

March 1st - Friday of the Third Week before Lent
1 John 2:7-17

Lust: 1 John 2:7-17, especially vs. 17: “*And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.*” Yesterday we focused on sin, the first of six key truths drawn from Saint John’s first epistle. Today the focus is on lust (in Greek, *epithymia*). In our sexually over-charged society, we most often associate lust with inordinate sexual craving.

However, our epistle writer uses *lust* in the broader sense of any strong “desire for, inclination toward, or passionate attachment.” Just the word “desire” has both negative and positive connotations in English, depending on the context, so does the term “lust” among New Testament authors writing in Greek (see Mt 13:17; Lk 15:16; Phil 1:23). However, we most commonly find *epithymia* used negatively in Scripture, as exemplified by our opening quote (1 Jn 2:17).

As Orthodox Christians, we usually consider “lusts” to be the equivalent of the passions. Saint Gregory of Sinai, along with other Church Fathers, does not consider the passions to be evil. God, he writes, “did not make [the soul] have rage and animal lust; He endowed the soul only with appetitive power and with the courage to be lovingly attracted,” i.e., to have healthy, natural desire (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 108).

Desire is transformed into lust when we exclude God from the picture. Without God, the natural powers of our soul become corrupt. Abba Sisoës, one of the Desert Fathers, stresses along with Saint James that “each man is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire” (Jas 1:14).

With Saint John the Evangelist, the problem with desire is not something inherent in the order of creation. Rather, the difficulty arises from our enslavement to the things of this world and to our physical being (1 Jn 2:15-16). God made the world, forming our very flesh and our eyes, yet sin turns even our natural desires into lust.

What is Saint John’s solution to desire run amok? What we do when lust separates us from God? First, we must seek God’s grace to resist hatred, craving, and lust. We are renewed and supported by a power greater than lust and the unruly passions, “because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining” (vs. 8). This new condition is God’s gift to us in Christ, if we only embrace Him.

Second, Saint John gives us “an old commandment” from the Lord – a commandment that existed from the *beginning* of time (vs. 7). We are to love one another and “abide in the light” so that there will be “no cause for stumbling” (vs. 10).

This spiritual condition in Christ is described using several images. Our *sins are forgiven* for His name’s sake (vs. 12). We *know Him* who is from the beginning (vss. 13-14, Jn 1:1). We “have overcome the wicked one” in Christ (1 Jn 2:13). We are strong because “the word of God abides” in us (vs. 14). We strive to care for those whom God introduces into our lives with a passionless love.

Since God’s word is at work in us, the beloved apostle counsels us to resist the wicked one who is already defeated by the Lord Jesus. We become vulnerable only if we allow Satan to entice us into shifting our love from God to His creation: “Do not love the world or the things in the world” (vs. 15).

When we love created things, our love for God diminishes and “the love of the Father is not in” us (vs. 15). Without the life blood of God’s love, our hearts wither. Then “all that is in the world” (vs. 17) and our lust for the flesh takes over. We lust after the things we see, rather than directing our desire toward our unseen Father (vs. 16). In Christ, however, we may overcome lust and abide forever (vs. 17)!

To Thee I come, O Christ, blinded in my soul’s eyes, crying unto Thee in repentance, “Thou art the Light; let me abide in Thee that I not stumble but overcome the wicked one.”

– Sunday of the Blind Man

March 2nd - Saturday of the Third Week before Lent
2 Timothy 3:1-9

Godliness vs. Self-Love: 2 Timothy 3:1-9, especially vss. 2, 5: “For men will be lovers of themselves. . . . having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away.” Although the epistle readings for today and tomorrow are drawn from Saint Paul’s writings, they share the concern with sin and lust found in Saint John’s first epistle. For example, Saint Paul warns us that men of the “last days” (vs. 1) “will be lovers of themselves” (vs. 2). Such people may appear religious, but they lack the depth of true conviction and practice (vs. 5). Weighed down under sins and lusts (vs. 6), these men stifle the “knowledge of the truth” (vs. 7) and confuse the immature and gullible.

If we merely dally with holy truth, we obscure true piety and godliness. Armed with apostolic wisdom, however, we can resist error and the false piety it spawns often in the form of counterfeit religion (vs. 8). First, we must examine and cleanse our own lives of ungodliness, so that the Holy Spirit will illumine us and guard us.

Saint Paul identifies several characteristics that distinguish true and false godliness. We encounter pious souls who love God, but we also meet *seemingly* devout persons who are “lovers of themselves” (vs. 2).

According to Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, “So often when we say ‘I love you,’ we say it with a large ‘I’ and a small ‘you.’ We use love as a conjunction instead of it being a verb implying action.” In loving God we encounter this same gulf between outward form and true substance, unless we can arrive at “that time when there is a longing in the heart for God Himself, not for His gifts, but God Himself” (*Beginning to Pray*, p. xvi, xviii).

Self-love and love for God are at polar opposites on the spectrum. Since few of us are entirely free of self-love, we must ask ourselves: “Toward which of these loves am I moving?” We may also be tempted to wonder about others, speculating as to which kind of love is manifested in their lives – in which direction are they moving?”

However, we are easily deceived. Many nice people are also very self-serving; they have the outer form of godliness, but choke its roots before they can sink deeply into the heart. There is no objective tests for identifying empty piety. Whenever we assess ourselves and others, we do so from hearts that are not reliable testing instruments. This is why Christ warns us against judging (Mt 7:1).

But what about those who seem to be maturing in the Holy Spirit? And what about us? “Who are you to judge another’s servant?” chides Saint Paul. “To his own master he stands or falls” (Rom 14:4). Speaking of himself, he says, “In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord” (1 Cor 4:3-4).

Next, Saint Paul says that false godliness denies us the power inherent in true godliness (2 Tim 3:5). He mentions multiple causes for this denial, including ignorance (vs. 7); misplaced love of self, money, or adulation (vs. 2); love of one’s own ideas or pleasures (vs. 3); disobedience, ingratitude, and pride (vs. 2); lack of self-control and loyalty (vss. 3-4). Let us pray that God will cleanse us until we overflow with love, thankfulness, and praise, always ready to give account of the faith within us.

Lastly, the Apostle Paul speaks of resisting the truth (vs. 8) – another sure sign of false piety. True godliness submits to the Lord, to godly authority and wise teachers; we follow Truth, no matter the price. Living in a headstrong age of relativity, we must ground ourselves in the basics of our faith if we wish to recognize every compromise with truth, every subtle form of resistance to the Gospel and its call to a genuine, holy life.

Spirit of Truth, guide and save me from all false choices for Thy Holy Name’s sake.

**March 3 - Sunday of the Prodigal Son – Third Sunday before Lent
1 Corinthians 6:12-20**

The Body: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, especially vss. 19-20: “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”

Living in this present age, we are constantly exposed to the secular assumptions of modern society. However, let us never forget that we are Christ’s disciples, to whom Saint Paul addresses the convicting words, “You are not your own” (vs. 19). If we wish to be faithful to the Lord to whom we belong, we must listen carefully to what the apostle says. We remain wary of adopting the mindset of this age, lest we fail to perceive the unchanging message of the life-giving Gospel. We distort this message to our soul’s detriment, for our salvation is both present and eternal.

The word “body” (*soma*) is a case in point. The translators of the Old Testament Septuagint, used by the Orthodox Church, applied a very specific meaning to *soma*. Indeed, our modern notion of the body as the individual’s corporal or physical substance rarely appears in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew word most frequently rendered as *soma* by the Septuagint translators is *basar* (flesh). But even *basar* does not refer to a wholly corporal entity.

The New Testament epistles were composed more than two centuries after the Septuagint was completed, but many of the letters the work of the rabbinically trained Apostle Paul. His concepts thus reflect the Septuagint’s Hebraic mindset, including his use of the terms “flesh” and “body.” Only once, in all his writing, does Saint Paul assign a meaning to “body” that resembles our modern concept of corporeality (see 1 Thes 5:23).

Rather, Saint Paul’s use of “body” corresponds most closely to our modern concept of the “total person.” To grasp the difference, let us try reading verse 13 again using Saint Paul’s original meaning. A rich set of associations and innuendos floods our understanding of the text.

For example, the term “sexual immorality” (vs. 13) is no longer confined to a wrongful activity undertaken by our physical body, as modern readings would have it. Saint Paul understands the immoral sexual activity of the body as something that corrupts the entire person – spiritually and psychologically, as well as physically. We begin at once to grasp the immense gulf between Saint Paul’s vision and our own narrow, modern understanding of sexuality.

Any bodily union between persons, whether in marriage or through immoral liaisons, has much broader implications when viewed from an Orthodox Christian perspective. The Apostle Paul reminds us that any sexual union is much more than a mere physical joining. Every such act delivers an accompanying load of spiritual and psychological baggage.

We ignore these unseen factors at our peril when we assume that our bodies are nothing more than corporal entities. Horrified by such an attitude, Saint Paul begs us: “Do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her?” (vs. 16). By using the term *one body*, he implies that we also share one mind, heart, conscience, and will with the other.

As Saint Paul describes the work of the Holy Spirit within us, he helps us to see our self more fully and comprehensively. We are indeed “temples of the Holy Spirit” (vs. 19) – a dwelling place that should be fit for God, both inwardly and outwardly.

Spirit of Truth, come and abide in me, cleanse me of every stain of sin, and save me.
– Prayer to the Holy Spirit

March 4 – Monday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)
1 John 2:18-3:10

The Devil: 1 John 2:18-3:10, especially vs. 8: “He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.” Evil is a person – one who seeks to corrupt, deceive, and destroy humanity, and most especially us, the “children of God” (vs. 3:10)! Thankfully, this ugly truth is countered by the prevailing message of the apostle’s letter: “The Word of life . . . was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father. . . . that you also may have fellowship with . . . the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (vs. 1:1-3).

Throughout this epistle, Saint John catalogues varied manifestations of demonic power, including “darkness” (vs. 2:11), “antichrist” (2:18, 22), “the devil” (vs. 3:8), a father of “children” (vs. 3:10), “death” (vs. 3:14), “he who is in the world” (vs. 4:4), the “spirit of error” (vs. 4:6), and “the wicked one” (vss. 5:18, 19).

Not every one of these manifestations of evil refers to the same dark, spiritual entity, yet all have a common source: the fallen angel called Satan. He himself is named four times by the apostle, who calls him “the devil,” “he who is in the world,” “the spirit of error” and the “wicked one.”

Today’s reading begins with a discourse concerning *antichrist* (vs. 2:18). This word is not a synonym for the devil, but refers to a spiritual power under Satan’s control. Antichrist operates through every person who opposes the Lord, the Gospel, and the Church (vs. 18-19). Only much later, at a climactic point of history near the end of time, will a single, powerful person identified as “the” Antichrist appear on the world scene.

Saint Paul identifies the Antichrist with “the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (2 Thes 2:3-4). This “lawless one,” he continues, “will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy” (vs. 8).

Before the Lord destroys him, however, Antichrist will be exalted “according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thes 2:9-10). Everyone who falls under his sway will be in grave danger of becoming corrupted.

For this reason, Saint John urges us to constantly “abide in the Son and in the Father” (1 Jn 2:24). We are to *purify* ourselves (vs. 3:3) and “practice righteousness” (vs. 10).

John does not mince words as he portrays the terrible choices that face us. He writes vigorously in order to save us from walking in darkness as children of the devil and falling into spiritual, moral, and eternal death. He warns us to cling steadfastly to the truth that we are God’s children, for we have received the sacrament of holy chrismation, “an anointing from the Holy One, and [we] know all things” (vs. 2:20) essential for our salvation.

We have the “promise that He has promised us – eternal life” (vs. 25). Let us not be “ashamed before Him at His coming” (vs. 28)! If we heed Saint John’s entire message, we will oppose the devil’s work and affirm the apostle’s witness that “the Word of life . . . was manifested to us. . . . that you also may fellowship with us” (vss. 1:1-2).

Let us take God’s message of hope to heart, embracing it always. If this message abides in us, we “also will abide in the Son and in the Father” (vs. 2:24). Saint John’s message is life, reminding us that we “are of God, little children, and have overcome [evil], because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (vs. 4:4).

Grant us, O Christ our God, a good defense before Thy fearful Judgment Seat.
– Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

March 5 – Tuesday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)
1 John 3:11-20

Love: 1 John 3:11-20, especially vs. 16: *“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”* Let us recall the proclamation at the beginning of Saint John the Theologian’s first epistle: “The Word of life . . . was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father. . . . that you also may have fellowship with us . . . with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (vss. 1:1-3). This message reverberates for us throughout all eternity.

In today’s verses, the apostle now adds love to this magnificent message. And love, in turn, becomes the reality check against which we are to measure ourselves. It is well and good for us to believe that God manifested Himself to the apostles and brought them eternal life. But now love offers us true fellowship with those same apostles – and with God Himself.

When Saint John introduces the reality of love – God’s love for all men, our love for God, our love for others, our love for our brethren in Christ – he also presents us with a challenge. We must make sure that our love is objective, measurable, and tangibly present in every aspect of our life.

“Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us,” he declares, “that we should be called children of God” (vs. 3:1). These astonishing words tell us that God loves us as His own children! But now the apostle expands our vision even further: “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us” (vs. 16).

Surely it would be sufficient cause for amazement for us to know that God became one with us and lived as a flesh-and-blood man named Jesus, whom the apostles “looked upon, and . . . handled” (vs. 1:1). The mystery of God’s incalculable love is made visible and tangible in Christ.

Yet once He became man, Christ did not hold back from death, that dread and final state awaiting every one of us. We all live under the sentence of death. Mortality is the inescapable judgment awaiting us. Knowing our plight, God still chose freely to be one of us, to embrace our agony.

As the ultimate expression of love, Christ our God says, “I lay down My life” for you (Jn 10:15; 15:13). Even the most painful and troubling aspect of our existence now becomes infused with love, for “wherever you go, I will go” (Ru 1:16)!

Christ our God approaches death deliberately. “I lay down My life . . . of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (Jn 10:18). By rising from the dead, the Lord wields His “power to take it again.” He reveals how “we might live through Him. 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 4:9-10).

How do we make certain that God’s love extends to us, operates in us, and gives us eternal life? Our treatment of others become the test of this assertion: “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? . . . Let us not love in word . . . but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him” (vss. 3:17-19).

