

April 1 - Wednesday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 43:26-32; 45:1-16

Self-Disclosure: Genesis 43:26-32; 45:1-16, especially vs. 5: “Now therefore, do not be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to save life.” A dozen chapters of Genesis fall between yesterday’s reading and today’s passage. They tell of jealous plotting by Jacob’s older sons toward Joseph, their half-brother, followed by the sale of Joseph into slavery in Egypt and his growth into spiritual maturity. When Pharaoh discovers Joseph’s wisdom, he places Joseph in control of Egypt’s economy. Joseph manages the country during a great famine and, providentially, his brothers come to him for food. When the brothers fail to recognize him, Joseph demands that they bring along the youngest brother, Benjamin, on their next trip from Canaan.

Now we learn how Joseph discloses his identity to his brothers gradually, one step at a time, preparing them for reunion. As we read, let us consider this parallel: God reveals Himself to us a little at a time, as we are able to bear it. Just as Joseph watches for respect and compliance, so the Lord does with us. We note the restraint exercised by Joseph and by the Lord as they reveal themselves, for full disclosure always occurs privately, as an intimate encounter between loved ones.

Joseph watches first to see if his brothers respect and comply with his will (vss. 26-29). They prostrate themselves, honoring his position, and they meet his demands by bringing his younger brother to him. Let us compare Joseph’s approach with the Lord Jesus, who takes three years to prepare His disciples. Out of the multitudes who flock to Him, the Lord chooses those whom He knows will be reliable witnesses to His Resurrection (Mk 3:9, 13, 14-19). The New Testament records that some 600 people *saw* the risen Lord (1 Cor 15:5-8). Even among these, some were not ready to believe what was plainly manifest before their eyes (Mt 28:17).

Next, Joseph restrains himself as he provides his brothers with more pieces of information. He carefully orchestrates the moment when he says at last, “I am Joseph.” He even repeats the fact so that what they see will make sense to them (Gn 45:3-4).

His brothers are in for a shock, similar in magnitude to that experienced by Cleopas and Luke when the Lord Jesus is known in the breaking of the bread. Wondering at their blindness, they exclaim, “Did not our heart burn within us?” (Lk 24:32). How many times did the disciples receive evidence of the Lord Jesus’ divinity through healings, the stilling of the waves, the Transfiguration, the raising of Lazarus from the dead? Let us always remember: Christ is among us! He is and ever shall be!

Finally Joseph cries, “Make everyone go out from me!” (Gn 45:1). For his act of self-disclosure Joseph chooses a private setting. With only his brothers present, he reveals that “God sent me before you to save life” (vs. 5), and repeats his message (vs. 7). Likewise, when the Lord Jesus rises from the dead, He appears repeatedly to His disciples in the space of forty days. He always selects intimate settings to bring them to full knowledge of Himself as Savior, Lord, and God. He continues to do the same today: He comes among His own and ever reveals Himself to us, His bride, the Church.

O Christ, we have had the memorial of Thy death, we have seen the type of Thy Resurrection, we have enjoyed Thine inexhaustible delight, which also vouchsafe to us forever. – Priestly prayer from the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil

April 2 - Thursday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 46:1-7

The Improbable God: Genesis 46:1-7, especially vs. 3: “So God said to him, ‘I am the God of your fathers; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there.’” God’s ways always exceed our comprehension and our capacity to predict. How often do we see the Lord achieve the unexpected, the unlikely, the improbable! We are astounded that God would direct Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son (Gn 22). How could we predict that Isaac’s second-born, Jacob, would come into possession of the family birthright and his father’s blessing (Gn 27)? Who would expect to find Joseph, the lost son of Jacob, ruling over all of Egypt (vss. 37:28 and 45:8)?

God’s ways ultimately defy our human reasoning and calculations, for He says, “I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise and hide the understanding of the intelligent” (Is 29:14). The present passage highlights the improbable and wonderful nature of God, who changes people by His grace. He uses unfavorable circumstances to benefit His people and overcomes seemingly impossible conditions.

