows him that “the Lord is with you” (Jgs 6:12). He *places the needs of God’s people ahead of his own*: “Why then have these evils come upon us?” (vs. 13). His example prompts us to value “the good estate of the holy churches of God” more than our personal comfort or the desire to avoid momentary afflictions. Stand with the Church as your God-given bastion through difficulties.

3) The Angel of the Lord encourages Gideon, telling him to “go with this strength of yours and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites” (Jgs 6:14). This challenge causes him to *admit impotence and acknowledge limitations*: “My thousand is weakened in Manasseh and I am the smallest in my father’s house” (Jgs 6:15). May we learn to accept dependency on God as the true source of strength and regard self-reliance as a pitfall.

4) But God’s angel declares, “The Lord will be with you” (Jgs 6:16). God is confronting him and Gideon’s response is *reverence* (Jgs 6:18). Worship the Lord!

5) Through worship Gideon *discerns his unworthiness*: “O Lord, my Lord! For I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face” (Jgs 6:22). May none of us consider himself anything other than a sinner in need of God’s rich mercy and compassion.

6) After God evokes these five attitudes in Gideon, He then proceeds to direct His servant upon a course of action that will confront the idolatry within His own family. And Gideon *obeys*. He challenges his family and fellow countrymen, which in turn awakens his father’s heart. For he says, “Are you now going to plead for Baal? . . . If he is a god . . . let him plead for himself” (vs. 31).

The significance of these virtues is clear, for “the Spirit of the Lord empowered Gideon” (Jgs 6:34) to muster a host of supporters from the other tribes of God’s people to act alongside him. Obey God from the heart, experience the indwelling of the Life-giving Spirit, and draw from the Spirit’s strength for direction. God uses the weakest for impossible tasks!

Finally, attend to the concluding verses of this chapter (Jgs 6:36-40). Once Gideon knows the Spirit is leading him, he guards against being deluded; he seeks a sign from God to “know that You will save Israel by my hand” (vs. 37). Always test your spiritual acuity, turn to the Lord to guard you against delusion, and watch your thoughts before acting.

O Lord, Thou knowest that I can do nothing without Thy guidance and help. Ever direct me to divine wisdom and power, that I may accomplish only what is pleasing to Thee.

Monday – January 17 – Third Kingdoms 18:30-39
Eleventh Reading at the Vigil for Theophany

Types of Baptism – Turning the Heart Back: 3 Kingdoms 18:30-39 (1 Kings 18:30-39), especially vs. 37: “Hear me, O Lord, hear me with fire and let these people know You are the Lord God, so as to turn the heart of this people back.” In the mysteries of baptism and penance, a prayer similar to Elijah’s is offered, asking that God turn our hearts back to Him and restore our relationship with Him in every aspect of our being. We approach the mysteries in need of cleansing – not only from the obvious stain of sinful actions, thoughts, and words, but from the deep, subtle idolatry, the dark pride and resistance that lurk in our hearts, inflaming our passions, vanity, pride, and self-will. Oh, that God would turn back our hearts!

So let us seek God’s life-restoring grace, as we read of Elijah’s offering before the assembly of Israel. Let the prophet’s words guide us toward restoration to God; let us draw near (vs. 30) with all the holy prophets, apostles, evangelists, and righteous souls with whom we are united in the Church. May we offer ourselves without reservation (vss. 31-33), holding back nothing and submitting all that we are and all that we have to the Lord (vss. 34-36).

Before Elijah’s offering the prophets of Baal fail to elicit any response from their idol. “They prophesied . . . But even still, there was no voice” (vs. 29). Of course, there is no response: Baal is merely a dark power of spiritual delusion. Ah, but Elijah calls the people to himself and away from idolatry, even as he calls us: “Come near me” (vs. 30). This is the call of all the saints who preceded us in faith. Holy Tradition brings us close to them through icons, Holy Scripture, and the Divine Liturgy, that they may aid us in returning to God.

The great saints are very close. “Just an intercession away,” we might say – close indeed! They pray for us now, for our healing and restoration, that our hearts may be open to God, that He may turn us back to Himself (vs. 37). As the Apostle Paul told the Christians at Thessalonica, “So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you . . . the Gospel of God” (1 Th 2:8). Do not neglect the saints’ call upon your heart nor impugn their intercessions!

Observe Righteous Elijah building an altar with twelve stones “according to the number of the tribes of Israel, for the Lord said, ‘Israel shall be your name’” (3 Kgs 18:31). His offering was for the entire people of God, including us. In preparing the offering at the Divine Liturgy, the priest includes the whole Church after the manner of Elijah: the Theotokos, the bodiless powers, the prophets (yes, Elijah is specifically named), the apostles, the great hierarchs, martyrs, ascetics, unmercenaries, and all the members of the Church both living and dead, that God may “have mercy on us and on [His] world, and save our souls.” As the Holy Gifts are borne to the altar, do not fail to offer yourself completely to God: “All that I am, and all that I have, I offer to Thee, O Lord. Accept the offering of Thy sinful servant.”

The heart of the call is to offer ourselves without restraint – totally. In verse 33, the whole carcass of the bull is placed upon the wood, then completely consumed in a flaming holocaust. The offering was first drenched with water so there could be no doubt that God alone accepted it. That saturation is akin to that within us which we are unable to offer to God, either through ignorance or weakness. But God understands our intent and receives what we offer as long as our hearts yearn for Him, as in Elijah’s prayer. Oh, that God would turn back our hearts! Remember, too, that the one true offering was made for us by Christ. May our feeble, earthbound offerings be joined to His: “Thine own of Thine own. . . .”

Do Thou Thyself, O Lord, bless our offerings and receive them upon Thine altar above the heavens, remembering and preserving us blameless in Thy divine mysteries.