When we withhold our love from others, when we continue to hate, ignore, and disdain those around us, we remain dead: “He who does not love his brother abides in death” (vs. 3:14). Likewise, we know “we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren” (vs. 14).

Let us apply this truth, striving to love others as God loves, without restraints. We know that “every one who loves is born of God, and knows God” (vs. 4:7). No matter how often we fail, we continue striving to love as Christ loves us.

O Lord, may I ever receive Thy Mysteries unto growth in grace and love unfeigned.
– Post-communion Prayer

March 6 - Wednesday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)

1 John 3:21-4:6

Spirit: 1 John 3:21-4:6, especially vs. 4:6: “*We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*” Science has amassed a large body of data concerning the role of environment in our health, growth, and survival. These findings reveal that we human beings live within a number of interrelated “environments” simultaneously.

Although the Church Fathers do not resort to scientific terminology, they are aware of the existence of multiple environments, often referred to as realms, kingdoms, eons, or ages. One such realm is that of the spirit, a dimension that many people in today can barely comprehend. As the faithful in Christ, however, we are blessed with an appreciation of this spiritual dimension.

We might even go so far as to define the faithful as those who live with awareness of the spiritual existence expressed within the life of the Church. Aided by God’s grace, we perceive within every environment the presence and activity of God’s kingdom, which comprises the foremost realm encompassing human life.

Living with an awareness of the kingdom enables us to say, with the Apostle John, “We are of God” (vs. 4:6). We understand John’s “we” to refer not only to the apostles, but to everyone who struggles to remain in communion with them. As Christians, we strive to live in harmony with and be nurtured by the apostolic environment of the Church, for this “environment of the spirit” has ultimate command and power over our lives.

Christ our Lord taught that “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:24). In this epistle, the Apostle John reminds us that there are many spirits (1 Jn 4:1): the “Spirit of God” (vs. 2); the spirit of *truth* and the spirit of *error* (vs. 6), and the “spirit of the Antichrist” (vs. 3). Very few of those around us are aware of such things! Only because we are *of God* are we able to grasp the dramatic contrast between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error!

Saint John the Theologian lived his life fully conscious of the spiritual realm. He knew the Word of God, Jesus Christ, who “has come in the flesh” (vs. 4:2). He saw the Lord with his own eyes, touched Him with his hands, heard Him with his ears (vs. 1:1).

He also perceived the presence of the false lying spirits abroad in the world – spirits that do not come from God, but spring from error. These spirits promote an etherealized Gospel that denies the reality that Christ “has come in the flesh” (vs. 4:2).

Note how the verb “has come” indicates the present tense. Having become incarnate for our sakes, the Lord Jesus Christ still remains *in the flesh*, bonded forever to our humanity. He is one of us, even now. “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” unto ages of ages!

Mankind, into whom God breathed the spirit of life, is now intimately united to God, for God has taken the flesh of man permanently upon Himself. Our physical existence is united to God’s own being. As we meditate upon our physical existence, we understand that God has bestowed great honor on us – an incredible dignity!

As if taking on our flesh were not enough, the apostle reminds us that Christ has “given us of His Spirit” (vs. 4:13). The Holy Spirit dwells in us and within the healing environment we call the Church, enabling us to know “that we abide in [Christ], and He in us” (vs. 13).

Jesus Christ manifested His divinity in Jordan when He was baptized. He comes to us in the blessed waters of our own baptism, and in the mystery of holy communion. He even bore our flesh on the Cross, defeating death. How do we know this? “It is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth” (vs. 5:6).

Master, by Thy Holy Spirit, open our eyes noetically to the knowledge of Thy truth.

March 7 – Thursday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)
1 John 4:20-5:21

Faith: 1 John 4:20-5:21, especially vs. 5:4: “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith.” Faith is mentioned only once in the entire first epistle of John, in the verse quoted above. Yet the apostle is much concerned with true faith in its multiple dimensions. Let us read and inquire what the Apostle means by *faith*.

Understanding what this word signifies helps us grasp what Saint John is saying in these verses. A quick scan of today’s reading yields a list of at least fourteen important truths. Yet each of these statements could be rephrased so as to begin with the clause: “To have faith is”

In other words, we can say that to *have faith* is to believe that Jesus is the Christ (vs. 5:1); to love God (vs. 3); to have eternal life in God’s Son (vs. 13); to keep His commandments (vs. 3); and to pray for a fellow Christian when he sins (vs. 16). Each statement reflects three aspects of our Christian faith: it describes faith’s essence, tells us what faith entails for us disciples, and offers assurances as we follow Christ in faith.

So what defines the essence of faith, according to the Apostle John? First of all, to have faith is to “receive the witness . . . of God” (vs. 9). The overarching message of this epistle is that we must always affirm God’s objective acts in history – acts which Saint John witnessed with his own eyes.

“That which . . . we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life – the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare. . . .” (vs. 1:1-2). The apostle’s statement in verse 5:9, however, challenges us to go beyond his own witness, for “the witness of God is greater.”

Saint John expands upon his statements concerning faith in several steps. Given that faith means to receive or embrace another’s witness, each of us must stand behind this testimony “in himself” (vs. 10). We affirm with the apostles “that Jesus is the Son of God” (vs. 5) and also “that Jesus is the Christ . . . born of God” (vs. 1).

The only difference between these two statements is the Lord’s title. “Christ” is directed to John’s early Jewish readers, while “Son of God” speaks to the Gentiles of the first century. However, both titles have the same meaning: “The Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true” (vs. 5:20).

To “know Him who is true” means to “believe in the name of the Son of God” (vs. 13), for only in this way do we “[have] the Son” (vs. 5:12). And if we have the Son, then we have eternal life (vss. 11-12). Thus the apostle proclaims, “Whoever believes . . . is born of God” (vs. 1).

How are we to preserve this true faith, as ones *born of God*? First, we must obey God’s commandments (vs. 2-3), keeping ourselves from sin so that “the wicked one does not touch [us]” (vs. 18).

Further, we are to love all those *begotten* of God (vs. 1). Love of our brethren is the litmus test of whether we are children of God, for “we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments” (vs. 2).

In obeying the command to love our brethren, we discover that God’s love is never *burdensome* (vs. 3), for God assures us that He answers the Church’s prayers. If a brother sins, but does not persist in his sin, then our prayers as the Church may effectively restore him to life (vs. 16). Our goal is to avoid doing consciously what we know to be contrary to God’s will, lest we run the risk of committing “sin leading to death” (vs. 16).

O Lord, let none of us be reprobate, but rescue us from death by Thy compassions.
– Priest’s Prayer at Sunday Orthros

March 8 - Friday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)
2 John 1:1-13

The Father and the Son: 2 John 1:1-13, especially vs. 9: “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.” The seven ecumenical councils addressed a variety of issues, but the nature of the Lord Jesus was constantly on the agenda. The relationship between the Father and the Son was challenged even while our Lord was still preaching and teaching (Jn 9:29-39).

Today’s passage reminds us that the apostles, as they preached, met many people who did “not abide in the doctrine of Christ.” Rather, many individuals were spinning their own theories about Jesus’ identity and questioning the truth revealed by His followers.

This failure to accept “the truth which abides in us [the apostles] and will be with us for ever” (2 Jn 2) continues to the present day. Our race finds still many ways to abandon “the doctrine of Christ” (vs. 9)!

However, there is only one truth concerning the Father and the Son. Any step away from it removes us from the true Light, for this apostolic truth remains central: “He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son” (vs. 9).

Ancient Israel knew the grace of almighty God. Their musicians – the “sons of Korah” – sang: “God will give grace and glory; the Lord will not withhold good things from them that walk in innocence” (Ps 83:12).

Even more, the Old Covenant people praised Him for His mercy, no doubt because they were so often delivered from annihilation – a judgment they saw meted out on many peoples around them. “All the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth, unto them that seek after His covenant and His testimonies” (Ps 24:10).

Ancient Israel truly knew that peace from God includes healing and release from strife. “I will hear what the Lord God will speak in me; for He will speak peace to His people and to His saints and to them that turn their heart unto Him” (Ps 84:8).

The apostolic message, however, announces a deeper “grace, mercy, and peace” to the people of the New Covenant. This peace comes from God, now called “the Father,” and “from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love” (2 Jn 3).

This new apostolic message is pervaded by a marked shift how we address God. He is no longer distant from us, nor is He separated from His Son, our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, the One who instructs us to call God “our Father” (Mt 6:9).

Many resisted John’s apostolic confession of “Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (2 Jn 7). Writing in his old age, the apostle faced many teachers who claimed that the eternal Word of God merely *appeared* to be a flesh-and-blood human being. These heretics could not understand how God, as pure Spirit, would contaminate Himself with our physical existence. For them, our physical nature formed the source of mankind’s deepest problems.

Yet “God formed the man of dust of the earth” (Gn 2:7) and declared we were made in His image: man was “very good” (Gn 1:27, 31). The apostles then touched and knew God in the flesh – He was fully God and fully man, like themselves, except for sin.

In Jesus Christ, God reveals the complete, unveiled truth. The *abiding doctrine of Christ* (2 Jn 9) throws open the gates of heaven, enabling us to say, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15). Let us confess the Father and the Son as we keep God’s commandments (2 Jn 6).

I confess the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the Trinity, one in essence, and undivided.
– Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

March 9 - Saturday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)
1 Corinthians 10:23-28

Preparing to Fast: 1 Corinthians 10:23-28, especially vs. 26: “For ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness.’” (Ps 23:1). We are approaching the threshold of Great Lent, preparing to enter the “bright sadness” of the fast. It is an appropriate time to ask ourselves if we are prepared for fasting, and to reflect on Saint Paul’s wisdom concerning eating and abstaining. Let us begin by considering some pertinent historical background and some thoughts concerning the days ahead. May this holy season be profitable to us in our life in Christ!

In Saint Paul’s day, only a tiny handful of Christians lived in the city of Corinth. They worked, shopped, and socialized amidst pagan customs, commerce, and society. Having professed Christ, they faced a special problem: How were they to keep themselves “pure and undefiled . . . before God” (Jas 1:27) while living in a pagan culture?

The meat available in the markets of Corinth was usually compromised by idolatrous rituals, for it came from animals that had been slaughtered in sacrifice to pagan gods. When an animal was offered to the idols, only a tiny portion of the meat was actually consumed during the actual ritual. The rest was sold to help support the operation of the temples.

To help the new disciples, Saint Paul offered a rule based on love and sensitivity to the conscience of others. Thus he says, “Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being” (1 Cor 10:24). For the faithful in Corinth, this advice meant that they should buy meat at the markets without overly burdening themselves with inquiries into the source of their purchases (vs. 25).

Likewise, when invited to dinner, they were to eat without asking questions as long as no one indicated that the meat came from pagan temples (vs. 27). The apostle grounds his rule in the revealed principle that all comes from God (vs. 26, Ps 23:1). Therefore nothing is considered impure, unless one’s conscience is contaminated (Mk 7:18-20).

How do these principles apply to the Lenten fasting disciplines? First and foremost, they speak to freedom of conscience. Do we fast because it is a rule that we must follow? If such is our primary motivation, then we have not chosen freely to fast with the Church. Instead, we are operating on the basis of rote obedience to religious traditions and rules.

Such behavior constitutes Judaizing, for slavishness destroys our freedom in Christ (Gal 2:4, 16). Christ our God *commends* fasting to His disciples (Mt 6:16), but He does not command it as He does in the case of the liturgy (“Do this in remembrance of Me” – Lk 22:19).

According to Father John Romanides, there are two important reasons why Orthodox Christians ought to fast: “Love, unity and communion of immortality with each other and with the saints in Christ; and . . . the war against Satan and his powers, already defeated in the flesh of Christ by those living in Christ, beyond death” (Akakios, *Fasting in the Orthodox Church*, p. 54).

Let us choose to fast, then, in order to express our unity with the Church, and to deny the demons control of our passions by depriving Satan of these points of entry into our souls. However, we should not pursue fasting if we merely are seeking our own good at the expense of others (1 Cor 10:24). Let us fast quietly in communion with our fellow Christians and before non-Christians.

What of using our freedom in Christ to avoid fasting altogether? Such an act would be self-serving. By suggesting that our common life in Christ is insignificant, we might weaken other disciples in their struggle. On the other hand, if by God’s grace we sustain an unassuming attitude toward fasting, we may show non-Orthodox the value of the common life in Christ. Above all, let us express our mutual love in the Lord, recalling that if we flaunt our fasting (or non-fasting), already we have our reward (see Mt 6:16-18).

Fortify me, O Lord, that I may fulfill the fast in God-pleasing purity and devotion.
– Cheesefare Sunday

**March 10 - Meatfare Sunday – Sunday of the Last Judgment (Second Sunday before Lent)
1 Corinthians 8:8-9:2**

Preparing for the Fast, continued: 1 Corinthians 8:8-9:2, especially vs. 10: “For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?” Today’s passage from First Corinthians is intended to help us prepare for the coming fast. Once again, after a little background and history, we will examine the apostle’s counsels concerning the asceticism of fasting.

In Corinth, as in other Roman cities, first-century Christians encountered idolatry in a variety of settings. If they belonged to trade guilds, for example, then they were routinely expected to attend occasional dinners held at the temple of the god associated with that guild. Thus, a believer might be invited to dine at one of the numerous pagan temples. On the positive side, eating such meals did not typically require any participation in the rituals and worship of the deities.

As we learned yesterday, a token amount of the food served might have been offered to the idols prior to the actual meal. Christians knew, of course, that the idols were pure fiction (vs. 8:4). They saw nothing wrong with eating at the tables in the idols’ temples, as long as they did not have to participate in the pagan rites and ceremonies. Indeed, many temple meals were arguably social occasions with no religious significance.

However, the concerns that the Apostle Paul expresses in this passage are not limited to certain kinds of overt ritual behavior. He cares about the perceptions and motives of Christians and non-Christians alike. Thus, his focus has implications beyond the situation of first-century Corinth and provides an important message for us today.

What are our motives for fasting during Lent, or for not fasting? What relationship do we wish to establish between our behavior and our intentions? How might the relationship between motive and action differ when an activity is dubbed “religious,” vs. when it is not? What is the nature of “this liberty of [ours]” (vss. 8:9)? Are we responsible for the interpretations that others place on our actions?