During his long exile in Mesopotamia, Jacob matures before God. The Lord directs him to return to Canaan. Along the way he meets and wrestles with God – and he prevails (Gn 32:24-25)! The Church Fathers understand Jacob’s victory as an achievement in prayer. Because he won, God renames him *Israel*, which means “he who wrestles with God.” His new name describes the change in Jacob that takes place through God’s graces. What is the nature of that change?

When Esau and Jacob were born, Scripture records that the younger son, Jacob, follows so quickly that he grasps onto the heel of his older brother. His name, Jacob, means “heel holder” (vs. 25:26). Idiomatically, Jacob may also mean “supplanter,” as Esau bitterly notes when his birthright is stolen by Jacob’s deception (vs. 27:35-36). However, God changes deceivers and manipulators into devout servants. Saul, the persecutor and self-proclaimed “chief of sinners,” becomes the Apostle Paul; Simon, who denies the Lord three times, becomes Peter the chief apostle.

In today’s passage we see God transform unfavorable conditions into divinely appointed circumstances. The Lord effects these changes in order to bring about the salvation of His people. Consider Jacob’s quandary: how can he leave Canaan and still expect his descendants to inherit the land? Yet the famine forces him to leave. His son’s presence in Egypt draws him there, but he knows he will be an alien! God understands his fear, and repeats the promise, “I will make of you a great nation there” (vs. 46:3). The man of God must accept contradictions before he can receive fulfillment. Death necessarily precedes the Resurrection.

This passage confirms that God can overcome impossible conditions. What are the odds that a family migrating to a foreign land will return to their country of origin as a mighty nation? The probability is unlikely, but God does amazing things. Likewise, the Lord leads us through the “Egypt” in our lives: “I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again” (vs. 4).

God overcomes what we cannot defeat, attains what we cannot achieve, and provides what we lack. The Lord’s disciples flee from the Garden of Gethsemane, only to become the victorious apostles who bear the good news of the Resurrection. “Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

By Thy Cross all gifts have shone forth upon us. Wherefore, we all kneel, saying with joy, How great are Thy works, O Lord! Glory to Thee! – Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross

April 3 - Friday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 49:33-50:26

The Eternal God: Genesis 49:33-50:26, especially vss. 19-20: “So Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for I belong to God. But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.’” All mortals are bound by time and finite constraints. And yet we yearn to be united heart, soul, and body with the eternal God – to realize our true destiny. For this reason both Jacob and Joseph enjoin their survivors to bury their remains in the land promised to them by God, who exists before and beyond time. Their common request expresses their desire to be one in purpose forever with God, thus overcoming time’s restrictions.

We who exist in the midst of flux, who have a definite beginning and a certain end, find it difficult to conceive of a relationship with “the Most High who dwells on high for ever” (Is 57:15). Nevertheless, we strive for oneness with Him whose “years will not fail” (Heb 1:12). After all, “eternal life . . . was with the Father and was manifested to us,” so that “truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1:2-3).

The patriarchs enjoyed a sure relationship with the Eternal One; we partake of Holy Communion with Him. We rejoice in the patriarchs’ deeds, for they express the essential mystery of Christ. In the lives of the patriarchs we see ultimate accountability to God and a profound awareness that the light of eternity shines even in present events, for history’s final outcome will outlast even death.

The patriarchs lived their lives “before God” in the full knowledge that they were accountable to Him. The righteous Joseph flees from the lustful advances of Potiphar’s wife rather than “sin against God” (Gn 39:9). Joseph’s brothers, anticipating his wrath, seek to avoid him, but Joseph says, “Do not be afraid, for I belong to God. . . . You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good” (vss. 50:19-20). He refuses to indulge in anger when events reveal the full purpose of the eternal God.