Tuesday – January 19 – Fourth Kingdoms 2:19-22
Twelfth Reading at the Vigil for Theophany

Blessing of Water: 4 Kingdoms 2:19-22 (2 Kings 2:19-22), especially vs. 21: “Thus says the Lord: ‘I have healed these waters; from them there shall no longer be death or barrenness.’” The Blessing of the Waters is traditionally celebrated twice at Theophany: the Lesser Blessing takes place on the *paramon* (the day of preparation for the feast, a strict fast day), while the Great Blessing takes place on Theophany proper. There is no difference, liturgically and canonically, between the two services. When both blessings are celebrated, some of the faithful practice the pious custom of drinking the waters of the first blessing for health and spiritual refreshment, while sprinkling their homes only with water from the second blessing. However, the water from either service may be used for both purposes.

Today’s reading records the cleansing by the Prophet Elisha of the spring at Jericho. The Blessing of the Waters at Theophany and its associated readings – found in Isaiah 35:1-10 (Jan. 4), 55:1-13 (Jan. 5), and 12:3-6 (Jan. 6) – all invite us to consider the crucial role of water in human life. Even as it meets our physical needs, water serves as spiritual means of cleansing by the Lord in His acts of renewing and healing His creation.

Much can be said about the necessity of water in general for human life and for all the living creatures that share the earth with us. When the Prophet Elisha cleansed the spring that served as Jericho’s water supply, he pronounced the will of God for all water: it should be health-giving and never the cause of “death or barrenness” (4 Kgs 2:21). This explicit declaration of the will of God surely is one motivation for laws such as the United States Clean Water Act of 1972.

As stewards of the earth’s rivers, lakes, seas, and coastal waters, we Orthodox Christians everywhere have an obligation to assure the future of the world’s water resources for drinking, fishing, and washing. We are not free to turn on the spigot and remain mindless of our stake in passing on a heritage of clean, potable, life-supporting water to the generations to come.

The men of Jericho approached the Prophet Elisha for help with the local spring. They realized that their water supply problems involved not only physical contamination but also stemmed from a spiritual source (vs. 19). Truly, as long as hearts and souls are not healed, there are no immediate solutions to the degradation of the world’s waters. Until we approach all the basic elements of the earth with reverence, we labor in vain to improve the water sources for our cities and lands. We heed the Great Blessing that calls water “a gift of sanctification, a deliverance from sins unto healing of soul and body and unto every expedient purpose.”

Let us be watchful over our kinship with water as a fellow creature upon which we depend both physically and spiritually. May God open the eyes of our hearts to the spiritual ministry of water. In the great mystery of His infinite love, God cleansed the water of Jericho in a rite of blessing for the life of that city and for the entire surrounding ecosystem. We drink the divinely blessed waters of Theophany and give thanks as the priest blesses our homes with the sprinkling of water. God, the Holy and Life-giving Trinity, is ever among us granting “redemption, the blessing of Jordan” and providing for the “remission of sins . . . protection against disease . . . destruction of demons” unto the cleansing of our hearts and souls.

Great art Thou, O Lord, and wondrous are Thy works and no words sufficeth to hymn Thy wonders. Glory to Thee, O Lord, glory to Thee.

Thursday – January 20 – Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9
First Reading at Vespers for Saint Euthymios

The Righteous in God’s Hand: *Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9, especially vs. 1:* “*But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God. . .*” Over the next three days we reflect on the Old Testament lessons that are read at Vespers for the feasts of righteous and God-bearing ascetics. The feast days of three famed ascetics – Theodosios, Anthony, and Euthymios – are celebrated this month on January 11, 17, and 20 respectively. The Church calls each of these monastic saints “the Great.” Why are they deemed *great*?

First, we remember that prayers were offered for us at baptism that we might “preserve pure and unpolluted the garment of incorruption,” represented by the white robe with which we were clothed immediately upon emerging from the cleansing waters. All the faithful face great struggles on a daily basis against the attacks of corrupting powers that assail them. The Apostle Paul knew this great struggle as matter of standing “fast in one Spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel” (Phil 1:27) – a glorious greatness!

Great ascetics are “anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let [their] requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6). They meditate on “whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report” (Phil 4:8). Their example calls us to remain in God’s hand and to develop a strong inner spirit of peace in the face of pain and death, accustoming ourselves to the discipline by which God deems one “worthy of Himself” (Wis 3:5).

Wise Solomon teaches that the righteous remain in the hand of God since “no torture will ever touch them” (vs. 1). Obviously many of God’s righteous have suffered torture and great pain, yet their faith lives. A fellow prisoner incarcerated with Father Arseny in a Soviet labor camp reports: “I could see that he was an exceptional man. He had been working like all the others for many years in the same camp. He was old and exhausted but he was still alive, he hadn’t died. He believed in something, he believed so hard that this was obviously the only reason he did not die, but lived.” Father Arseny survived event though “we were in such a state that people fell down dead while still holding their spades and axes.” The righteous often suffer and triumph over great pains.

That which keeps the righteous alive and untouched by torments is the interior life: “He believed so hard that . . . he was still alive.” Yes, violence and pain touch the body, as with every mortal, but *no torture* ever touches them (vs. 1). The verb *touch* used in this text connotes interacting or communicating with pain. Pain and torment carry messages of hate, despair, or degradation. Yet because “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God” (vs. 1) and ever battle to keep themselves there, they fend off the messages of pain and torture.

Even in death, when “they seemed to have died, and their departure was considered to be misfortune, and their passage from us to be their destruction . . . they are at peace” (vss. 2, 3). Why? Because in Christ the righteous ascetic regards death as a delusion of the unwise and godless, of those whom Solomon calls *the undiscerning* (vs. 2). Thus, in the face of death, “their hope is full of immortality” (vs. 4), for they allow only the Spirit of Christ to touch them. Their interaction and communication is with the life-giving Spirit of God, by remaining in God’s hand.

Great inner strength in the face of pain and death must be sustained by discipline: prayer, fasting, godly reading, and the practice of the virtues. By these, as Saint Nikolai of Zicha says, it becomes sweeter to “walk with God without men than to walk with men without God.” May God find us “like gold in a furnace” and accept us “as a whole burnt offering” (vs. 6).

Through the prayers of Thy righteous ascetics, have mercy upon us and save us, O Lord.