When Saint Paul states that “food does not commend us to God” (vs. 8:8), he clearly included all food, regardless of whether we eat or abstain from eating. Our daily activities may bring us blessing but also condemnation, for God’s gaze is directed deep into our hearts. God sees what men can only infer (1 Kgs 16:7).

Seemingly innocent acts that serve our ego may in fact be wicked, self-indulgent, or without true concern for others. Such actions will not “commend us to God” (1 Jn 8:8) – indeed, they may merit His condemnation.

Why do we take up the Lenten fast, if there is no specific merit in fasting per se? According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “All that is not done for Christ’s sake, even though it be good, brings neither reward in the future life nor the grace of God in this life” (*Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 86).

And yet Saint Paul warns us not to ignore the dangers of free choice (vss. 8:9-12). Because society at large does not observe Lent, occasions will arise when we are tempted to break our abstinence from meat and dairy. On such occasions, let us consider not only our own motives for breaking the fast, but the perceptions of others.

If a nonbeliever offers us food, is he perhaps testing our resolve to maintain the Church’s practice? Does he even care about our faith? What of our fellow believers who may see us break the discipline? We are our brother’s keeper, after all (Gn 4:8-10).

Let us beware of convenient excuses and rationalizations during the Lenten fast. God is weighing our motives (1 Chr 29:17). We ought never act casually in any matter concerning our faith, whether we are with fellow Orthodox Christians or outsiders observing our witness.

Lord, help me to love Thee, and keep firm my life in communion of Thy Holy Spirit. St. Basil the Great

DYNAMIS – Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry * 276 5th Ave * Ste 704-3036 * New York, NY 10001

March 11 - Monday of Cheesefare Week (Week before Lent)
3 John 1:1-15

The Work of the Great Fast – Caring for the Brethren: 3 John 1:1-15, especially vs. 5: “Do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren. . . .” During this final week before Great Lent, we abstain from meat but not from dairy products. For this reason, we refer to this week as “cheesefare.” We continue the epistle readings assigned during the Lenten Triodion until Clean (or Pure) Monday. When Lent commences, our readings shift to the Book of Proverbs.

The theme of the week prior to Clean Monday concerns the specific tasks to which we will be applying ourselves during the coming forty days. The central message is this: If we labor as faithful disciples in a God-pleasing manner, then the Lord will bring springtime into our souls, allowing us to sprout fruitfully. He will make known to us the full joy of His holy Pascha.

The third, and last, of Saint John’s epistles records a rather sour turn of events in a local congregation. Diotrophes, the pastor, opposes the authority of the Apostle John (vs. 10). Despite John’s letters of appeal, Diotrophes, “who loves to have the preeminence . . . does not receive . . . fellow workers for the truth” (vss. 9-8), i.e., the apostle’s representatives. Now, John writes a letter to Gaius to be delivered by a special emissary, Demetrios, a man of “good testimony from all, and from the truth itself” (vs. 12).

Gaius has a proven record as a leader within the troubled congregation. The apostle declares him to be a man known to “walk in the truth” (vs. 1). The central message of Saint John’s letter centers around two commands: “walk in the truth” and “do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren” (vss. 3, 5). As disciples, we need to love our fellow Christians with genuine concern, so that all may go “forth for His name’s sake” (vs. 7) and present Christ to the world.

As we prepare for the pilgrimage of the Lenten Fast – what Father Alexander Schmemmann calls the “journey to Pascha” – let us keep our focus on attaining the heights revealed in Christ, our Passover, so that we may celebrate the glory of the Lord Jesus. For this reason we are already focusing on our preparations for Pascha now!

The Apostle John explains the glory of the Lord Jesus succinctly: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16). God’s love has been extended to us, unworthy as we are, and this great love requires us to love others (vs. 15:12).

We are forgiven our trespasses; let us speedily forgive others their wrongs (Mt 6:14-15). God’s consistent love saves us if and when we love those whom He sends into our lives. In all of his epistles, the apostle highlights this truth. Now, in this final brief letter, he emphasizes love’s truth once more.

Let us consider why the apostle calls Gaius “beloved” (vs. 1). Gaius is known for his witness of “love before the church” (vs. 6). He faithfully cares for the brethren “in a manner worthy of God” (vs. 6). These characteristics tell us how is love made real.

True love does not belong to the realm of intangible feelings; caring is visible. Love is tangibly practiced as a help to other Christians in their struggles (vs. 8). Love enables the faithful to go “forth for His Name’s sake” (vs. 7). We accept rebuff in this world, and still freely return love to those who afflict us “for the Lord’s sake.”

In this holy season, let us learn to “imitate what . . . is good” (vs. 11). Our Lord Jesus Christ appeals to us. If we respond to His love in kind, we will be numbered among those who are “of God” (vs. 11). Like Demetrios, we will have “a good testimony from all” (vs. 12).

O God of perfect peace and love, grant that I may love in a manner worthy of Thee.
– Service of Betrothal

**March 12 - Tuesday of Cheesefare Week (Week before Lent)
Jude 1-10**

The Work of the Fast – Contending for the Faith: *Jude 1-10, especially vs. 3:* “*I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.*” When God “called [and] sanctified [the faithful] . . . in Jesus Christ” (vs. 1), He also preserved and protected us against anyone who would “turn the grace of God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 4). Our Lord gives us a complete and eternal faith, a sure foundation for our soul, subject neither to revision nor modification. This faith “was once for all delivered to the saints” (vs. 3).

How can the Church make such a claim in a world where everything changes constantly? The source of our radical certainty lies in the Lord Jesus, our incarnate God. Who or what can ever supersede Him? There will never be an improved, modernized, or upgraded version of our Lord and Savior! We proclaim the unchanging revelation of God Himself. We have received a unique, unrepeatably disclosure of the eternal God, who is changeless and immutable.

The Lord God, ever the same, acted “once for all” (vs. 3). He delivered to His apostles an unchanging Way, giving Life and Truth to all human beings in every time, place, and circumstance. When the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council declared their support for the Church’s use of icons, they could boldly declare: “This is the faith of the apostles, this is the faith of the Fathers, this is the faith of the Orthodox, this is the faith which has established the universe.”

What bearing does the changelessness of our faith have on our conduct during the Lenten fast? Orthodoxy is our rock amidst the surging tides and currents, through the earth-shaking events that roil the seas of life. Placed in the midst of this storm is the season of Lent, a God-given opportunity to afix our anchor on the solid rock of the “inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away” (1 Pt 1:4).

God gives us these forty days to recognize and renew our anchor in the unchanging One. May God open our eyes so that we may “see the true light,” spread our hearts wide, and “receive the heavenly Spirit.” May He aid us in establishing Christ as the sure basis of our life, as we “[worship] the undivided Trinity: for He hath saved us” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

In the present passage, Jude urges us to “contend . . . for the faith” (Jude 3). “Contend,” in the original Greek, is the same verb used to describe combat to death in the Roman arenas. The deepest purpose of human existence, the source of life for every Christian, lies in our unwavering faith. We are not called to defend an abstract set of propositions or formulas devised by the Church. We battle for our eternal existence as persons.

Within our minds, we experience life as a constant flood of turbulent thoughts. Now, the Lord bids us to stabilize the vessel of our soul and still this inner turbulence. For, as Christ warns, “out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man” (Mt 15:19-20).

First and foremost, then, Lent is a time for interior struggle, for cutting off our thoughts and passions. For example, Evagrius suggests that “the thought of giving hospitality to gain human recognition [may be] cut off when a better thought comes, which prompts us to be hospitable for the Lord’s sake.” Let us use the time of the fast to reorder our thoughts, laying down a new beginning and gaining the skills to contend for the faith which was “once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

O Lord, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit.
–Western Rite Liturgy

March 13 - Wednesday of Cheesefare Week (Week before Lent)
Reading for Sixth Hour – Joel 2:12-26

The Work of the Fast, continued – To Repent from the Heart: Joel 2:12-26, especially vs. 13: “Return to the Lord your God, for He is merciful and compassionate. He is longsuffering and plenteous in mercy and repents of evils.” In this pre-Lenten Old Testament reading, the Prophet Joel calls God’s people to repentance. To help us embrace this deep change of heart as our God-pleasing goal, the prophet describes four outcomes of true repentance.

First, we are able to identify our evil thoughts and passions. We then accept responsibility for the calamities our sins have caused. We acknowledge that God is “zealous for His land” but has “spared His people” (vs. 18). Finally, we thank God for “restor[ing] to [us] the years the grasshopper and the locust have eaten” (vs. 25).

We pay a high price for our evil thoughts and uncontrolled passions, for they enslave and wither away our humanity. As Saint Gregory of Nyssa explains, “Man, who once lived in the delights of Paradise, has been transplanted into this unhealthy and wearisome place, where his life, once accustomed to impassibility, became instead subject to passion and corruption. [Sin] occupies the castle of the soul like a tyrant. . . .

“For the whole array of passions, wrath and fear, cowardice and impudence, depression as well as pleasure, hatred, strife and merciless cruelty, envy as well as flattery, brutality together with brooding over injuries, they are all so many despotic masters” (*The Lord’s Prayer and the Beatitudes*, p. 113-114).

Indeed, the passions are fierce adversaries who turn us into a *reproach* (vss. 17, 19). They befoul the good name we received in Christ. No wonder God calls us to repent: “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting and wailing and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your garments” (vss. 12-13).

The Prophet Joel places God’s offer of mercy before us; we are given another chance at fellowship and life with God. According to Saint John Climacus, “Repentance is the renewal of baptism. Repentance is a contract with God for a second life. A penitent is a buyer of humility” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.1, p. 54).

Joel’s prophecy presents the icon of repentance to us, as the community of God’s people, so that we may embrace this vision and become genuine penitents. Lent is a time for the priests to “sound the trumpet . . . [and] gather the people” (vss. 15-16). This summons includes the aged, infants, and even the newlyweds who set aside their nuptial joys (vs. 16).

Together as God’s people, we weep for our sins. We stand before the altar and cry, “O Lord, spare Your people, do not give Your inheritance to reproach” (vs. 17).

God in turn declares that He will answer King David’s plea and turn His “face away from [our] sins and blot out all [our] iniquities” (Ps. 50:9). The Lord does not desire the death of sinners, but that we should live, for the Prophet Joel reminds us that “the Lord our God . . . is merciful and compassionate . . . long-suffering and plenteous in mercy” (Joel 2:13).

Let us “be of good courage; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things” (vs. 21)! God “will shower [us] as before with the early and the late rain” when we struggle to repent (vs. 23). He “will restore to [us] the years” eaten away by sins like blight (vs. 25).

“Repentance which takes place in deep mourning and joined with confession is what unveils the eyes of the soul to see the great things of God,” according to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 142). Repentance is our supreme work during the Great Fast, enabling us to “praise the name of the Lord [our] God for what He has so wondrously done unto [us]” (vs. 26). Let us rend our hearts and turn to the compassionate Lord!

Grant, O Lord, that we may complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance, having a pure conscience unto remission of sins. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**March 14 - Thursday of Cheesefare Week (Week before Lent)
Jude 11-25**

The Work of the Fast – Reordering Our Lives: *Jude 11-25, especially vss. 20-21:* “*But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.*” So that we may begin to reorder our life in Christ, Saint Jude directs us to “keep [ourselves] in the love of God” (vs. 21). This means that we do His will with love, living contrary to those “who . . . deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 4).

To remain “in the love of God” requires us to reject the ways of “ungodly sinners” (vs. 15), strengthening ourselves against the influence of “sensual persons” (vs. 19) through fasting. In verses 4-16 of this reading, Saint Jude lists twenty-four different vices of these “mockers . . . who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts” (vs. 18).

Such people are deceitful, lewd, atheistic, and reject Christ (vs. 4); agnostic (vs. 5); schismatic (vs. 6); immoral (vs. 7); unruly, insolent, and impure (vs. 8); blasphemous (vs. 10); greedy, rebellious, and faithless (vs. 11); barren, lifeless, irreverent, and arid (vs. 12); boisterous and insubstantial (vs. 13); self-serving, flattering, grandiose, and grumbling (vs. 16).

This list offers a tragic account of the consequences when we “walk according to . . . ungodly lusts” (vs. 18). We withdraw from divine love by choice; we become immoral, defy God-given authority, and separate ourselves from the “most holy faith” (vs. 20).

Yet despite such wickedness, no one is beyond the love of God! Such rejection would run contrary to the Lord’s loving nature (1 Jn 4:16), “for He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt 5:45). Honestly, where would we be if God did not love sinners?

If we know someone who deliberately walls himself off from the love of God through his attitudes and behavior, he is truly to be pitied. Saint Jude urges us to “have compassion” in such cases (vs. 22), through our prayers and love “pulling them out of the fire” (vs. 23).

The Apostle’s twofold message is that we must “contend earnestly for the faith” (vs. 3) and “keep ourselves in the love of God” (vs. 21). As the Lent approaches, we have an opportunity to examine our lives in order to avoid indulging in the sins and character flaws listed above – to avoid separating ourselves from the love of God.

What if we fall short? We may repent from the heart, purify ourselves, and by the grace of God resume the struggle for godliness.

Surely immorality must “not even be named among [us], as is fitting for saints” (Eph 5:3). As the Apostle Paul commands, “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God” (Rom 13:1). Within the Church, we find good cause to uphold those who lead us.

Also, let us carefully examine the areas of our lives where we find difficulty living according to the faith. Let us seek out the godly counsel of our priests, being reverent and “fruitful in every good work” (Col 1:10).

Saint Jude encourages us in this process of “building [ourselves] up on [our] most holy faith” (Jude 20). Indeed, the Great Fast is God’s gift to us, allowing us to renew true worship, meditate on Scripture, receive the holy Gifts devoutly, pray regularly, fast in company with the Church, and give alms to the needy. Above all, let us find ways to love our brethren in our Church and family, including those living in the world who hunger for the love of God.

Grant me, O Christ, a watchful mind, a prudent reason, a vigilant heart, a faithful will to keep Thy commandments, giving Thy servant sufficient grace to glorify Thee always. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**March 15 - Friday of Cheesefare Week (Week before Lent)
Reading for Sixth Hour – Zechariah 8:7-17**

The Work of the Fast, continued – Use the Time Diligently: Zechariah 8:7-17, especially vs. 15: “Now in these days I have prepared and purposed to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; be of good courage.” God challenges us in these verses to “strengthen [our] hands” (vs. 13) for His new epoch. In other words He tells us, “Do not hold back, but be diligent, for a new era has come.”