Let us also “belong to God,” beseeching Him to give us grace “to serve . . . in holiness all the days of our life” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom). One day, we shall be called to make our “defense before the dread Judgment Seat of Christ.” As Christ plainly teaches us, “For every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment” (Mt 12:36).

Welcoming the eternal God into every moment of their lives, the patriarchs allow the light of eternity to shine upon whatever occurs. Indeed, God’s uncreated light illumines the activities of all mortal men when we awaken to His presence. “Even to your gray hairs, I Am. I bear you; I made you and will forgive you. I will take up and save you” (Is 46:4).

The godly-minded Joseph reassures his brothers, “Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your households.’ Thus he comforted them and spoke to their heart” (Gn 50:21). He knows God has a plan for their posterity, which includes all those who have received the life of regeneration in Christ. Lord, open the eyes of our hearts to faith unashamed, to love unfeigned, to increase of wisdom, and growth in Thy divine grace!

As the end of his life approaches, Joseph says, “I am about to die, but God will surely visit you and bring you out of this land to the land God swore to our fathers” (vs. 50:24). Our quest for communion with the everlasting God reorients our vision, directing it toward the eternal destiny of all mankind. We understand history and each person’s life from the perspective of our ultimate goal of union with Him. Thus in the funeral service we pray: “Grant unto me the home-country of my heart’s desire, making me again a citizen of Paradise.”

O Christ, Thou didst make the thief a citizen of Paradise. Make me worthy of the same. –
Orthodox Funeral Service

April 4 - Lazarus Saturday
Hebrews 12:28-13:8

To Serve God Acceptably: *Hebrews 12:28-13:8, especially vs. 28:* “*Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.*” Following a series of fierce campaigns that desolated Greece and northern Italy in 410 AD, Alaric and the Goths burst through the Salarian gate to sack Rome. This event forced an unthinkable idea upon the Roman people and their subjects around the world: the great Roman Empire might be shaken, perhaps even swept away.

Two years later, Saint Augustine refuted pagan claims that the prohibition of idols was actually the source of this calamity. Instead, he defended the “glorious City of God . . . both in its temporal stage here below (where it journeys as a pilgrim . . .) and as solidly established in its eternal abode” (*City of God*, p. 39).

What in this life cannot or will not be shaken? Only God’s kingdom, which even now “we are receiving” (vs. 28). Likewise, there are disciplines we may follow in this life whose results are never shaken by the ravages of time, as today’s epistle teaches – practices by which we may serve God eternally.

First, we seek “reverence and godly fear” (vs. 28) in our worship. We find these attitudes fully, completely, and eternally expressed around the throne of God on high. The more they grow to fill our minds and hearts, the more *unshakable* we become in the face of whatever assaults us in this life. Let us pray God to plant these graces firmly within us!

When “brotherly love continues,” it takes on an eternal dimension (vs. 13:1). The Apostle Paul declares that we see love dimly now, yet love alone abides supremely (1 Cor 13:12-13). Saint John the Theologian teaches us not only to love one another, but that we pass “from death to life, because we love the brethren” (1 Jn 3:14), since love is characteristic of the life eternal.

When we practice hospitality and “entertain strangers” (Heb 13:2), this virtue is never wasted. According to the Desert Fathers, “A brother went to see an anchorite and as he was leaving said to him, ‘Forgive me, abba, for having taken you away from your rule.’ But the other answered him, ‘My rule is to refresh you and send you away in peace’” (Ward, *Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, p. 42). Hospitality endures unto eternity.

We also “remember the prisoners as if chained with them” (vs. 3). These inmates may be held by walls or bound by their entrenched habits, such as alcoholics, addicts, gamblers, spendthrifts, over-eaters, and other slaves of their passions. Godly wisdom may require us to practice tough love, yet our prayers and respect for God’s children nurture a repentance and humility in us that will free us eternally.