Friday – January 21 – Wisdom of Solomon 5:15-6:3
First Reading at Vespers for Saint Euthymios

God’s Intervention: Wisdom 5:15-6:3, especially vs. 16: *“Therefore they shall receive a kingly dwelling of dignity and a crown of beauty from the hand of the Lord, because He will shelter them with His right hand and protect them with His arm.”* Earlier in his book of Wisdom (3:1-9) the wise Solomon reveals the source of the strength that great ascetics exhibit in the face of pain and death: the disciplines of prayer, fasting, godly reading, and rigorous practice of the virtues aided by the grace of God. Such a way of living, as Saint Thalassios asserts, calls the righteous to “the forceful practice of self-control and love, patience, and stillness [to] destroy the passions hidden within us.” God richly blesses those of His people who steadfastly labor to unite themselves to Him that they might become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4).

In this present reading, Solomon discloses that God also works through the social, natural, and political orders of this world in order to shield the righteous and intervene in their struggle to obtain “a crown of beauty” (Wis 5:16). First, Solomon draws upon a well-known theme of Holy Scripture: the Lord as a warrior puts on His armament with “righteousness as a breastplate . . . impartial judgment as a helmet . . . holiness as an unconquerable shield and . . . relentless wrath for a sword” (vss. 18-20). Similar imagery appears in Isaiah. The Lord “saw . . . there was no one to help. He defended them with His arm and established them with His mercy. He put on righteousness as a breastplate and placed the helmet of salvation on His head. He clothed Himself with the garment and covering of vengeance” (Is 59:15-17). Saint Paul uses these same metaphors in Ephesians 6:13-17.

Isaiah sees the Lord act in this manner when He forces the withdrawal of the siege forces of Sennacherib from the fortress walls of Jerusalem (4 Kg 18:13-19:37). During that siege, God leads Isaiah to counsel the King of Judah: “Thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, ‘He shall not enter this city nor shoot an arrow there, nor will a shield come before it, nor will he build a siege mound against it’” (4 Kg 19:32). Isaiah reports “that the angel of the Lord . . . struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians. When they arose early in the morning, all the dead bodies were there” (4 Kg 19:35). God is both active in and effective at intervening in the affairs of nations to achieve His will among men.

Solomon reveals how the Lord also uses the forces of nature to effect His will on behalf of His righteous ones. His “well-aimed flashes of lightning will strike . . . as from a well-drawn bow of clouds; and hailstones full of anger will be hurled as from an engine of war” (Wis 21-22). Likewise, “the water of the sea will be vexed with them, and the rivers will wash over them severely. A powerful wind will oppose them, and like a storm it will winnow them away” (vss. 22-23). These verses recall how the Lord Jesus “arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace, be still!’ And the wind ceased and there was a great calm” (Mk 4:39).

After Solomon ponders the Lord God’s capacity to intervene in the affairs of men and nations, he concludes the present passage with a warning to the leaders of the world who “take pride in yourself over a multitude of nations. For power was given to you from the Lord, and your lordship from the Most High, who will . . . examine closely your plans” (Wis 6:2-3). Our Lord Jesus Himself says to Pontius Pilate, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above” (Jn 19:11). We would do well to consider both ourselves and the nations, for God surely rules this world.

Teach us, O Lord, to treat all that comes to us throughout the day with peace of soul and with the firm conviction that Thy will governs all.

Saturday – January 22 – Wisdom of Solomon 4:7-15
Third Reading at Vespers for Saint Euthymios

God-pleasing Maturity: *Wisdom of Solomon 4:7-15, especially vs. 12:* “For envy arising from lack of judgment obscures what is good, and a whirling of desire undermines an innocent heart.” The Prophet David, among other Biblical writers, was acquainted with the Lord’s decree concerning ripe old age: “He that dwelleth in the help of the Most High . . . With length of days will I satisfy him, and I will show him My salvation” (Ps 90:1,16).

In Scripture old age often is regarded as the Lord’s reward for those who fear Him (Prv 10:28). Thus, among God’s people elders are highly honored. In the present reading Solomon introduces an important modification to this tradition without weakening its truth. Observe that he equates honorable old age with spiritual maturity: “For old age is not honored for its length of existence, nor measured by its number of years; but discernment is gray hair for mankind, and a spotless life is the maturity of old age” (Wis 4:8-9).

Having shifted the measure of honorable maturity away from the mere accumulation of years to godly understanding and a blameless life, Solomon illustrates his point with the example of Enoch (vss. 10-15). One of the antediluvian patriarchs, Enoch was so pleasing to God that he was taken “early from the midst of evil” (vs. 14), “lest evil change his understanding or deceit deceive his soul” (vs. 11). Enoch is one two patriarchs after Adam (Noah being the other) described as “well-pleasing to God” (Gn 5:24), which is the stated reason for the Lord’s shortening his life and taking him directly into heaven.

Enoch’s case is especially important, for he embodies Solomon’s more exacting definition of old age. Among the antediluvians, Methuselah enjoyed the longest life at 969 years. The rest lived 900 years or longer with the exception of Lamech, Noah’s father, who died at 777, and Enoch, whose lifespan was only 365 years (Gn 5). Let us examine more closely what Solomon tells us about Enoch.

First, as we have learned, Enoch is “pleasing to God and loved by Him” (Wis 4:10). He meets Solomon’s criteria of spiritual *understanding* and a *blameless life*. His example reveals how “bereft of the life of the righteous” we truly are, to use the words of Saint Andrew of Crete when he prompts us to strive for closer communion with the Lord.

Second, Enoch’s direct translation to heaven is revealed as God’s provident solution to his life among sinners, delivering him from the danger that evil might “change his understanding or . . . deceive his soul” (vs. 11). We do well to pay attention to the state of our souls!

Third, Solomon provides a keen analysis of the seductive attraction of evil for the human heart, soul, and mind, highlighting especially evil’s fascinating, relentless, and perverting power over the *innocent heart* (vs. 12). The word for *heart* in the original is *nous*, an inclusive term for the interior life that often refers to the innermost center of our heart or spirit.