In former times all diligence was futile, for “there [was] no peace for those going out and those coming in” (vs. 10). Hence the Lord gives us a new promise: “I do not do to the remnant of this people as in the former days” (vs. 11). Here God is assuring us that during His new epoch our state will improve. Our industry and diligence will profit us, for God says, “I have prepared and purposed to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; be of good courage” (vs. 15).

This ancient message is for all of us who belong to Christ. Imagine the situation of a people who had lived under repressive conditions for many years. Suddenly, the social, political, economic, and spiritual conditions change for the better. But do we always find new conditions in life to be golden, when they come after hard years?

No – in fact, some facets of our life may now become more difficult. However, under new conditions, our *strong hands* and diligence are more likely to be rewarded than laziness and lassitude. When God announces a new era in Christ, He is not offering us a bailout program. Our situation is far better if we meet these new conditions with determined effort.

Yes, this word of Lord prophesied by Zechariah is intended for us, especially as we stand at the threshold of the Great Fast. The prophet’s message reminds us to embrace the new era with diligence and hope.

What were our prior conditions, and what are the new circumstances that God has effected? Under the old conditions, our *wages* did not profit us. No one wanted to purchase our *livestock*. Under the former conditions we found no peace, whether going out or coming in, for we were pitted “each against [our] neighbor” (vs. 10). War and conflict prevailed. Certainly, this is a situation we know all too well. But God has created a new set of conditions.

Of the previous time, when we lived separately from the grace of God, Saint Paul exclaims: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). Sin still holds sway in the world, leading the Prophet David to pray: “Deliver my soul from ungodly men . . . yea, with Thy hidden treasures hath their belly been filled. They have satisfied themselves with swine and have left the remnants to their babes” (Ps 16:13-15). Indeed, there are wages for sin, and recompense will follow the workers of evil.

We live under new circumstances, however, for “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Our Savior’s invitation stands: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). We can turn away from sin and receive refreshment. Let us therefore make our hands strong for the things of God.

The Apostle Paul asks: “What fruit did you have then in those things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death” (Rom 6:21). Yet he also says, “But now having been set free from sin . . . you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life” (vs. 6:22). Christ created a set of new circumstances for us by taking on flesh and trampling down death. Let us use the time of Lent with good courage and strength of hands, to “speak truth” and “judge truth,” for then Christ will bless us (see Zec 8:13, 16).

O all-good Master, grant us to undertake the coming fast diligently, pass our days with a seemly disposition, and always lead a virtuous life that Thy kingdom of goodness, righteousness and peace may come upon us.

March 16 - Cheesefare Saturday (Week before Lent)
Romans 14:19-23

The Work of the Fast, continued – To Edify Others: *Romans 14:19-23; 16:25-27, especially vs. 19*: “*Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.*” At Christmas, Theophany, and Pascha, we rejoice that “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). We declare that we have left behind our limited individual existence and entered into the corporate life in Christ, who comes to us from above.

According to Metropolitan John Zizioulas, the Church “is formed from out of ordinary existence through a radical conversion from individualism to personhood. As death and resurrection in Christ, baptism signifies the decisive passing of our existence from the ‘truth’ of individualized being into the truth of personal being.”

Our former individual existence depended on birth. Now, however, a “new birth is required . . . so that each baptized person can himself become ‘Christ,’ his existence being one of communion and hence of true life” (*Being as Communion*, p. 113).

These words are no mere sentimental assurances, nor do they commend us simply to have warm feelings toward others. Rather, Zizioulas is describing our God-given interdependence with every person who is a member of the Church. We cannot grasp what the Apostle Paul is saying in today’s verses from Romans, unless our understanding is grounded in the corporate life of the Church.

The apostle admonishes us to exhibit concern for others in everything we do and work for. The *peace* we are to pursue is not simply an end to quarreling and strife, nor does it mean pleasant inner quiet for the individual. Saint Paul calls us to embrace the well-being of every spiritual and social relationship that flourishes within the Body of Christ, whether it involves God or our fellow members.

As the apostle presses us to bring peace and to edify one another, he underscores the fact that being passively present amidst others is not enough. By using the verb “pursue” in verse 19, he conveys the need for our active attention and participation. Is someone grieving? Who is faltering in his faith? Who is confused, offended, or in need? What is to be done in such situations? We are to “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (vs. 19)!

The Lenten fast, which will soon be upon us, is not our individual business, but rather the labor of the whole Body of Christ. Let us commit to a blessed fast for our brothers and sisters. To express this commitment, many of our parishes begin the fast by celebrating Forgiveness Vespers. This service discloses the mutual love that bonds us together during the fast, especially if we continue to live it thereafter.

What is the “work of God” (vs. 20) to which Saint Paul refers? Is it not the health of the heart, soul, mind, and body of every member, as well as the health of the entire fellowship? Truly, we are a *koinonia* (communion) called together to witness to the world.

Let us look upon our fellow members in Christ with the knowledge that the Holy Spirit is alive in the breast of each person. What an ineffable mystery! Let us refuse to injure others by the manner in which we fast. We must not neglect our common action, nor do as we please. If we flaunt our piety or accuse others of doing wrong, we fall under apostolic judgment, for “if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love” (vs. 15)!

As Lent begins, let us bear in mind that “whatever is not from faith is sin” (vs. 23). We labor so that all may have a holy Lent, and so that we may give to others a royal blessing.

Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance: preserve the fullness of Thy Church.
– Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

March 17 - Cheesefare (Forgiveness) Sunday
Romans 13:11-14:4

The Work of the Fast, continued – Putting on the Lord Jesus: *Romans 13:11-14:4, especially vs. 14:* “*But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.*” One thing must be said about fasting: if we are to sustain the practice faithfully, we must remain aware of how we behave with respect to food. Questions about what and how much to eat will confront us not only at mealtimes, but also during our breaks at work, at business lunches, in the homes of friends, in the market, at the gas station, and before those tempting vending machines.

If we wish to keep the fast, we must consciously open ourselves up to a myriad of impulses not normally denied – pleasures we usually enjoy without a thought, for they are habitual actions. Suddenly, we notice food displays in magazines, billboards promoting delicious treats, and television commercials showing us what we are missing.

Along with these reminders come the ready rationalizations. Our emotions surprise us with their insistence, and little voices begin to interrupt our train of thought. All of this turns abstinence into work, as we struggle with an increased awareness of what fasting is costing us.

We may be tempted to consider fasting as an uncomfortable discipline that we maintain only until relief comes at Pascha. However, in the synaxarion reading for Cheesefare Sunday, we receive these helpful instructions from the Church.

“The divine Fathers set the anniversary of the exile of Adam from the paradise of bliss on this day, to show us by deed as well as word how great is the benefit that accrues to man from fasting; and, on the contrary, how great the harm that comes from destructive gluttony and from disobedience to the divine commandments.”

We are urged to “hasten to the subjugation of the flesh by abstinence, as we approach the divine battlefield . . . of blameless fasting.” Let us, then, “begin the season of fasting with rejoicing, giving ourselves to spiritual strife, purifying soul and body, fasting from passions as we fast from foods, faring on the virtues of the Spirit.”

In today’s epistle, the Apostle Paul speaks like an officer addressing his troops. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” he says, “and make no provision for the flesh” (vs. 14). To help us understand how “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ” relates to the Lenten fast, let us review four other elements of Saint Paul’s counsel: waking up, casting off, putting on the armor of light, and walking properly.

By fasting, we aim to discover how far we have fallen into spiritual sleep and the unthinking acquiescence to our desires. Whatever stirs in our consciousness as we fast sounds an alarm. What habits and routines do we indulge, as if we are sleepwalkers? With our Lenten disciplines, Christ is shaking us awake. Let us rise (vs. 11)!

Consider the *works of darkness*: revelry, drunkenness, lewdness, lusts, strife, and envy (vss. 12-13). Have we adopted any of these, even in thought? The fast discloses the darkness inside us so we may off every trace of indulgence and deepen our relationship with the Lord.

Christ shines in the purified heart just as He did on Mount Tabor (Lk 9:28-29). Radiating wisdom, He reveals what we need to surrender to Him. May His uncreated light become our armor against the darkness on every side (Rom 13:12).

Finally, let us apply ourselves to the virtues. Saint Paul tells us to “walk properly” (vs. 13), following the ways of the Lord Jesus. Let us determine to make His thoughts our thoughts, His words our words, His will our will, His commandments our habits. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ!” Such an endeavor will require practice. We may expect some failure, but let us persist in the effort!

May our prayer and fasting flood us with Thine uncreated light, O Benefactor of all!
– Forgiveness Vespers

March 18 - Clean Monday (First Week of Great Lent)
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 1:1-13

God Said “Let There Be”: *Genesis 1:1-13, especially vs. 1:* “*In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth.*” Genesis calls us to faith in God – to trust Him and commit to Him. These demands defy human intuition, surpassing every human vision and the insights of the philosophers. Genesis is God’s revelation of Himself, recorded for us by the Prophet Moses. Saint Basil says of Moses: “It is this man, whom God judged worthy to behold Him, face to face, like the angels, who imparts to us what he has learned from God. Let us listen to these words of truth written without the help of the *enticing words of man’s wisdom* (1 Cor 2:4)” (*Hexameron* 1.1, *NPNF*, Second Series, Vol. VIII, p. 52).

Indeed, during Lent we are to read and feast on Moses’ record of God’s self-revelation. Saint Basil blesses what the Church sets before us at weekday vespers during the Great Fast. The title of this book, Genesis, means “origin,” and Moses records many origins that arose according to the will of God. In the first week of Lent the Church focuses on the origin of the created order and especially on the origin of mankind – including the realities of sin and death that hover over our race.

Genesis begins with God’s creation of the heaven and the earth. God speaks; and as Saint Basil says, “The order was itself an operation, and a state of things was brought into being, than which man’s mind cannot even imagine a pleasanter one for our enjoyment” (*Hexameron* 2.7, p. 63). We learn a great deal about God, though much concerning Him shall ever remain shrouded in mystery. We encounter the eternal One who is the Lord of history. We discover that God is indeed “everywhere present and fillest all things,” yet quite distinct from His creation.

God is the prime actor in the Genesis account. He is disclosed as the Creator Who *made* the heaven and the earth (Gn 1:1). The Word of God is effective, unlike human words that are nothing but sounds. “Then God said . . . and there was . . .” (vs. 3). All things are brought into being through the spoken, creative Word of God, “and without Him nothing was made that was made” (Jn 1:3).

The revelation of the Trinity is embedded in the present passage, although God as three Persons is not manifested explicitly. The triune God does not manifest Himself fully until His theophany at the baptism of the Lord Jesus. Yet our Christian faith affirms that all three Persons create: the Word of God the Father spoke all things into being while “the Spirit of God was hovering over the . . . water” (Gn 1:2).

God is also disclosed in today’s passage as Lord of history. Note the opening line: “In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth” (vs. 1). First, there will come an end to the time of creation just as there is a beginning. Creation is not an endless cycle of being and extinguishing – it is a history that unfolds in time. Saint Basil notes: “The dogmas of the end, and of the renewing of the world, are announced beforehand in these short words put at the head of the inspired history” (*Hexameron* 1.3, p. 53). That which began in time will come to an end in time. Bishop Kallistos Ware explains, “God is making the world. . . . Creation is not an event in the past but a relationship in the present” (*The Orthodox Way*, p. 57). The Word holds us in being, and as a result we exist!

Finally, God manifests Himself as “other than” His creation. Pantheism is nullified, for God creates from nothing; He neither shapes nor manipulates what already exists. As Bishop Kallistos notes, “God was under no compulsion to create” (p. 56). Rather, as we hear in the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, “Thou it was who didst bring us from non-existence into being.” The created order is *made* by God “out of nothing” (2 Mac 7:28). The secularists who would evade the fact of creation by dwelling on galactic forces fail to touch on the origins of the universe. Instead, according to Saint Basil, they disclose an “inherent atheism . . . that nothing is governed . . . and that all was given up to chance.”

Glory and praise to God, the supreme artificer of all that is wisely and skillfully made.
–based on *Hexameron* 1.11

March 19 - Clean Tuesday (First Week of Great Lent)
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 1:14-23

God Said “Let There Be Lights”: *Genesis 1:14-23, especially vs. 14:* “Then God said, ‘Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven. . . .’” Vladimir Lossky observes that creation is “a mystery as unfathomable as that of the divine being, the mystery of the created being, the reality of a being external to any presence of God. . . . in brief, the reality of the ‘other-than-God’” (*Orthodox Theology*, p. 51). He then invites us to consider three aspects of the creation mystery: how God the Word brings the creation into being, the place of light in the creation, and the interplay of light and water.

In the Nicene Creed we confess our belief in God the Father Almighty, “maker of heaven and earth,” as well as God the Son “by whom all things were made.” Thus we affirm the revelation in Genesis quoted above. God the Father wills there to be stars, moon, sun, and planets; God the Word brings them into being. The Son of God reveals the nature of God the Father as the primordial Cause of all that is created, being the Father’s divine operative agent.

God the Word brings into existence the desire of God the Father. According to Lossky, “God, in order to create, thinks creation, and this thought gives its reality to the being of things. . . . By the divine Word the world is suspended over its own nothingness, and there is one word for each thing, one word in each thing, which represents its norm of existence and its way to transfiguration” (p. 58). We marvel at the creative power of God, who brings things from thought into existence!

In all of creation light is the first thing spoken into existence. “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (vs. 3). The finite mind is tempted to ask, “How can there be light without sources that generate it? How is there day and night without a sun?” Light, however, is the first order of the Word of God. As the Prophet Daniel discloses, God “knows what is in darkness, and the light is with Him” (Dan 2:22). We are challenged along with Job: “In what kind of land does the light dwell, and what kind is the place of darkness? If you would bring Me to their boundaries . . . if you understand their paths” (Job 38:19-20).