Keeping “marriage . . . honorable among all” (vs. 4) affirms and manifests the great mystery of Christ and the Church (Eph 5:32) through earthly marriage. Godly unions reveal to the world the eternal Light by which we are delivered from the judgment of God.

We must be “content with such things as [we] have” and let “[our] conduct be without covetousness” (Heb 13:5). The God-instructed Saint Silouan shrank from “the beauty of this world . . . [and considered it] as naught compared with Thy grace” (Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, p. 327). We cannot serve God and mammon (Mt 6:24).

Finally, we remember our priests and bishops who speak “the word of God” (Heb 13:7). If we follow the faith that they proclaim, we build on the foundation of the apostles and on the cornerstone, which is Christ (Eph 2:20).

All these graces are from the Lord, who “is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8). They draw us into union with Christ, whose “kingdom . . . cannot be shaken” (vs. 28).

O Lord, Thou hast confirmed what Thou hast said, “I am the Resurrection.” Through my passions I am dead; raise me also, I beseech Thee, in Thy tender love for mankind. – Orthros for Lazarus Saturday

April 5 - Palm Sunday
Philippians 4:4-9

Meditate on These Things: *Philippians 4:4-9, especially vs. 8:* “*Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things.*” What could be more true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, or praiseworthy than our Lord Jesus Christ? Today we enter the greatest and holiest of weeks, a time filled with enough *good report* to exalt our hearts eternally. “Let us hasten, O believers, moving from one divine festival to another; from palms and branches to the fulfillment of the august and saving sufferings of Christ . . . and let us sing unto Him!” (vespers for Palm Sunday evening).

In this coming week, we shall witness the evil, turbulence, and hatred that marks all of human history, erupting not only in cruelty, injustice, war, and lies, but also in the rejection of truth. We see Truth arrested and put on trial by mankind! We watch Truth executed, in order to silence Him. Yet in the end we see Truth trampling down death by death and bestowing life on all. We open our hearts to worship and receive our Savior.

What nobility is displayed by the God-man as He rides upon the colt! Look upon Him as He sits astride a small beast of burden, acclaimed with cries of “hosanna.” This cry is actually a blend of the Hebrew words *hosha* and *na*, translated in Psalm 117:25 as, “O Lord, save now.” *Hosha* conveys a plea for salvation, while the addition of *na* expresses intense yearning and supplication.

We may well ask where justice is to be found in the events of this week. We observe studied efforts to “take Him by trickery and put Him to death” (Mk 14:1). What is just about a friend’s betrayal? What is just about a trial held at night, away from public view, so that its travesty will not be exposed?

What is just about releasing a criminal to instead of the Just One? Mobs are fickle! And yet Jesus our Lord is just and merciful. Here God introduces us to the highest meaning of this word, filling justice with compassion and forgiveness even for those who execute Him.

Purity is also to be found here. While everything around Christ is tainted with corruption and foul intrigue, our eyes rest upon the Source of purity. He makes the thief pure for Paradise, He purifies the adulterous woman, the blustering Peter, and the doubts of Thomas. Look carefully at the pure One, for He desires to cleanse each and every one of us if we allow it.

When the Apostle Paul urges us to meditate on “whatever is lovely” (Phil 4:8), he refers to something or someone who draws our hearts to love Him. “A wise man will make himself *beloved* through his words” (Sir 20:13) just as Christ did. He puts the fire of love in our hearts by what He says and does in the course of His Passion.

Soon, we will stand among God’s people at the Paschal Liturgy and hear and receive the truly “good report” (Phil 4:8) with joy: Christ is Risen! By His trampling down death by death, “verily, all creatures have been filled with light, the heaven and the earth” (Paschal canon).

As for virtue, Saint Peter reminds us that the Lord Jesus, as the only sinless One, “called us by glory and virtue” (2 Pt 1:3). Christ’s integrity and moral excellence blazes with heavenly light amidst the gloom that pervades Holy Week, and all of human history. He alone is worthy of praise!