Next, Solomon rests his case for redefining true old age by noting that “in a short time [Enoch] fulfilled long years” (vs. 13) by serving God’s purpose. This is a truth to consider whenever we sing or hear the prayer, “God grant you many years.” God in His goodness suffers long with us that we may come “to repentance” (Rom 2:4), as the Apostle Paul reminds us.

Finally, recognize that all too often many of us *see* “but [do] not understand nor take such a thing to heart, that the Lord’s grace and mercy are with His elect” (Wis 4:14-15). Time is short. Let us strive that our souls may indeed be “pleasing to the Lord.”

My soul, arise! Why are you sleeping? The end is drawing near. Awake, then, and be watchful, that Christ our God may spare you, who is everywhere present and fills all things.

Sunday – January 23 – Proverb 10:7,6; 3:13-16; 8:6, 32, 35, 4, 12, 14, 17, 5, 6-9; 22:21, Tone 6
First Reading at Vespers for Saint Gregory the Theologian

The Blessing of the Lord: Selections from Proverbs, especially 8:6: “Obey me, for I speak sacred things, and from my lips I will bring forth things that are true.” The title of this meditation comes from Proverbs 10:7, but it is also the lead phrase of the priest’s blessing at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy. When our priests bless, you and I receive that blessing by God’s grace. This entire selection of verses from the Proverbs of Solomon reveals two truths: first, what type of person will surely receive the blessing of the Lord, and second, what benefits that blessing confers upon him. These verses encourage us to labor with the Lord Jesus that we may become people in whom the priest’s blessing is truly realized, experienced, and known.

Each of the selected verses identifies the characteristics of those who will receive God’s blessing. They are *righteous* (10:7), *with understanding* (10:6), and *come near* to wisdom (3:16). Starting with chapter eight, Wisdom personally exhorts us to be among those who will receive divine blessing. She issues a command that will be repeated later: “Obey me” (8:6). What are the credentials for speaking with such authority? “I speak sacred things, and from my lips I will bring forth things that are true” (8:6).

Those sure to receive God’s blessing *obey* (8:6); they *hearken* to wisdom and *guard wisdom’s ways* (8:32); they *love* and *seek* wisdom (8:17). For them “all things are evident” because they “understand,” and what they learn is *true* because it comes from authentic knowledge (8:9). By applying what wisdom reveals to their hearts, they are gladdened and able to express wisdom readily with their lips (22:21).

What, then, does the blessing of the Lord confer on these lovers of wisdom? First, they are “kept safe from the heat,” especially from being “blasted by the wind at harvest time” (10:6). The bane of every farmer is to have an entire crop ruined by destructive winds at harvest time. Every labor – guarding against predators, cultivating, irrigating – can be wasted in a brief moment of wild weather.

God’s blessed ones, however, are able to receive such disasters from His hand, for divine wisdom aids them in surviving the spiritual devastation that breaks men who rely solely upon “treasures of gold and silver” and “precious stones” (3:14-15). Many evils surround us on every side: terrorism, vandals, sickness, accidents, betrayals, infidelities, ugliness, abandonment, lies, perversion. The weight of many misfortunes bears down upon us! But rest assured that “nothing evil will withstand” wisdom (vs. 15), especially when that wisdom is “well known” and near at hand (vs. 16). Do not delay: begin seeking wisdom from this very moment!

Wisdom speaks of *sacred things* (8:6) in matters directly related to God: *truth* (8:7) as well as *life* and *grace* are “prepared from the Lord” (vs. 34). *Counsel*, *knowledge*, and *understanding* (vs. 12) are woven into the fabric of wisdom, giving us *safety*, *discernment*, and *strength* (vs. 14). These things truly are sacred and worthy of our imperfect struggle to obey!

Indeed, let us apply wisdom’s ways, praying that Christ our God becomes our Wisdom and establishes our hearts (22:20). The Word of God who took on our humanity heals us by the “tree of life” (15:4) upon which He gave His life for us.

Help us, O Wisdom from above, to rise above earthly darkness and draw near to Thee, who shinest in our darkness, that we may become light as Thou dost promise.

Monday – January 24 – Wisdom of Sirach 51:1-12
Reading for Saint Gregory the Theologian

A Confessor’s Prayer: Wisdom of Sirach 51:1-12, especially vs. 11-12: “My prayer was heard, for You saved me from destruction, and rescued me from a time of evil. Therefore, I will thank and praise You, and I will bless the name of the Lord.” This prayer by an ancient confessor who lived before Christ applies to godly defenders of Orthodox truth such as Saint Gregory the Theologian. Ever a defender of the Nicene truth, he spells out what his integrity cost him: “What sufferings have we failed to undergo? Ill-usage? Threats? Banishment? Plunder? . . . The desecration of temples by the blood of the saints, till . . . they became charnel-houses.” And his response? “And for which of these have we requited the wrongdoers? For the wheel of fortune gave us the power of rightly treating those who so treated us” – yet he never took revenge.

Saint Gregory’s enemies rejoiced when he left public office; they were delighted to be rid of him and rejoiced again at his death. Yet, as Father Alexander Schmemmann affirms, “Death is above all a ‘spiritual reality,’ of which one can partake while being alive, from which one can be free while lying in the grave. Death here is man’s ‘separation from Life,’ that is, from God who is the only Giver of life. . . .” What his enemies considered death was in fact life for Gregory.

A cursory examination of the present passage reveals a poem of thanksgiving to God for deliverance. The author of the prayer, Jesus ben Sirach, was a well-educated teacher of Old Testament law. He penned this prayer sometime before 132 BC. Sirach’s prayer reflects gratitude for salvation from some unnamed physical danger, as this line tell us: “You redeemed my body from destruction” (vs. 2).