Light without source emanates from the “Jerusalem above,” as revealed to Saint John the Evangelist: “The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light” (Rev 21:23). Such light informs our iconography, for there is no external source of light nor any shadows in icons. God the Word, who is light, is not Himself created; rather, light is among His energies. As the sun creates the light of the moon by reflection to our physical eyes, so the Son creates light without a source. Where He is, light is.

Also, the Word of God creates the sources of material light in the universe (Gn 1:14-19). On day five the Lord, having already gathered the waters under the heavens together in one place (vs. 9), now lets the waters abound with living creatures (vs. 20).

At the Feast of Theophany, the Light enters the waters of the Jordan and fills them with His blessing. Likewise, when we enter the baptismal waters, Christ the Word fills us with His light. We beseech Him that “we may be illumined by the light of understanding and piety, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit” – that very same Spirit who was hovering over the waters at the beginning of the creation (vs. 2).

It is right that we pray in this way at the baptismal waters, asking that they “may prove effectual unto the averting of every snare of enemies, both visible and invisible.” When we perceive that light and water are closely associated in the successive days of creation, it prepares our hearts and minds to receive the Light Himself into our souls and bodies by means of these created entities.

O Lord, may we prove ourselves to be children of the Light, heirs of eternal good things, that the waters of regeneration may be ever unto the remission of our sins and our salvation.

– Mystery of Baptism

March 20 - Clean Wednesday (First Week of Great Lent)
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 1:24-2:3

God Said “Let Us Make Man”: *Genesis 1:24-2:3, especially vss. 26-27:* “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. Let them have dominion. . . . So God made man; in the image of God He made him; male and female He made them.’” We continue to examine God’s unfolding revelation of Himself in the account of the sixth day of the creation process. Here God discloses Himself as personal and in relationship to man, who is made in his Creator’s image. Man, therefore, is also a person capable of relationships – a being with whom God, the Ruler of all, shapes the dominion of what He has brought into being.

In verses 26-27, there is a significant pause in the narrative as God reflects within Himself, i.e., among the three divine Persons. Up to this point God simply creates by saying, “Let there be” (vs. 14) or “Let the earth bring forth” (vs. 24). Whatever He names then comes into being. However, in these two verses God first proposes (“Let Us make man” - vs. 26) and then acts: “So God made man” (vs. 27). The use of the pronoun “Us” further reveals creation as the work of an interpersonal and relational Being. God proposes, deliberates, and communicates among the Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three Persons, in a relationship of communion with one another, is an appropriate description of God the Creator.

Since man is fashioned in the image of God, these facts concerning God’s nature have immense consequence for us as relational beings. When man is made in the image of God, according to Metropolitan John Zizoulas, “he exists, he takes on God’s ‘way of being.’ God’s way of being is not a moral attainment, something that man ‘accomplishes.’ It is a way of ‘relationship’ with the world, with other people, and with God, an event of *communion*” (*Being as Communion*, p. 15). This way of being may be fully attained only within the life of the Church, as an “ecclesial fact.” As Saint Gregory of Nyssa says, “There is nothing remarkable in man being the image and likeness of the universe: for the earth passes away, the sky changes, and all that is contained therein is as transient as that which contains it” (Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, p. 70).

What do we mean by the terms *person* and *personal*? Based on the fact that we are made in God’s image – and knowing that He creates, deliberates, proposes, decides, and communicates – we understand that human beings are likewise persons with the capacity to do these sorts of things. What is remarkable about mankind is that each and every man bears within his breast what Saint Gregory the Theologian calls a “divine particle” that confers self-awareness and a modicum of freedom of choice.

Man also is relational, as Zizoulas further indicates. Because God is both communion and diversity, we are complete only in relationship. We are made for communion. This fact is the underpinning of our creation as male and female in the image of God (vs. 27). Let us recognize, therefore, that gender diversity is not merely natural, but supernatural. Furthermore, we do not find completion merely in physical union but in spiritual communion with God.

Finally, mankind’s God-given mission is set forth: “Let them have *dominion* over . . . all the earth” (vs. 28). Respect and care for God’s creation is implicit in this dual extension of *dominion* and *blessing*. God has called us into being to bless the world, transfiguring it for communion with Him. As Saint Diadochos of Photiki states: “Our likeness to God requires our cooperation. We are to work with God in bringing blessing to the created order” (Manley, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 742). “But man shall go forth unto his work, and to his labor until the evening” (Ps 103:25).

“Thou hast made [man] a little lower than the angels; with glory and honor hast Thou crowned him, and Thou has set him over the works of Thy hands.” – Psalm 8:5

March 21 - Clean Thursday (First Week of Great Lent)
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 2:4-19

God Charges Mankind: Genesis 2:4-19, especially 16-17: “And the Lord God commanded Adam saying, ‘You may eat food from every tree in the garden; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat; for in whatever day you eat from it, you shall die by death.’” According to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, “The Holy Fathers tell us that God became man in order that through His becoming man He might again raise up human nature into the blessed state” that was ours before the transgression of Adam. Saint Symeon continues, “Therefore, we must know in what way it is that man, through the economy of Christ’s incarnation, may again come into that blessed state” (“The Sin of Adam” in Manley, *The Lament of Eve*, p. 15).

The starting point for the Fathers, from which they understand mankind’s original state, is the sixth day of creation (vss. 1:24-31). Today’s reading expands our understanding of that day. We learn that man, along with every “living creature according to its kind” (vs. 1:24), is brought forth “out of dust from the ground” (vs. 2:7). “All that is produced,” says Saint John of Damascus, is “subject to change. . . . For those things must be subject to change whose production has its origin in change,” for they are “brought into being out of nothing . . . transforming a substratum of matter into something different” (“Exposition of the Orthodox Faith” in *Lament of Eve*, p. 14).

How, then, did God intend for man to change? Man differs from other living creatures in that “God . . . breathed in his face the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (vs. 2:7). As we learned yesterday, man is thus made according to the image and likeness of God (vs. 1:26). He simultaneously imposes a law on man, not to taste of the tree of knowledge. If man, says Saint John of Damascus, “should preserve the dignity of the soul by giving the victory to reason, and acknowledging his Creator, and observing His command, he should share eternal blessedness and live to all eternity, proving mightier than death. But if he should subject the soul to the body, comparing himself in ignorance of his true dignity to the senseless beasts, and shaking off his Creator’s yoke, and neglecting His divine injunction, he will be liable to death and corruption, and will be compelled to labor throughout a miserable life” (*Lament of Eve*, p. 14).

God places man in a garden of paradise “to tend and keep it” (vs. 2:15), honoring him with the gift of free will. Saint Gregory the Theologian explains, “He desired that man might belong to Him as the result of his choice.” Our freedom is a gift, for where there is no choice there can be no love. Love and free choice partake of an interpersonal truth. Saint Gregory explains that God gave man a commandment so that he would have “material for his free will to act upon. This law was a commandment as to what plants he might partake of, and which one he might not touch. . . . Not however, because it was evil. . . . It would have been good if partaken of at the proper time, for the tree was . . . contemplation, upon which it is only safe for those who have reached maturity of habit to enter, but which is not good for those who are still somewhat simple and greedy in their habit” (“Oration on the Theophany,” *Lament of Eve*, p. 18).

When Christ our God became incarnate, the image of God was manifest clearly to mankind once again, that we might turn back to our Creator. However, this return happens only after we “have got rid of all foreign matter that has affected our soul, and can show it in the simplicity as it was made,” according to Saint Athanasios. Upon seeing Christ, he says, the soul is brightened as it “beholds in a mirror the image of the Father, whose image the Savior is” (“Against the Heathen,” *Lament of Eve*, p. 19).

Illumine our hearts, O Master, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge.
– Prayer Before the Gospel Reading

March 22 - Clean Friday (First Week of Great Lent)
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 2:20-3:20

Return to the Ground: Genesis 2:20-3:20, especially vs. 3:17, 19: “To Adam He said. . . ‘Earth you are and to earth you shall return.’” How well we seem to know Adam and Eve! Their portraits might be placed in a family album, for we see how readily they fit in with our pictures of parents and grandparents, children and grandchildren. We are truly members of their family!

Indeed, let us also look into our own hearts as we read, for there we shall see Christ our God. He too is present at these events, in the giving and losing of Paradise, even as He is with us now. The pre-incarnate Christ causes Adam to fall asleep. He forms the woman and brings her to the man. He commands them not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. He walks in the garden, looking for His errant loved ones. He fashions us still, and lays His hand upon us: “And from Thy presence whither shall I flee? If I go up into heaven, Thou art there; if I go down into hades, Thou art present there” (Ps 138:6-7). He was with our primal parents, and we likewise may “grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27).

“Thus God brought a trance upon Adam, and he slept” (Gn 2:21). Saint Augustine of Hippo explains, “Adam sleeps, so Eve may be formed; Christ dies, so the Church will be formed” (*Homily 9 on John, NPNF First Series*, vol. 7, pp. 66). Christ makes us one with Him in the holy mysteries, so that His precious blood may course through us to eternal life. Nicholas Cabasilas avows that “in this sacrament we attain God Himself, and God Himself is made one with us” (Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 146).

Having formed the woman, Christ our God brings her to Adam for marriage, in a simple procession of innocence. Later, having taken our flesh upon Himself, He repeats Adam’s prophetic words at creation: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh” (Gn 2:24; Mt 19:5). By His presence at this very first marriage feast, He declares wedlock to be a holy and honorable estate: “The two were naked, both Adam and his wife, and were not ashamed” (Gn 2:25).

The cunning serpent then approaches the innocent ones. He comes with questions, insinuations, and suggestions. Centuries later, he comes again with probings, and enticements to the Son of God, the second Adam. But when he meets Christ Jesus, Satan finds his temptations spurned – Christ does not sin. The first man and woman, however, turn away from truth and life and enter into delusion and corruption.

“Then they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden that afternoon, and Adam and his wife hid themselves . . . from the presence of the Lord God” (vs. 3:8). No one who is full of sin can stand in the presence of the pure and uncreated Light. Our God is “a fire, consuming the unworthy” (pre-communion prayer of Saint Symeon Metaphrastes). Yet He comes to all who are fallen with Adam in order to restore us to life. He forgives, and bids us to “sin no more” (Jn 8:11). It is time we learn how to refuse the questions and enticements of the liar and embrace Life instead.

The only begotten Son of God knew that He would come in the flesh to restore mankind, so He warns the serpent that the woman’s seed “shall bruise your head, and you shall be on guard for His heel” (Gn 3:15). We see this promise fulfilled when Christ tramples down death by death after the Crucifixion. He breaks the gates of hades, raising Adam and Eve from their tombs and bestowing eternal life upon mankind once again.

Thou wast verily nailed upon the Cross, O Life of all; and was numbered among the dead, O deathless Lord. Thou didst rise after three days, O Savior, and didst raise Adam from corruption.
– Orthros Verse, Tone One

March 23 – Saturday of the First Week of Lent
Hebrews 1:1-12

God Has Spoken: Hebrews 1:1-12, especially vss. 1-2: “God . . . has in these last days spoken to us by His Son. . . .” In the opening verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Saint Paul presents God’s declarations concerning His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the destiny of every human being will be ultimately determined (Rom 6:21-23). Let us search within ourselves honestly now, to understand how these declarations apply to us.

First, God declares that the Lord Jesus is “heir of all things” (Heb 1:2). *All things* includes what the Prophet David foretold: “I will give Thee the nations for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession” (Ps 2:8). Every human authority and every person in history will answer to Christ. Are we preparing for His coming judgment?

God reveals that Christ Jesus is the Creator of all, “through whom . . . He made the worlds” (vs. 2) and everything we know and see: time, space, all of humanity. The Child of the Theotokos made each of us. How are we fulfilling the purpose for which He created us?

God calls the Lord Jesus “the brightness of His glory” (vs. 3). He is bright because He is the radiant light of God Himself, illumining the whole world and those who will receive Him as “Light of Light.” Do we glory in the Lord, or only in ourselves (1 Cor 1:31)?

God informs us that Jesus Christ is “the express image” of His Person (Heb 1:3). Thus, in the Lord Jesus we see the face of God (Jn 14:9). Are we keeping faith with the apostles, who heard, saw with their eyes, and handled with their own hands Christ Jesus, the Word of eternal life? They declared that we enjoy fellowship with them and “with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1:1-3). Do we honor this fellowship?

When God says that the Lord Jesus upholds “all things by the word of His power” (Heb 1:3), we must ask ourselves how grateful we are to be upheld. He holds our life in the balance, permits us to continue breathing, and enables us to move and act – do we acknowledge Him?

God the Father declares that He is “in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses” (2 Cor 5:19). Christ our God has “Himself purged our sins” (Heb 1:3). Do we truly confess my sins and receive the Lord’s purification in the sacrament of confession?

The Prophet David was told that God would seat one of his own descendants at “the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb 1:3). To what extent do we submit to Christ as Ruler of all? Do we perhaps prefer to “rely in [our] own discernment” (Prv 3:7)?

As a man, Jesus has “obtained a more excellent name than” any angel (Heb 1:4). Furthermore, God calls Christ “His Son” (vs. 2). How well do we sustain our union with Christ as our Lord and prove ourselves worthy children of His kingdom?

God also calls Jesus the One “I have begotten” (vs. 5). We know the angels worship Him day and night. Do we also worship Christ as our only King and God at all times? God declares that Jesus Christ our Lord loves *righteousness*, which is the *scepter* of His kingdom (vss. 8). Do we love and pursue righteousness?

God “has anointed [Jesus] with the oil of gladness more than [His] companions” (vs. 9). To what extent do we count ourselves as joyful companions among the faithful of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

God informs us that Jesus Christ will “fold . . . up” the heavens and the earth at the end of time (vs. 12). On that day, what will we say before His dread judgment seat?

O come, let us worship and fall down before Christ. Save us, O Son of God, who art risen from the dead, who sing unto Thee. Alleluia! – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**March 24 – Sunday of Orthodoxy – First Sunday in Lent
Hebrews 11:24-26, 32-12:2**

The Contest of Faith: Hebrews 11:24-26, 32-12:2, especially vs. 12:1: “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” At vespers for the Sunday of Orthodoxy, we recall the prophets, who paid dearly for proclaiming the truth, and the confessors who defended the holy icons. Contemplating the long days of abstinence that lie ahead, we entreat Christ: “Wherefore, by their pleadings, prepare us to pass blamelessly over the battlefield of abstinence, O Thou who alone art most merciful.”