Upborne upon the heavenly throne, and seated upon the earthly foal, O Christ, God, receive the praises of angels and the hymns of men: Blessed is He that cometh to restore Adam! – Palm Sunday hymn

April 6 – Great and Holy Monday
First Reading at Vespers – Exodus 1:1-20

Being Tyrannized: Exodus 1:1-20, especially vs. 13: “*So the Egyptians tyrannized the children of Israel by force.*” Living in the land of Goshen in Egypt, Jacob’s family watched conditions deteriorate after the grace-filled years when Joseph directed Pharaoh’s policies. Following this time of prosperity and growth under this Pharaoh (Gn 47:25-27) came a season when the Israelites were enslaved and humbled (Ex 1:11-12). Yet despite the repression and bitterness (vs. 14) they experienced under a new “king over Egypt who knew not Joseph” (vs. 8), God intervened so that “the people multiplied and grew very mighty” (vs. 20).

Within these protracted events involving the children of Israel, we find hints in Scripture that a deeper blessing is quietly at work for this family. Joseph had declared to his brothers, “So now, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler throughout all the land of Egypt” (Gn 45:8). Again, at the end of today’s reading, we are reminded that “God dealt with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew very mighty” (Ex 1:20).

These passages are meant to focus our hearts on God’s dealings with His people, even as we meditate on the saving Passion of Christ and His suffering for all people. In tonight’s service of Bridegroom Orthros, He asks, “How can it be that ye do not recall the words that I spake to you before; that no prophet is killed except in Jerusalem, as it is written?”

“And now the time hath come concerning which I told you before; for behold, I shall be delivered unto ridicule at the hands of sinners, who shall nail Me upon the Cross, deliver Me to the tomb, and account Me dead and abandoned. But be of good cheer, for I will rise on the third day, for the joy of the faithful and their eternal life.”

God is in the business of redeeming slaves and liberating the tyrannized, of freeing people from every sort of bondage. Most of all, He continues His saving work of lovingkindness unto them that know Him. We who have united ourselves to Christ must search for the hand of the Lord in His every dealing with the human race.

Perhaps we find ourselves overwhelmed by the latest news. The size and scope of the forces at work across the face of earth, the sheer magnitude of international conflict, the shifting economic trends over which we have no power – yes, even the inexorable wearing down of our bodies over time leaves its indelible mark.

What could the children of Israel do when the new king over Egypt determined to “outwit them, lest they multiply, and it happen in the event of war that they also join our enemies and fight against us and so escape out of the land” (vs. 10)? What could Jesus’ disciples do when Judas, “one of the twelve, went before them and drew near to Jesus to kiss Him” (Lk 22:47)? They were powerless as they “saw what was going to happen” (vs. 49).

What can we do when a specialist confirms that we have an incurable degenerative disease? There are limits to this mortal, time-bound existence. We soon discover how quickly the resilience of childhood passes as our cares increase. And yet we do not despair.

What Pharaoh and his advisers could not see was God at work on behalf of the family of Jacob. He aided those tyrannized, powerless Hebrew slaves in Egypt; even now, He is closer to us than our feeble awareness can grasp. God does save His people and bless His inheritance; He helps us, saves us, protects us and keeps us by His grace (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

I will bless the Lord at all times, His praise shall continually be in my mouth. In the Lord shall my soul be praised. . . . I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my tribulations.
– Psalm 33:1-4

April 7 – Great and Holy Tuesday
First Reading at Vespers – Exodus 2:5-10

Four Women: Exodus 2:5-10, especially vs. 10: “Now when the boy was grown, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son; and she called his name Moses, saying, ‘Because I drew him out of the water.’” This vesperal reading for Great and Holy Tuesday is the second in a series of vignettes on the early life of the Prophet Moses. Cultural historians and other researchers in the field of Egyptian antiquities have confirmed that Egyptian society was highly stratified at the time of Moses’ birth, with Pharaoh at the pinnacle and slaves at the bottom. Yet despite the reality of slavery into which Moses was born (vs. 1:1-2:4), his time in the palace and his ties to his family of origin served to prepare him for ministry (vs. 2:5-11).