When read in light of the Gospel, this passage wonderfully demonstrates how those mature in faith witness fearlessly in the face of afflictions including, pain, torture, and the prospect of death itself. At times we, like Gregory, are caught up in circumstances that demand that we renounce our deepest convictions concerning life in Christ – or at least face the possibility of separation from “Christ who is our life” (Col 3:4) – and retreat from the Truth. If at such a time we lift up our supplication and pray for deliverance, God does not forsake us in the “days of affliction” (Sir 51:9-10). Rather, we are delivered “from suffocation by an encircling fire . . . from the depths of the belly of Hades” (vss. 4-5).

Note that the prayer reveals in detail how God will act to save us from all manner of spiritual death. First, Sirach speaks of “the snare of a slanderous tongue” (vs. 2). Those who attempt to draw us away from the truth of Christ often defame both us and God, considering Him merely a figment of our imagination or a psychological device for overcoming stress. The prayer next mentions “being devoured” (vs. 3), which means a confrontation with anger. There is always the temptation to return hate for hate, anger for anger, bitterness for bitterness – but such a response is death for our souls!

The prayer ultimately directs us to the true source of strength under duress. “Then I remembered Your mercy, O Lord. . . . I sent up my supplication from the earth and prayed about the instability caused by death” (vs. 8-9). We find life by crying out to Life Himself: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me a sinner!” God turns us away from the world’s invitation to abandon the truth and, at the same time, He fills us with life: He will save us “from destruction, and rescue [us] from a time of evil” (vs. 11). Truly, let us say with Sirach, “Therefore I will thank and praise You, and I will bless the name of the Lord” (vs. 12).

O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance, granting to Thy people victory over all their enemies, and by the power of Thy Cross, preserving Thy Kingdom.

Tuesday – January 25 – Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-8:9
Third Reading at Vespers for Saint Gregory the Theologian

All About Wisdom: *Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-8:9, especially vss. 6:12, 8:4:* “*Wisdom is radiant and unfading and. . . she is the initiate of the knowledge of God. . .*” Truths concerning wisdom were revealed by God to His ancient people and recorded in the Scriptures as one of the legacies handed down by Israel in preparation for the coming of Christ. These selected verses from chapters six, seven, and eight of the Wisdom of Solomon were chosen for us by the Holy Fathers because they provide insight for those seeking to gain spiritual discernment, to defeat evil, and to receive counsel through knowledge of God.

Often in these particular verses *wisdom* is personified, a revelation that led to the recognition in New Testament times of Christ as the *Wisdom of God*. As Saint Paul says, “We preach Christ crucified. . . the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23-24). Some readers have questioned why Christ is identified with these verses in light of the fact that feminine pronouns are used in speaking of wisdom. However, this detail poses no barrier to a Christian interpretation because the words for wisdom in both Hebrew and Greek – *hokma* and *sophia*, respectively – simply happen to be feminine nouns.

See how Christ our Wisdom, speaking through these verses, encourages us to seek wisdom from Him that we might gain *discernment*. His “radiant and unfading [nature] . . . is easily perceived by those who love” Him (Wis 6:12). The Word of God became the incarnate God-man who enables us to grasp, in our variable human nature, that all true wisdom derives from God. Furthermore, we know from the experience of God’s grace that wisdom is prevenient and “comes upon those who long to know her beforehand” (vs. 13), for “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

The discernment we receive in Christ guides every phase of our struggle against evil – another blessing from true Wisdom. Remember that from the very beginning, after we have renounced “Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride” at our baptism, we turn confidently from the darkness of this age to Christ the Light. In the same vein, the ancient poet teaches that while “night succeeds the light . . . evil cannot overcome wisdom” (Wis 7:30). This phrase surely resonates in our ears, reminding us of the Paschal summons: “Come ye, take light from the Light, that is never overtaken by night. Come, glorify Christ, risen from the dead.”

God gives us strength to love righteousness rather than evil ways. “For wisdom teaches self-control, discernment, righteousness and courage, concerning which things there is nothing more valuable in the life of man” (8:7).

The guidance and presence of Christ within us gives “good counsel and encouragement in cares and sorrows” (8:9), for He “appears to [us] favorably in [our] paths and meets [us] in every thought” (6:16). The ancient teacher dimly glimpses the profound truth that we now confess in the Nicene Creed concerning Christ, who is “the only begotten . . . of the Father . . . begotten not made; of one essence with the Father.” He describes wisdom to the extent that he is able before the Lord’s incarnate appearance: wisdom is “the initiate of the knowledge of God” (8:4) and “the Master of all loves” Him (vs. 3). Jesus Himself reveals this same truth in John 5:20: “For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does.”

Ought we not to take Divine Wisdom to live with us (vs. 9)? Saint John, the beloved disciple, says, “If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father” (1 Jn 2:24). Be assured, He may be found by those who seek Him (Wis 6:12).

Thou art wisdom, righteousness from God, and redemption for us, O Christ our God!

Wednesday – January 26 – Isaiah 43:9-14

A Kellia Reading for Recovery of the Relics of Saint John Chrysostom

Conviction and Confidence: *Isaiah 43:9-14, especially vs. 12:* “*I proclaimed, and I saved. . . .*” Today we celebrate the return of the relics of Saint John Chrysostom to Constantinople from the ancient Black Sea village of Comana, where the Saint had reposed after a grueling forced march across southeastern Turkey. We can be sure that when Saint John died our Lord met and welcomed the faithful archbishop: “You are My [witness], and I am a witness” (vs. 12) and “My [servant] whom I chose” (vs. 10).

We celebrate the earthly return of Saint John’s relics because he unfailingly witnessed to the God who is, “and besides [whom] there is no one who saves” (vs. 11). God revealed Himself to the Prophet Isaiah, in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, and finally through saints like John Chrysostom, proving that His words always are true and confirmed by active, saving results.

In verses ten through thirteen, God declares the certainty of the effect of His word. He asserts, “You are My witnesses, and I am a witness . . . and My Servant whom I chose.” He challenges His people, both ancient and modern, to “show an instance where My word is not proven true.” In the creation God spoke and “it was so” (Gn 1:30-31). Again, at the Red Sea, the Lord said, “I will be glorified in Pharaoh and over all his army. . . and . . . not so much as one of them remained” (Ex. 14:17, 28). God is changeless and sure to save.