Winning the contest of the Great Fast requires robust faith – not only during Lent, but throughout our mortal life. Today’s epistle describes five elements of a working faith.

First, we learn that the contest of faith is a team effort. It is not for individualists who devise their own agenda and practices, for “all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ” (1 Cor 12:12). Hebrews 12:1 begins with the word “also” to remind us that we are never alone on this team.

In a relay, the lap completed by each contestant is essential to victory. In the icons that adorn our churches, we see a small part of the vast cloud of participants who, in faith, contested for Orthodoxy. “With all the saints, let us commend ourselves and each other . . . unto Christ” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

Second, the contest of faith demands that we lay aside any excess weight that may be hampering us (Heb 12:1). Trimming unnecessary weight, in the form of clothing or body fat, is essential to both athletes and soldiers. Lightening one’s weight may spell the difference between a life lost or a passage through a battlefield unscathed. Let us ask ourselves what we might lay aside in favor of life-giving prayer, worship, and service to the Lord.

Third, in matters of faith, as in every struggle, it is imperative that we focus our full attention and energy on the battle. *Amartion*, the Greek word translated as “sin,” means “missing the mark,” and calls to mind the clumsy toss of a javelin.

As contestants, we must allow neither our own thoughts, nor the sounds of conflict, nor the opponents’ jibes, nor any extraneous demand distract us from our focus. A victor remains indifferent to everything except winning the struggle. The Church Fathers call this spiritual state *dispassion*.

“Dispassion is established through remembrance of God,” according to Saint Ilias the Presbyter. “Passionateness is removed from the soul through fasting and prayer; self-indulgence through vigil and silence; and impassioned craving through stillness and attentiveness” (*Philokalia*, vol. 3, p. 42). The Lenten fast provides us with opportunities to grow toward dispassion.

Fourth, the contest of faith is never won by charging ahead recklessly. Only a controlled, steady pace allows us to endure the long hours and varied demands of our struggle. Likening the life in Christ to a race, the Apostle Paul encourages us to run with *endurance* (vs. 1). We undertake special conditioning to develop our stamina during Great Lent. The fast is a period of intensive training intended to yield lifetime results.

Lastly, the contest of faith is won by those who look “unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (vs. 2). If we consider our wants and our need for self-esteem, we lose. “Many may be stripped of the coat of self-love,” says Saint Ilias, “but few of the coat of worldly display; while only the dispassionate are free from self-esteem, the last coat of all.”

Grant me contrition, estrangement from evil, and perfect amendment, for I am sunk in the depths of bodily passion and separated far from Thee, O God, the King of all; and I have no other hope but Thee. – Vespers for Monday of the Second Week of Lent

**March 25 – March 25 – Annunciation of the Theotokos
Hebrews 2:11-18**

Savior and Kinsman: Hebrews 2:11-18, especially vs. 14-15: *“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”* The hymn for the feast of the Annunciation declares: “Today is the beginning of our salvation.” On this day, “the Son of God becometh the Son of the Virgin, and Gabriel proclaimeth grace.”

God’s restoration of mankind, planned “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4) is now fulfilled. A flesh-and-blood Child, conceived in the womb of a flesh-and-blood Virgin, has come to save all who embrace Him as Savior. The conception of God the Word within the Virgin Mary marks the beginning of the saving Incarnation.

Ever since becoming man, God has shared our very flesh. Without holding back from our material existence, God the Word came into the world to release us, “who through fear of death” have learned, in bitter shame and frustration, that we are forever “subject to bondage” (Heb 2:15).

Now, we have One who is capable of helping us in our pitiable state, for He “has suffered, being tempted [and] is able to aid those who are tempted” (vs. 18). Even in those times when our *bondage* to the flesh chafes and grinds down our will, our God-in-the-flesh continues on our side. Christ opposes our dread foe and defeats impotent Satan on his own demonic turf.

Mary, the Virgin Birthgiver of God, rightly is called “full of grace” (Lk 1:28) since the day she conceived the God-man, our Savior. God Himself becomes eternally one of us, a complete human being in every respect, except without sin (Heb 4:15), and never coming under Satan’s power.

How is it that infinite God becomes man? The festal hymn celebrates “the manifestation of the mystery of the ages.” Our human experience is exceeded, for the Son of God, who alone is capable of “transcending nature and the bounds of the laws of birth,” takes on flesh and blood – truly!

Being flesh-and-blood, Christ releases us from the fear of death (vs. 15). Without Christ, death forever diminishes our struggle against sin. In the end, the devil has us in his grasp! Yet Lord Jesus meets our foe and defeats him at his game of lies. “You shall not die by death. For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil” (Gn 3:4-5).

Let us remember that the aid Christ gives is not intended for the angels. It is designed for the seed of Abraham – for *all* men (Heb 2:16). By assuming flesh from the Virgin Theotokos, He intended “in all things He” to “be made like His brethren” (vs. 17). Christ is our kinsman, now and forever, the flesh-and-blood Savior who fights for us.

Lastly, Christ our God makes propitiation (vs. 17) for our sins, on the basis of His “insider” status. As a flesh-and-blood man, He faced temptation in His own body, denying sin at every turn. He is personally and immediately available to us, as He was to the drowning Peter who cried, “Lord, save me!” (Mt 14:30). Our Savior answers our cries for help as His weak brethren, coming to the aid of every one of us.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner! – The Jesus Prayer

March 26 – Tuesday of the Second Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 4:8-15

Beyond Eden – Sin Exposed: Genesis 4:8-15, especially vs. 10: “Thus God said, ‘What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.’” We are inclined to grade sin by degrees. As a result we often view the transgression of Adam and Eve as relatively harmless, a mere yielding to a minor and understandable temptation. However, God does not grade sin. All disobedience separates us from Him, which is why sin is always death-dealing. If “sin entered the world” with Adam and Eve (Rom 5:12) it should never be perceived as harmless, but rather as the wellspring of capital crime.

Cain’s fratricide unveils the dread potential of sin in its irreversible consequences, bondage, and resistance to self-examination. The voice of Abel’s blood cries out to God (Gn 4:10), along with the blood of history’s countless slaughtered victims. No matter how we grieve, the dead are not restored to life. And sin of every sort brings irrevocable consequences. King Saul’s disregard of the Lord’s commandment costs him his kingdom and his life (1 Kgs 13, 31). King David’s crime against Uriah the Hittite haunts his reign despite his repentance and his gifts of psalmody and prophecy. The stain of adultery remains; whispered lies return with ghastly results. Retractions never undo wrongs.

The consequences of sin may benefit us in the end if we do not whimper, like Cain, “My guilt is too great to be forgiven” (Gn 4:13). As Christians, we know that there is a better way of responding to our sins. The Prophet David teaches us that “a heart that is broken and humbled, God will not despise” (Ps 50:17).

The truth is that our response to sin is critical. By God’s grace the consequences of sin provoke our contrition, providing the breaking and humbling we need for healing. On the other hand, our denial of sin generates a downward spiral into hardened resistance, like Cain’s. The rejection of his offering brings no reflection but sorrowfulness (Gn 4:5). Presented with the alternative of offering “rightly” (vs. 7), Cain transfers his anger to Abel and murder results (vs. 8). Asked where his brother is, he evades the question by asking another: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (vs. 9). Faced with his crime and its consequences, he merely whines (vss. 13-14).

Sin enslaves, blinds, and bedevils: “But each man is bound by the chains of his own sins” (Prv 5:22). How simple is the path to freedom, and how often we resist! Admission and confession is the doorway out of the bondage of sin. The Lord speaks clearly: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev 3:20).

By God’s grace, let us confess our sins. Open the door to the dark, convoluted passageways that sin burrows into the heart! Cain will not examine his anger, nor the enormity of his crime, nor the shattering of the bond of fraternal love and trust that he severed. And yet we see that God never ceases to encourage him, and us. With no repentance from Cain nor even a sign of remorse, our patient and loving God still does not abandon him. Rather, He marks him and continues to cover over Cain until his life’s end (Gn 4:15-16).

God leaves us time and space to change our hearts, examine our souls, and confess. Even the thief on the cross found sufficient time. Let us remember Saint John’s words, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:8-9).

Cleanse us from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, and may our soul, our body and our spirit be enlightened by the light of Thy divine knowledge, that we may be saved by Thy mercy.
– Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*

March 27 - Wednesday of the Second Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 4:16-26

Beyond Eden – Secularism Is Born: *Genesis 4:16-26, especially vs. 16:* “Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod opposite Eden.” Today’s passage describes the history of Cain and his descendants, whom we might call the first “secularists.” Cain shows us what becomes of human life when it is devoid of any awareness of God. Here we see into the heart of secular man: his existence is entirely organized around the material and psychological dimensions of life, where the passions reign over the spirit.

God curses Cain, casting him out “from the face of the ground” (vss. 4:12-14). Now that he is estranged from the life of tilling the soil (see vs. 4:2), he learns what it means to be “hidden from [God’s] face” (vs. 14). His rootlessness is emphasized by the Hebrew name of the place where he comes to dwell, for “Nod” means “land of wandering.” His wandering takes him “out from the presence of the Lord” (vs. 16), and thus God is effectively removed from his thoughts. He lives solely for the *speculum* – the material world.

Living a purely physical existence, he fashions a community based on his immediate needs. Saint Augustine notes that, since Cain “belonged to the city of man” in his heart and will, “it is recorded of Cain that he built a city” (*City of God*, p. 324-5). In other words, he uses a man-centered construct to replace life in communion with God. This is secularism: a life devoid of relationship with God.

The Apostle Paul teaches that when men “exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,” they “became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts [were] darkened” (Rom 1:25, 21). However, even the darkening of men’s hearts does not totally destroy the human spirit. The Lord leaves His gifts in place for both the just and the unjust (Mt 5:45).

Artistic capacity, for example, exists in the heart of every man. Hence the descendants of Cain direct their spiritual capacities toward the invention and fashioning of elements of material culture: the husbandry of livestock, the development of musical instruments, and the mastery of metal work in bronze and iron (Gn 4:20-22).

But how can we compare a talented, worldly craftsman with the godly artisans who are filled “with the divine Spirit of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, and in every manner of workmanship” (Ex 31:3). The mysteries of faith and the beauty of worship are rightly expressed only by those whom God chooses, ordains, and inspires. For this reason we see that Orthodox iconography, music, vestment making, and other forms of craftsmanship are conducted according to Church canons and accompanied by prayer and fasting, so that God is honored in all things.

Secularism inevitably leads men to greater indulgence of the passions. Cain’s descendant Lamech is consumed by anger and lust. Although God ordains monogamy as the rule for human marriage (Gn 2:24), Lamech takes two wives (vs. 4:19). No ills appear to follow from his bigamy, but Scripture recounts numerous other cases where multiple wives and indulgence of the sexual passions bring great grief.

Lamech also exhibits the characteristics of a man who is fully under the sway of the passion of anger. Anger becomes far more violent and sinister in him than in his grandfather, Cain, who killed one man. Lamech wildly boasts of wholesale revenge, announcing his intention to indulge in blood feuds and multiple killings (vss. 23-24). His ethics are founded on unrestrained self-indulgence. He thus epitomizes the spirit of secularist ideologies that espouse genocide, mass murder, and violence as a means of achieving their vaunted ideals.

Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen. – Invocation of the Divine Liturgy

March 28 - Thursday of the Second Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 5:1-24

Beyond Eden – The Image Continues: Genesis 5:1-24, especially vs. 1: “*This is the book of the genesis of mankind in the day God made Adam, whom He made in God’s image.*” We should keep in mind that this passage contains far more than a list of descendants. Herein God unveils hope! Life is not simply “poor, nasty, brutish and short,” as Thomas Hobbes and the swaggering Lamech assert (Gn 4:23-24). The blessing of God’s image remains within us, and His gift of life perseveres despite death. God continues to seek, enrich, and watch over us all, for we are pleasing in His sight.

The opening verses direct us back to the uniqueness of mankind, for our race is fashioned “in God’s image” (vs. 5:1). God does not withdraw His blessing from us despite our expulsion from Paradise, nor on account of our sinfulness and the consequent distortion of God’s likeness within us. We hear of God’s continuing love for us “while we were still sinners” (Rom 5:8) in this morning prayer to the Holy Trinity: “Because of the abundance of Thy goodness and long suffering, Thou was not wroth with us, slothful and sinful as we are; neither hast Thou destroyed us in our transgressions, but in Thy compassion raised us up as we lay in despair, that at dawn we might sing the glories of Thy Majesty.”

We who are united to Christ, who have received life from the new Adam, cry out with joy: “Christ is born, raising the image that fell at the beginning” (Forefeast of the Nativity). What is this image of God that He places within us, to be fully revealed in Christ Jesus and illumined by the Holy Spirit?

The listing of fathers and firstborns in this chapter flows onward from Adam to Enoch. We note that in his maturity each patriarch begets a firstborn. The father lives on for many years after the birth of this long-awaited son, siring other children. God’s gift of life asserts itself against the fact of death that mankind’s disobedience has sadly introduced. Our race does not develop solely from Cain’s murderous and secular lineage, which is devoid of any relationship with God. The Lord appoints “another seed . . . instead of Abel, whom Cain killed” (Gn 4:25). The world is never abandoned to Satan and his human slaves.

Seth’s lineage ultimately extends to Christ Jesus, revealing that our gracious Creator is ever the “fountain of life” (Ps 35:10). We may be exiled from Paradise, but God remains active among us, bestowing salvation and life on those who worship and seek Him. As Elder Joseph the Hesychast says, “Blessed is he who has traded well during this exile and reached the haven of salvation” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 236).

In the seventh generation from Adam, the new lineage through Seth reaches a milestone in Enoch, a man who “was well-pleasing to God” (Gn 5:22). Like Seth, Enoch surely “hoped in the Lord God and called upon His Name” (vs. 4:26), for he did not taste of the bitterness of death. Instead, God *translated* him directly to heaven (vs. 5:24). Like the Prophet Elijah, Enoch is lifted up to the presence of God without undergoing physical death. This fact is reiterated in the Epistle to the Hebrews: “By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, and was not found because God had taken him; for before he was taken away he had this testimony, that he pleased God” (Heb 11:5). By Thy mercy may we struggle to please Thee!