God names His *Servant* as a witness to His unfailing ways (Is 43:10). Thus Christ our God says to a father yearning for his son to be healed, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.” Then “the father of the child cried out and said with tears, ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!’” Jesus “rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!’ Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him” (Mk 9:17-26).

Need we mention the prophecy of our Savior concerning His Passion and Resurrection, through which He “let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36)? As Saint Peter confidently proclaims to us, “the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). The word of God comes to pass. God speaks, and then He saves. To know the unchanging God opens our hearts and fills our minds with confidence, so that the faithful choose to speak His saving words with amazing certainty and fearlessness.

When a silver statue of the Empress Eudoxia was erected near the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople, the boisterous celebrations distracted those attending services there. Saint John complained that such “noisy entertainments were an insult to the church” and denounced the instigators in withering terms. When his honest but unwelcome remarks were reported to the imperial palace, John was sent into exile by the empress.

Yet even in exile Saint John was not silenced, nor could his word be turned aside. He continued to actively correspond with his many supporters. In an attempt to silence him fully, the Empress Eudoxia ordered him to the extreme northern border of the Byzantine Empire by forced march. Short of his destination, exhausted and ill, John died near Comana. Reports tell of Eudoxia’s subsequent death and how her grave quaked until Saint John’s relics were returned to Constantinople. She lay in shame while he came home in triumph, glorified as a saint. His divine, saving words remain as true and powerful as ever today.

Thy voice, O Lord, is majestic, giving strength unto Thy people and blessing us with peace.

**Thursday – January 27 – Wisdom of Solomon 7:30, 1:8, 2:1-22,
Second Reading at Vespers for the Recovery of the Relics of Saint John Chrysostom**

Our Unseen War: *Wisdom of Solomon, especially vs. 2:22:* “*But they did not know the mysteries of God, nor . . . judge the reward of blameless souls.*” At baptism and chrismation, we commit ourselves to a lifelong inward battle, prompting the Church to pray: “Keep him ever a warrior invincible in every attack of those who assail him and us; and make us all victors, even unto the end, through Thy crown incorruptible.” Saint Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain concurs in his *Unseen Warfare*, which “teaches not the art of visible and sensory warfare, and speaks not about visible, bodily foes but about the unseen and inner struggle, which every Christian undertakes from the moment of his baptism, when he makes a vow to God to fight for Him, to the glory of His divine Name, even unto death.”

Verse 7:30 in the present selection announces the battle: “But evil cannot overcome wisdom.” Here we encounter the real possibility of victory as well. But be clear: victory is neither an absolute given nor a certainty – it remains only a potential outcome. Overcoming evil depends on whether or not we choose to take up our interior struggle under the shield of divine wisdom. If we choose to go it alone, we will surely taste bitterness, emptiness, and defeat. These are unnecessary and tragic, for ultimately evil is a vulnerable foe, an enemy with a fatal flaw. The key to victory, therefore, lies within us and depends upon persisting under the protection of wisdom.

This warning follows: “No one who speaks unrighteous things will escape notice” (1:8). Our ancient foe watches to see who is liable to fall, who is focusing on outward things and neglecting the inner field of combat. Those who heed only the signals of sensory messages, the attractions that advertise pleasure and the appeals of momentary delight at the expense of truth, justice, and love, are sure to be drawn into the web of the enemy and become his victims. It is so unnecessary! Christ our God gives us the gift of living memory, a *remembrance* that participates in life and blesses with a foretaste of the age to come.

Let us focus now on the verses 2:1-12. The wise Solomon discloses dangerous intelligence from the enemy war room, so that we may hear the evil mind railing against us. He records actual words of defeat so that we may listen closely within ourselves for signs of corruption in our thinking as a result of this deadly propaganda. These verses are worthy of close study. Yes, life is short, and who escapes pain? However, it is a bald-faced lie to say that “there is no cure for the death of a man; for no one has been known to return from Hades” (vs. 1). Christ is risen! He has trampled down death by death. He is the Giver of life – He is our cure!

Might makes right is another lie (vs. 11). What could have appeared weaker or more inconsequential to those who crucified the Lord Jesus than this Galilean peasant? Pilate was aghast at His quiet retort: “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above” (Jn 19:11). His enemies said of Him, “He is useless to us and opposes our deeds; he denounces us for our sins against the law and accuses us of sins against our upbringing” (Wis 2:12). Do not be taken in by their materialistic confidence. The Spirit gives life!

The important things are “knowledge of God” and becoming “a child of the Lord” (vs. 13) and living a “life . . . unlike that of others” – that is, following the Way that goes “in a different direction” (vs. 15). In your life you *do* have God as your Father (vs. 16). The words of the Lord Jesus *are* true (vs. 17)! His gentleness and patience endure (vs. 19). In “the mysteries of God . . . the wages of holiness” are paid and there is “reward of blameless souls” (vs. 22). God brings us “down to the gates of Hades” *but leads us back again* (16:13)!

And Thou, O Lord, “give grace to the humble and oppose the arrogant” – Proverbs 3:37

Friday – January 28 – Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16; 7:30; 8:2-4, 7-9, 13, 18; 8:21-9:4; 9:10-13
Third Reading at Vespers for Recovery of the Relics of Saint John Chrysostom

By Grace: Selections from the Wisdom of Solomon, especially vs. 9:4: “Give me the wisdom that sits by Your throne, and do not reject me from among Your servants. . . .” Since from apostolic times the Church has known Christ as the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24), a most instructive exercise while reading these verses is to substitute the word *Christ* for *wisdom*. (Yes, you do have to change the pronouns and make a few other small adjustments: for example, in Wisdom 8:21, *Christ* is identified as God’s gift to us, and in vs. 9:10, change the preposition *with* to *within*.) What a righteous portrait emerges!

It is also possible to amend the passages in a related way by substituting *the saints* for *wisdom*, for the blessed ones certainly teach us “self-control, discernment, righteousness, and courage” (8:7). Again, you must make certain changes in the wording, but what an eye-opener! If we take this sort of substitution one step further, we find in these verses a sketch of what God is calling us to become. Solomon truly guides us toward sainthood.

Another helpful approach is to replace *wisdom* with *grace*, for by grace God gives “good counsel and encouragement in cares and sorrows” (8:9) – no doubt! We can also add the phrase, “By His grace, God . . .” to a verse such as 8:7, so that it reads, “By His grace God teaches self-control.” Such an approach helps us understand many of these verses. What is there of *things of old* and *the things to come* that God does not know? Yet by His grace, through Scripture and the Holy Fathers, God surely reveals much of what we urgently need to learn from the past and of events yet to come. Unless I know that I am capable of betrayal, why would I need to declare in the precommunion prayers, “Neither will I give Thee a kiss as did Judas; but like the thief will I confess Thee”?

“I would not be self-controlled unless God gave me” the grace of *discernment* to know that the capacity to restrain from evil is His gift (8:21). “I entreated the Lord and besought Him, and with all my heart, I said: ‘O God of our fathers and the Lord of mercy, who made all things by Your word. . . . Give me the [grace that comes from Christ, who] sits by *Your throne*, and do not reject me from among your servants” (8:21, 9:1, 4)!

Consider it all joy that He allows each one of us to be counted among His servant (vs. 5). What a gracious act on His part, that He moves our hearts to submit ourselves to Him: “Do you unite yourself unto Christ?” The grace of God enables me to continue responding, “I do.” The grace of God gives me the necessary resolve to meet slurs, doubts, and questions with renewed conviction, and to mean it when I say, “I believe in Him as King and God.” Imperfect though I am, by the grace of God I remain a servant of Christ, my King and my God.

How else am I able to *labor* for Christ, to be *well-pleasing* to Him, except by His grace (vs. 10)? I falter, I fudge, I fall asleep – truly, I am the unprofitable servant. Yet from my poorest efforts, by God’s grace, comes service that is blessed, fruitful, and productive – even a blessing to those who need it. How are my efforts turned from mediocre into good? The grace of Lord guides me *wisely in my actions* and guards me with *glory* (vs. 11). There is no other explanation. To God “be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (Gal 1:5).

Yes, it is wise to confess, as great Solomon does in all his wisdom, that “the reasoning of mortals is cowardly, and our intents are unsafe” (Wis 9:14). Were it not for the good will of God and His amazing grace, His enabling gift, “what man [would] know the counsel of God? Or who [would] think about what the Lord wills?” (vs. 13). Count it a blessing!

“O God of our fathers and the Lord of mercy who made all things by Your word” (9:1), give me the grace of Christ who sits with You and “do not reject me from among Your servants” (vs. 4).

Saturday – January 29 – Deuteronomy 1:6, 8-11, 15-17
First Reading at Vespers for the Three Holy Hierarchs

Leadership: Deuteronomy 1:6, 8-11, 15-17, especially vs. 15: “So I took from you wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men and made them leaders over you. . . .” At the Feast of the Three Holy Hierarchs, the Church reminds us that the divine teaching of Saints Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom have taken firm hold “in all the earth and sea. . . . The regions are well organized by their divine laws, and are united in one Orthodox opinion.” These three leaders laid down wise guidelines, clear expositions, and primary foundations for the Church’s subsequent life. They were truly led by God to establish the governing and management of the Church – not merely for the fourth century but throughout all centuries, including the present one.

The first two readings are taken from what can be called a *farewell address* and final testament of another great leader of God’s people, the Prophet Moses. The ancient seer spells out foundational principles that have remained effective for leaders during every vicissitude that has befallen the people of God over four millennia, including the ultimate revelation of God in our Lord Jesus Christ. Quite simply, Moses outlines standards for leaders of the Church and describes methods for their appointment and the tasks common to those called upon to govern.

Leaders of God’s people should be “wise, understanding, and knowledgeable” (vs. 15). When speaking of wisdom, Moses points beyond the type of intelligence required for merely human, worldly enterprises. In Scripture wisdom always is traceable to God, who in the second Person of the Trinity is Himself often called Holy Wisdom.

We may be confident of finding wisdom in a man who exhibits true *fear of the Lord* (Prv 9:10) and seeks God’s mind in all his ways. Furthermore, true wisdom, when established in a godly leader, produces understanding of the needs, pains, hopes, and struggles of others. God’s leaders must understand those whom they govern. And finally, godly wisdom and understanding come generally to those who have proven themselves in the course of long, extensive training. David, Israel’s most exemplary king, began his development as a teenager serving in Saul’s court. He did not assume public leadership in his own tribe of Judah until he was thirty years old, and he was nearly forty when he began to reign over all Israel (2 Kgs 5:4-5).

Church leadership has always been organized hierarchically, no doubt because all rulers derive their authority from a single Head, God the Lord. Thus Moses appointed the “leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens” (Dt 1:15). Yet he directed the people to first “choose . . . men from among your tribes” (vs. 13), so that his appointments were drawn from a pool of candidates nominated by the people, a practice still followed by the Church today.

No leader of men can govern single-handedly, as Moses well knew (vs. 9). Subordinates are required to help cope with all the “labors . . . burdens, and . . . lawsuits” (vs. 12). The standards for leaders of God’s people to follow are *righteous judgment* (vs. 16), *impartiality*, and *treating small and the great as equals* (vs. 17), brushing aside respect for status that might corrupt or limit fair decisions. Woe to any Church leader who succumbs to decision-making based upon popular opinion. Rather, all leaders in the Church are to refer difficult decisions to their superior (vs. 17), or to colleagues and synods.

O Master, fill Thy servants, the clergy of the Church, with all faith, love, power, and holiness through the inspiration and rich bounties of Thy holy and life-giving Spirit.