Enoch foreshadows the hope that is fulfilled by the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Despite death, we may yet look forward to the end of our lives in hope. We pledge ourselves to live in such a manner that we, too, may be pleasing to God and worthy always to “be with the Lord” (1 Th 4:17).

O All-compassionate Word, who didst translate Enoch from the earth, by his prayers save us who glorify Thee in faith that we too may be found well-pleasing in Thy sight.

– Vespers for the Feast of Prophet Elijah

March 29 - Friday of the Second Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 5:32-6:8

Beyond Eden – Grace Abounds: Genesis 5:32-6:8, especially vss. 5, 6, 8: “Then the Lord God saw man’s wickedness, that it was great in the earth. . . . So God was grieved that He had made man on the earth. . . . But Noah found grace in the presence of the Lord God.” Such are the conditions before the Great Flood. We learn the cause of the deluge: men born into the lineage of Seth are now approaching life solely in terms of a material perspective. They have oriented their relationships and actions to tangible things; although they may gain renown among men, they are unfit dwelling places for the Holy Spirit of God. However, one man, Noah, finds grace before God (vs. 8).

The great tidal waves of evil sweeping over the nations of the earth today are reminiscent of the age of Noah. We see men who possess in “every intent of the thoughts within [the] heart . . . only evil continually” (vs. 5). *Men of renown* (vs. 4) may stand in society as giants of human achievement, yet they are often devoid of a living relationship with God. In this dark, confused world, grace still may be found with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let us who have united ourselves to Him despite the surrounding darkness pay heed to the caution of Nicholas Cabasilas, that we “not destroy the grace that we have received, but preserve it to the end and depart this life in possession of the treasure” (*Life in Christ*, p. 159). Yes, there is need of endeavor on our part, for grace abounds in Christ only for those who seek Him in their hearts and through daily effort.

Let us consider the situation of Noah’s contemporaries. They slipped into evaluating everything – people, relationships, activities – based appearances. The example presented in today’s passage is the nearly universal human activity of selecting a marriage partner. The men of Noah’s generation choose wives because they *were beautiful* (vs. 2). Despite a godly family background, they ignore the importance of “the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God” (1 Pt 3:4), focusing instead on externals. How common this is today! We are not to look at outward appearance, but to the heart (1 Kgs 16:7). Before undertaking any activity, be it a relationship, marriage, or career, our Lord teaches us to “seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Mt 6:33).

Having shifted from a spiritual to a materialist focus, the orientation of Noah’s entire generation becomes fixed on the *flesh*. Such an approach to life prevents God’s Spirit from remaining “with these people forever” (Gn 6:3). To describe men who stray from a godly heritage as fleshly is a Biblical way of speaking. When certain tangibles like clothes, tools, shelter, transport, and communication become gods in our lives, then we become merely *flesh*. Our hearts are preoccupied with the material. To recover our God-given nature, it is necessary to first reject this orientation and seek to live the life of the Spirit. The Lord Jesus says plainly: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt 6:24). To be united to the Lord, our focus first and foremost must be on prayer, meditation, worship, and the receiving of the Holy Gifts.

People who dedicate their lives to the flesh may well become giants in industry, academia, politics, or the acquisition of wealth, but the Spirit of God withdraws from such persons. Their thoughts and activities focus on evil with no place remaining for “righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30). Following the teachings of Saint Seraphim of Sarov, let us make the acquisition of the Holy Spirit the true aim of our lives.

Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and with Thy governing Spirit establish me. – Psalm 50:11-12

March 30 - Saturday of the Second Week of Lent
Hebrews 3:12-16

Holding on or Letting Go: Hebrews 3:12-16, especially vs. 14: *“For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.”* Now, at the beginning of Lent, we find ourselves in a dangerous situation. We must guard the holy life that rescues us from evil ways (Prv 2:11-12), or we will surely be captured and see our souls destroyed (Prv 6:36-37).

In these verses from Hebrews, the Apostle Paul sets forth the alternative of “holding on” versus “letting go.” “Beware . . . [of] departing from the living God,” he warns (Heb 3:12). If we give in to an “evil heart of unbelief” (vs. 12), we let go of our anchor in Christ. It is far better to battle on and “exhort one another” (vs. 13), holding “our confidence steadfast to the end” (vs. 14).

Now is the time to face the choice before us wholeheartedly, so that we may assess the true cost of letting go. Then, by God’s grace, we may turn to Him with longing, asking “to be made such that God will receive us, receive us in repentance, receive us with mercy and with love” (Bloom, *Beginning to Pray*, p. 7).

The hope of God’s mercy awakens us to look deeply into our heart and ask what evil may lurk in its recesses. What kinds of stubborn disbelief are found within us, holding us back from God?

In moments of truth, we sense the yawning gulf between God’s dread holiness and the character of our actual lives. Before Him, “the deceitfulness of sin” (vs. 13) is painfully apparent, even frightening! The disciple Peter falls on his knees and begs the Lord to depart from him, appalled by the revelation of his sin (Lk 5:8)! Either we are like the rich young ruler who goes away sorrowful (Mt 19:22), or we draw near the Lord and kiss His feet, like the harlots and the sinners (vs. 7:38).

When we look into the gulf between ourselves and God, there is no need to despair. We are encouraged by the publican who would not so much as lift up “his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner” (Lk 18:13). He “went down to his house justified” (vs. 14), having become a blessed “partaker of Christ” (Heb 3:14).

“If we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (vs. 14), we have hope. We may come to know God, the Lord who judges our deceit and our honest desires alike. He uncovers everything in our heart, both good and evil.

The apostles remind us that we face a God who wants to be our *confidence*, assuring us of life. “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned” (Jn 3:17-18).

Above all, our need is to “turn to Him with all the reverence, all the veneration, all the fear of God of which we are capable . . . and ask Him to . . . make us capable of meeting Him face to face” (Bloom, p. 8).

Holding on is simply our refusal to let go of God. Instead, we let go of our pride and cling to the Master’s feet, so that we may partake of Him. Our yearning for the “living God” (Heb 3:12) delivers us from every illusory invitation of the evil one.

Let us seek a vital relationship with God now, while we still walk this earth. However, God will not allow us to seek a relationship of convenience with Him – to fit Him into our lives so that we are happy. May we allow Christ God to truly rule in our hearts!

O Christ my God, shine forth on me and on all who dwell in the darkness of sin; show me the glorious day of Thy Passion, that with all men I may cry, Arise, and have mercy! – Orthros for the Second Sunday of Lent

**March 31 – Sunday of Saint Gregory Palamas – Second Sunday of Lent
Hebrews 1:10-2:3**

Wondrous Works: Hebrews 1:10-2:3, especially vs. 10: “You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands.” We are “given to know” (Mk 4:11) the miracle of existence. The Apostle Paul now reveals this eternal mystery at work in time (Eph 3:9-11) by means of several quick, bold statements. The wondrous work of God extends from creation to the last day, when the Lord will fold up heaven and earth “like a cloak” (Heb 1:12). Then He will unfurl a “new heaven and earth,” and dwell among His people to make all things new (Rv 21:1-5).

In the opening lines of this epistle, Saint Paul chants to the Lord Jesus from Psalm 101:25-27. He thus reveals its centerpiece to be Jesus Christ, whom Saint Paul declares to be our Creator, for He is the eternal God who made the heavens and the earth (Heb. 1:10).

Christ is the changeless One, who *remains* ever the *same* (vss. 11, 12). He reigns over the entire cosmos and God the Father puts the Lord Jesus’ *enemies* beneath His feet (vs. 13). God has worked “a great salvation,” Saint Paul assures us, “confirmed to us” through His holy apostles (vs. 2:3).

With these few details, the apostle displays the vast scope of God’s works and gives us the wonder of creation – the miracle noted above – as grist for our Lenten meditations. In this scientific age, our researchers plumb the wonders of all that the Lord has wrought, from the tiniest subatomic particles to the vast light years of space, from the delicate codes of DNA to the greatest of all marvels: human life present on a tiny planet orbiting the sun.

We thus see how God long ago set the stage for our lenten journey. Without the creation of mankind, what need would there be for the ineffable revelation of the God-man, the Cross, or the Resurrection? With no Haran from which to depart, what need for the faith to sojourn in a land overrun by godlessness (Gn 12:1-2; Gal 3:6-8)? Without the waters of the earth, how could the Exodus or baptism come about?

We stand in awe before Christ our God, who created all things (Heb 1:10-12). Our God not only created the world, but gave mankind the capacity to choose, act, and love as persons, and to know Him. We are designed for fellowship with God, members of a species formed, inbreathed with life, and made for eternity with Him.

And yet we are *disobedient* (vs. 2:2), and so we die. To restore the human race, God focused His love on His chosen people and spoke to them. In keeping with the sin common to us all, those people disobeyed and “received a just reward” for refusing the Promised Land. They died in the wilderness.

Lent offers us life through confession. In the hymns of the Church, we cry to the Life-giver, “Open to me the doors of repentance.”

Great Lent takes us into the heart of salvation “which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord” (vs. 3). The meaning of God’s wondrous salvation is confirmed to us by the apostles from first-hand experience (vs. 3).

They plead with us not to *drift away*, but to “heed the things we have heard” (vs. 2). Let us not be counted with the enemies of God, but stand humbly among His people during this season and arrive at the Lord’s Pascha in joyful communion.

Thou didst shine forth, O Christ, a Light to those who dwell in the darkness of sin, in the season of abstinence. Show me, therefore, the glorious day of Thy Passion, that I may cry to Thee aloud, Arise O God, and have mercy upon me. – Orthros for the Second Sunday of Lent

April 1 – Monday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 6:9-22

The Flood – Well-Pleasing to God: Genesis 6:9-22, especially vs. 9: “Noah was a righteous man who was perfect in his generation and well-pleasing to God.” Noah alone among his contemporaries is called righteous and “well-pleasing” to God. As a result, God discloses to him that the time of judgment has come: “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with unrighteousness through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth” (vs. 13). In spite of this judgment, God saves Noah from destruction.

Like Noah, we live in a time flooded with wickedness. Hence the question naturally arises: Is God likely to permit another season of destruction to come upon the earth? How might we, like Noah, be found well-pleasing to God in the event of such a worldwide catastrophe? The baptismal liturgy affirms that we are clothed with the garment of righteousness, although the text clearly cautions that we must take responsibility for preserving our “baptismal garment and the earnest of the Spirit pure and undefiled unto the dread Day of Christ.”

Noah is called “righteous,” a characteristic further emphasized by his also being called “perfect” (vs. 9). In the original, this word implies that he is effectively a complete or whole person. When Noah is described as “perfect in his generation” (Gn 6:9), we understand that his inner character accords with God’s standard. In other words, he comes very close to being that which every person is meant to be. As a righteous man, Noah is morally predictable and habitually trustworthy: he is reliable in business, in the company of other men’s wives, in handling money and valuables. He is pleasing to God.

Proverbs declares that “every desire of the righteous is good” (Prv 11:22). What causes a man to desire what is good in God’s eyes? We learn from Genesis 6:8 that “Noah found grace in the presence of the Lord God.” By God’s grace he overcomes inner confusion, conflicting impulses, and base desires so that he can function with integrity. He is at peace within himself and before God.

The grace of God is necessary to enable right behavior and the attainment of integrity. Elder Joseph the Hesychast says, “By ourselves, we cannot do anything if Christ does not first assist us with His divine grace. He first made Himself known to us, and then we came to know Him. . . . If He does not first act, the good is not activated within us” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 305). O Lord, perfect us in Thy Christ!

The integration of the inner man, by which we become *perfect* or complete in Christ, requires our cooperation with God. Let us embrace the grace of our Savior and confess our sins to Him who is “faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9). Likewise, let us receive His all-pure Body and precious Blood for healing, restoration, and reconciliation to the Lord of all. In these ways we begin to grow toward what is well-pleasing to God.

Lastly, observe how after the Lord gives Noah detailed instructions (Gn 14-21), “Noah did according to all the Lord God commanded him” (vs. 22). As God directed, so Noah did. Noah never replies verbally to God, but simply acts on God’s commands! Let us who have received grace in Christ also heed our Lord, and obey Him.

O Physician and Healer of our souls: guide us unto the haven of Thy will, enlighten the eyes of our hearts to the knowledge of Thy truth, and vouchsafe that our whole life may be peaceful and without sin; and grant us, O Lord, all our petitions which are unto salvation, that we may love and fear Thee with all our hearts and do Thy will in all things. Amen. – Priest’s prayers during the Vesperal Psalms

April 2 – Tuesday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 7:1-5

The Flood – Embracing Mercy: Genesis 7:1-5, especially vs. 1: “Enter the ark, you and all your family, because I have seen you righteous before Me in this generation.” Ever since the Apostle Peter associated the Great Flood with holy baptism (1 Pt 3:18-22), the Church has celebrated Noah as a type of the Christian mystery. In his deliverance we find a prophetic foreshadowing of the gifts of grace, mercy, submission and salvation – the whole of the life in Christ imparted through baptism, chrismation and holy communion. Yesterday we considered the lovingkindness and grace that God extends to each one of us. The present passage reveals the importance of applying the incalculable love of God in our lives.

First of all, let us understand that God’s gracious actions, whether directed to Noah or to us, are loving invitations from the Lord. They are neither harsh commands nor empty rituals. Although the phrase “enter the ark, you and all your family” takes the grammatical form of a command, God fully reveals His purpose (Gn 7:4), thus prompting and inviting rather than brusquely ordering. Indeed all of God’s commandments share this character, for they are given out of love and compassion for our highest good and welfare.

Compare the tone of God’s directives in this passage with the prayers offered by the Church for the catechumens: “I lay my hand upon Thy servant, who hath been found worthy to flee unto Thy Holy Name, and to take refuge under the shelter of Thy wings. Inscribe him in Thy Book of Life, and unite him to the flock of Thine inheritance. And may Thy holy name be glorified in him.” Let us embrace and apply God’s mercy, because to do so is natural, healthy, and life-giving.

God prompts Noah to come into the ark with his family primarily for their safety and survival, in order that they might preserve life. Similarly, the invitation of holy baptism bids us enter into the safety and life that God offers us in His Church. Saint Nikolai of Zicha has this very security in mind when he quotes the wise Chrysostom: “If you are within, the wolf cannot enter, but if you stray outside, the wild beasts will get you. . . . Do not wander from the Church; there is nothing more impregnable than the Church. She is your hope and salvation” (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 1, p. 16).

As we consider the entrance of Noah and his family into the ark, let us recall our own entry into the Church through baptism. God’s mercy brings us into the Church, and thus into the space where the Body of Christ gathers for liturgy and worship. Our assembly hall is called a *nave*, which originally meant “ship” – a haven of salvation from the floods of evil around us.

We note that the Lord gives precise instructions regarding the animals to be brought aboard the ark. He tells Noah, “You shall also bring with you into the ark the clean cattle by sevens, male and female; and the unclean cattle by twos, male and female; and the clean birds of heaven by twos, male and female” (vss. 2-3). God’s instructions insure that Noah’s family will have a sufficient number of clean animals and birds for burnt offerings in thanksgiving to God after the flood has passed, as well as for replenishing the earth.

God in His grace likewise prearranges resources to meet both our physical and spiritual needs. He gives us a planet rich in resources and abundant with life-giving goods. In the grace of the baptismal mystery, the Lord provides the blessings of new life in the Spirit through washing and anointing. He arranges for our ongoing spiritual nourishment on a day-to-day, year-in-and-year-out basis, especially through the Holy Gifts of the Lord’s blessed Body and Blood. As Elder Joseph reminds us, “Just know that everything – the beginning and the end of every good thing – is Christ” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 305).

The Lord is my light and my savior; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid? – Psalm 26:1

April 3 – Wednesday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 7:6-9

The Flood – Obedience: Genesis 7:6-9, especially vss. 8-9: “*And everything that creeps on the earth, entered with Noah into the ark, two by two, male and female, as God commanded him.*” As Holy Scripture records, “Noah did according to all the Lord God commanded him” (Gn 6:22), never uttering a word of reply to God. Throughout the entire account of the Great Flood, Noah silently acts as the Lord commands. The Lord’s speech to him, on the other hand, takes many forms. He directs, commands, asks, and explains. Long after the flood we finally hear Noah speak, but only to his sons (vss. 9:25-27). Never once does he speak directly to God, yet he obeys the Lord without hesitation.

Noah’s silent actions speak eloquently, however. He *speaks* when he prepares and loads the ark, and also as he waits for God to tell him when he may leave the ark. Noah typifies obedience to God for all of us who desire to actualize the mystery of being “saved through water” (1 Pt 3:20). Christian obedience begins silently within the self whenever we choose to obey the Lord. The faithful respond without question, because we believe in Christ as God and King.

The wordlessness of Noah’s behavior reveals that the habit of godly obedience begins in the silence of the soul. Listen to the words of Elder Joseph the Hesychast: “Obedience is not to carry out this or that order that you were given, while you object on the inside. Obedience is to subordinate your soul’s convictions so that you may be freed from your evil self. Obedience is to become a slave in order to become free. Purchase your freedom for a small price. . . . And don’t listen to that thought of yours which advises you” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 98).

Herein lies our problem: “listening” to our thoughts creates struggles – a raging storm of contradictory ideas and impulses. Saint Augustine of Hippo advises, “A temptation arises: it is the wind. It disturbs you: it is the surging of the sea. This is the moment to awaken Christ and let Him remind you of those words: ‘Who can this be? Even the winds and the sea obey Him’” (“Sermon on Mark” 63:3, ACCS New Testament vol. 2, p. 65).

Note that when Christ awakens, however, the choice of how we shall respond to Him remains ours. In spite of his utter silence, Noah is not an automaton lacking all capacity to choose. Like us, he is created in the image of God. Freedom is ingrained in his essential nature as a descendant of Adam. Noah freely chooses to obey!

Free choice is the ground of our life in Christ. When undertaking this new life, each candidate for holy baptism is examined carefully so that he may fully exercise his freedom: “Dost thou renounce Satan? Hast thou renounced Satan?” Even when we are challenged to breathe and spit on him, the choice is ours. Over and over, our freedom must be exercised: “Dost thou unite thyself unto Christ? Hast thou united thyself unto Christ? Dost thou believe in Him?” Obedience is to subordinate the soul to Christ, as Elder Joseph suggests, but this subordination is offered in full freedom, in the same liberty exhibited by Noah, for the choices remain ours.

Let us take special note of the final question put to the baptismal candidate: “Dost thou believe in Him?” We are not asked if we believe that Jesus is Lord, but rather if we *believe in Jesus the Lord*. Christian obedience is commitment to Christ as our King and God. It is allegiance. We become His obedient servants. Being a servant of Jesus Christ is the first mark of identification that Saint Paul offers about himself, even before his apostleship (Rom 1:1). If we, like Noah, are to gain our freedom, let us ever commit ourselves to keeping our lives centered on that which the Lord directs, commands, asks, and explains.

Let us now lay aside all earthly care: that we may receive the King of all, Who comes invisibly upborne by the angelic hosts. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. – The Cherubic Hymn

April 4 – Thursday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 7:11-8:3

The Flood – To Be Saved: Genesis 7:11-8:3, especially vss. 7:24-8:1: “Now the waters prevailed on the earth one hundred and fifty days. Then God remembered Noah, and whatever was with him in the ark” God saves Noah and all who accompany him in the ark from death, just as He saves the faithful in Christ from eternal death through baptism. By embracing Christ, the faithful remove themselves from the swirling flood of death on all sides; they die with the Lord and receive His gift of new life. As Father Alexander Schmemmann says of baptism: “It is the representation not of an idea but of the very content and reality of the Christian faith itself: to believe in Christ is to ‘be dead and to have one’s life hid with Him in God’ (Col 3:3)” (*Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 56).

Baptism hides us away from the world, shuts us up safely in the ark of life, and introduces us to life in Christ. Let us examine this mystery in the context of Noah’s story.

“The waters prevailed exceedingly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered. . . . And all flesh died that moves on the earth” (Gn 19, 21). In reality, all those who perished were already dead long before the waters came, for biological death is not the totality of death. The people of Noah’s generation held the same dominant heresy that darkens the mind of modern secular man: the denial of the spiritual dimension of life and a complete focus on physical existence.

The result is described by Father Alexander Schmemmann: “Spiritual death . . . fills the entire life with ‘dying,’ and, being separation from God, makes man’s life solitude and suffering, fear and illusion, enslavement to sin and enmity, meaninglessness, lust and emptiness. It is this spiritual death that makes man’s physical death truly death” (*Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 63).

By choosing to live life on spiritual terms, Noah elects to die in relation to his neighbors, acquaintances, and extended family, including the members of his wife’s family and the families of his sons’ wives. He leaves them all and removes himself from their delusion.

Likewise, each of us in baptism is “found worthy to flee unto [Christ’s] holy name, and to take refuge under the shelter of [His] wings.” We ask that our gracious may Lord “remove far from [us our] former delusion.” For the sake of Christ, who loved us while we were still in our delusion, we continue to love those who choose death over life. But we steadfastly choose the ark of salvation and the life in Christ that delivers us from spiritual death.

Because Noah is a righteous man, he is found worthy to build the ark that delivers him from the flood. His life of silent obedience reveals that he passed from death to life long before the flood arrives – he is a man who is truly united to God.

Let us pray that this portrait of the baptismal candidate describes the manner in which we live: “Fleeing from darkness he runs toward the light and turns to the east to seek the sun. Being freed from the tyrant’s hands he worships the King, and having condemned the usurper he recognizes his lawful Master. He prays that he may become subject to Him and serve Him with all his soul” (Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, p. 71).

Like Noah, we are called by God into the ark of the Church and shut inside with Him by His own hand. God remembers us because we are united to Him. God became man to join us to Himself. Now, as Nicholas Cabasilas says, “We are really members of Christ, and this is the result of baptism. The splendor and beauty of the members come from the Head, for they would not appear beautiful without being attached to the Head” (p. 86). Let us cling to Him who glorifies us.

Keep us in Thy sanctification; deliver us from the evil one, and preserve our souls in purity that we may please Thee in every deed and word and be heirs of Thy heavenly Kingdom. – Service of Chrismation

April 5 – Friday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 8:4-21

The Flood – Entering the New Life: Genesis 8:4-22, especially vs. 22: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and spring shall not cease by day or by night.” Like those who emerge from the ark after the Great Flood, everyone who comes forth from the waters of baptism enters upon a new life, preserved under the shelter of God’s promises. Indeed, God assures us that our lives are renewed by the Holy Spirit when we pass through the waters of baptism “through the washing of regeneration” (Ti 3:5).

How may we obtain the gracious blessings that flow from a reborn life? The experience of the righteous Noah provides us with the model. With the eye of a servant, he watches patiently to discern God’s will. He waits for God’s direction before coming out of the ark. When he emerges, his first action is to worship. Similarly, the new life in Christ is lived by watching, waiting, and worshipping.

As the last of the furious rains end and the ark rests upon the mountains of Ararat, Noah watches so that he might continue to follow the will of God. He opens a window in the ark to the new life beyond and observes. He notes the order of things and their natural interactions, looking for the Lord’s hand. Today, as then, the way we watch makes a difference.

Once, while seated at prayer on a desert mountain, Saint Antony suddenly sent two monks with water along the road leading to Egypt. They encountered two men there, one who had died and another about to die of thirst. Saint Nikiphoros, when telling the story, was asked why Saint Antony did not dispatch relief sooner. He answered that the first man’s death rested with God, not Saint Antony. The miracle happened because the saint “kept his heart watchful, and so the Lord showed him what was happening a long way off” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 195-6).

Great changes occur continually in every aspect of our lives – physical, social, and spiritual. Most are beyond our control, for they begin and end with God. The first task of a servant of Christ is to “look unto the Lord our God, until He take pity on us” (Ps 122:2). We are to discern what God wills and how He is calling us to act. Such watchfulness must be continual. Otherwise, the heart may be wounded and our birth in the new life in Christ will be disrupted, injured, or possibly stillborn.

As Noah watches, he tests the conditions by sending out a raven and then a dove. Each bird brings him signs that “the waters had receded from the face of the ground” (Gn 8:8). As we hear in the text of the baptismal liturgy, God “didst send unto them that were in the ark of Noah [His] dove, bearing in its beak a twig of olive, the token of reconciliation and of salvation from the flood, the foreshadowing of the mystery of grace.” Yet still Noah waits (vss. 10, 12).

Only after the Lord speaks does the patriarch leave the ark. This combination of waiting, watching, and testing is essential to discerning God’s will fully, for the enemy constantly sows both good and evil thoughts to distract us from God’s highest and best. May we always wait for God, for He alone teaches us and leads us to the truth (Ps 24:5).

When God directs Noah to leave the ark, the first thing the patriarch does is to present “whole burnt offerings” to the Lord (Gn 8:20). These sacrifices, consumed by fire, signify Noah’s total surrender of himself to God. Our own regeneration in Christ requires total worship and full surrender of ourselves. With the prayer of the anaphora from the Divine Liturgy – “Thine own of Thine own we offer unto Thee, on behalf of all and for all” – we give our hearts over completely to the will of God in all our ways.

We have put Thee on, O Christ our God. Teach us to watch and wait for Thee alone, O merciful One, that we may be victors even unto the end, through Thy crown incorruptible. – Baptismal prayer

April 6 - Saturday of the Third Week of Lent
Hebrews 10:32-38

Endurance and Faithfulness: Hebrews 10:32-38, especially vs. 36-38: *“For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: ‘For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith. . . .’”* The Church offers a three-fold prayer at the conclusion of every baptism. We first thank God who “hath been graciously pleased to regenerate Thy servant that hath newly received illumination by water and the Spirit.” We then ask Him to “grant also . . . the seal of the gift of Thy holy, and almighty, and adorable Spirit.”

Our third and final request is that God “keep [Thy newly illumined servant] in Thy sanctification; confirm him in the Orthodox faith; deliver him from the evil one, and from the machinations of the same. And preserve his soul in purity and uprightness, through the saving fear of Thee; that he may please Thee in every deed and word.”

God expects each disciple to *endure* and be *faithful* in this life. Our first task as Christians is not to acquire an education, get a job, or tend a business. Nor is it instructing our children in the faith, nor teaching them how to love the Lord. Before any of these worthy goals, we must tend our own soul by seeking purity, living uprightly, and pleasing God in word and deed.

There are many ways to describe this top priority of our life in Christ. We dedicate ourselves full time to fighting the demons and their traps. We strive to stand firm in the faith we profess, in the face of every worldly thing that distracts us from our goal.

Enduring and being faithful is the mode of living we embrace as disciples of Christ. We may be tempted to say that we do not know how to live like this, or even ask, “Is this possible?”

If we are committed to seeking and accepting God’s help every day, however, we can learn. We remember that we are trainees (the meaning in Greek of the word “disciple”). As such, we know that a godly life is possible because “with God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26).

Saint Paul teaches us to keep our heart fixed on two truths. First, we know we have “an enduring possession for [ourselves] in heaven” (vs. 34). Second, our “great reward” (vs. 35) is not a fantasy, but a true promise from God (vs. 36).

All of us, to some extent, “after [we] were illuminated, endured a great struggle with sufferings” (Heb 10:32). We tried to do what we knew was right, although we were inclined to cave in to temptation. We spoke the truth even when we found ourselves ignored or overruled. We paid the price for keeping the true faith, even when it seemed easier to violate our commitment to Christ.

In other words, we have had a taste of what it means to endure and remain faithful. We know also know the cost of endurance, perhaps, as well as our tendency to fail and fall short.

Perhaps we do not endure very well. We may be fickle and tend to circle around the truth. Being nice to others may seem more appealing to us than enduring faithfully. If so, here is encouragement from the Apostle Paul: “You have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven” (vs. 34).

By His death and resurrection, Christ proves our title to “an enduring possession.” If we know that we have a fortune waiting for us, why would we toss it aside for a moment of fleeting pleasure, or to keep ourselves from being embarrassed? Life may offer us great fortune, but we are heirs to eternal life!

Let us remember that “[our] confidence . . . has great reward” (vs. 35), and refuse to throw this reward away. Yes, we may have trouble keeping promises and following through, but God does not! “He who is coming will come and will not tarry” (vs. 37). Let us dust ourselves off when we fall and prepare to try again.

Keep me ever a warrior invincible in every attack of those who assail me even to the end.
– Sacrament of Chrismation