Sunday – January 30 – Deuteronomy 10:14-21, Tone 7
Second Reading at Vespers for the Three Holy Hierarchs

In Praise of God: Deuteronomy 10:14-21, especially vs. 21: “He is your boast and your God, who did these great and glorious things for you, the things you saw with your own eyes.” Orthodox Christians are above all a people of praise and worship: “Let our mouths be filled with Thy praise, O Lord, that we may sing of Thy glory.” Especially let us be grateful to the three great hierarchs, Saints Basil, Gregory, and John Chrysostom, for providing such rich and wondrous hymns and prayers for opening our mouths in praise and exaltation of God.

The liturgy used most frequently by the Church, the one that resounds in our hearts and springs so easily to our lips, comes from Saint John Chrysostom. The Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great sustains us in the days of Great Lent as we struggle with our wounds and our sins. It revives us again and again with the challenge, “Who is sufficient to speak of Thy mighty acts, to make all Thy praises to be heard, or to tell of all Thy wonders at every season?”

And let us never forget, as we delight in the glory of Pascha, that the very words of the Paschal Canon come from two orations of Saint Gregory the Theologian: “It is the day of Resurrection, be illumined for the Feast, and embrace one another. Let us speak, brothers, even unto those who hate us, and forgive all for the sake of the Resurrection, and so together let us cry out: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life.”

The present reading from Deuteronomy comprises two exhortations to the Church given in the gleaming light of the august God to whom belongs the heavens and “also the earth and everything in it” (vs. 14). In its verses Moses proclaims the majesty of God and urges us to “serve Him . . . hold fast to Him” and swear by His name (vs. 20).

First, the great seer reminds us: “Indeed, heaven and heaven of heaven belong to the Lord your God, also the earth and everything in it” (vs. 14). He calls us to meditate on the immensity, power, delicacy, and complexity of the universe, which in our time has been illumined by modern science. What a call to adoration! We observe a cosmos that measures light years beyond us, while within us it holds the tiniest mesons and particles – and yet it joins us to every other living creature. All is from Thy hand, O Lord of the heavens and of the heaven of heavens! Rightly we sing, O Lord, that “there are no bounds to the majesty of Thy holiness, and just art Thou in all Thy works”!

Moses heightens the contrast: “The Lord chose your fathers to love them; and He chose their seed after them, you above all nations, as it is this day” (vs. 15). His words foreshadow the condescension of God the Word: “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). The indescribably infinite God loves us with a tender compassion, ineffable and unimaginable.

And so, says Moses, “circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stiff-necked any longer” (Dt 10:16). Submit yourselves to God; open your hearts to Him! Having brought us to our knees before the Lord, the prophet once more lifts our eyes to the supreme majesty of God: “For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome” (vs. 17). Moses proclaims Him as the God Who executes “justice for the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow” (vs. 18). He requires us likewise to do justice for and to love the dependent and needy, “for you were resident aliens in the land of Egypt” (vs. 19). Thank God we have been delivered from a world that enslaves men and women.

Beloved of the Lord, fear God with a holy fear and be lifted up to His presence. May we always reveal Him as our true praise, glory, and life (vss. 20-21).

Blessed be the name of the Lord, henceforth and forever more!

Monday – January 31 – Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9
Third Reading at Vespers for the Three Holy Hierarchs

Champions of the Holy Trinity: Wis 3:1-9, especially vs. 9: *“Those who trust in [God] will understand truth, and the faithful shall continue with [Christ] in love, because grace and mercy are upon [the Holy Spirit’s] elect.”* We can easily replace the pronouns in verse 9 with the names of the Trinity, and perhaps for this reason the Church selected this passage to be read at vespers on the feast of the Three Hierarchs. The Church Fathers chose this reading wisely, for our Trinitarian God worked actively in the lives of these bishop-saints, even as He blesses all His saints.

The passage encourages us to be confident of God’s protection for those He deems righteous (vss. 1-3), because He keeps their souls in all their ways during this life. He grants them grace and strength, finding them worthy of Himself (vss. 1-5). The saints and, for that matter, all of Christ’s faithful disciples are in God’s hand when they are tested (vss. 1, 5-6). Truly, the faithful in Christ are assured that in “the time of their visitation they will shine forth” (vs. 7) and come to rule over nations and peoples.

How does God keep and protect the righteous? It should be clear that first and foremost the Lord guards our hearts and souls. The history of the Church is replete with the stories of the martyrs and confessors who stood up under torture and repression, always glorifying and honoring the Lord. They endured blows, deprivation, and assaults bravely and with equanimity. The cause of such endurance is plain: their souls were in the hand of God (vs. 1).

When the faithful meet death, pain, or the loss of homes, honor and fortunes, it appears in the eyes of the world as sheer misfortune (vs. 2). And yet the amazing message of this reading is that true confessors and martyrs for Christ “are at peace” (vs. 3), leading us to ask, “What makes such peace possible?”

While we may say that saints are people of conviction, Solomon the Wise brings us to an even deeper conclusion. First, note that he says “their hope is full of immortality” (vs. 4). Saint Paul develops this same point: “We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom 5:3-5).

At root, the martyrs’ perseverance is not mere conviction, but love brought by the Holy Spirit. Anyone truly transformed by the love of God can, in the words of Solomon, be tested “like gold in a furnace and accepted . . . as a whole burnt offering” (Wis 3:6).

Melting down is the sure way to assay the true worth of a substance, for impurities are revealed in the fire. This applies even to our human convictions. Our transient beliefs will burn up, for as Saint Paul says, “No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw . . . the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is” (1 Cor 3:11-13).

The apostle’s allusion to the testing fire brings us to the moment of God’s judgment. Concerning this, Solomon speaks of how the righteous will fare in “the time of their visitation” (Wis 3:7). He directs our eyes away from whatever may be the earthly condition of the saints: torture (vs. 1), death and misfortune, (vs. 2), destruction (vs. 3), punishment (vs. 4), and chastening (vs. 5).

Their *visitation* will be their vindication. In the end, they will become standards for God over nations and peoples (vs. 8), because His grace and mercy are with them.

Thou hast taken the crown of Thy teachers for the enjoyment of Thy blessings, O Lord.