In one sense, the heroine of this account is “the daughter of Pharaoh [who] came down to bathe at the river” Nile with her maidens. “Seeing the ark among the reeds, she sent a maid to get it” (vs. 2:5). This royal princess comes from the highest echelon of ancient Egyptian society, while her maid belonged to the middle classes.

By contrast, Moses’ mother, “a daughter of Levi” (vs. 1), and his sister Miriam represent the lowest stratum of the Egyptian populace. These two women struggle to obey God and to protect the “beautiful child” (vs. 2).

The infant weeping in the “ark of bulrushes” (vs. 3) captivates the heart of Pharaoh’s daughter, who “had compassion on him” (vs. 6). She readily agrees to Miriam’s proposal: “Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?” (vs. 7). As the Latin poet Prudentius says in his instructive poem:

Thus Moses in a former age escaped proud Pharaoh’s foolish law,
and as the savior of his race, prefigured Christ who was to come.

Truly, God is ever at work in our lives! If the infant in the ark had been overlooked or ignored, he surely would have perished of hunger, or perhaps been devoured by one of the Nile’s crocodiles, or washed away to an ignominious destiny. But the righteous Moses lives (Mt 17:3)!

The maid, sent to fetch the little ark, gains an honored role in sacred history by her simple obedience. She goes down to the riverside, takes up the basket, and brings it to her mistress as directed (vs. 5). Her act encourages us to obey God, for Christ teaches us that “My mother and My brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21). Let us readily bow “our neck to the Savior’s commands” however they come to us, and so receive “the relation of a mother and brethren to Him” (Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 183).

Moses’ mother illustrates another facet of obedience. Pharaoh ordered all male children of the Hebrews to be killed at birth (vs. 1:16). However, when she “bore a son and [saw] he was a beautiful child,” she conspired with her husband and hid the child “three months” (vss. 2:1-2).

Did the mother disobey? In reality, she acted in accord with divine truth: “‘Turn away from evil, and do good’ (Ps 33:14); for he who distances himself from evil, restrains his feet ‘from every way that is evil,’ so that effecting the good, he might keep the words of God” (Manley, *The Lament of Eve*, p. 131).

Finally, we find in Miriam a young woman who gives cause for rejoicing, for the Holy Spirit distributes divine wisdom to the faithful. Seizing the opportunity before her, Moses’ sister asks Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?” (Ex 2:7). Here indeed is the power of spiritual grace!

Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and with Thy governing Spirit establish me. – Psalm 50:12

April 8 - Great and Holy Wednesday
First Reading at Vespers – Exodus 2:11-22

Roots or Vocation, Exodus 2:11-22, especially vss. 11-12: “Thus it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brethren and saw their burdens. He also saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren of the sons of Israel. . . . And when he saw no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.” Today’s passage sheds light on the development of Moses’ vocation as Hebrew leader and prophet. We see these signs when he goes “out to his brethren” (vs. 11), when he murders the Egyptian oppressor (vs. 12), and when he confesses, after his self-imposed exile to Midian, that he is now a “a sojourner in a foreign land” (vs. 22).

How do we identify our vocation? Perhaps it is better for us to ask how vocation finds us, for vocation means “calling.” Our English word comes from the Latin *vocare*, “to call,” which connotes “a summons or a strong inclination to a particular state or course of action, especially a divine call to a religious life.”

Reading this account, we note that vocation begins stirring “when Moses was grown.” It is connected to his growing awareness of who he is, for he goes “out to his brethren and saw their burdens” (vs. 11). Even though he had been adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh, Moses remains aware of his roots and his birth heritage (vss. 8-10).

Indeed, he leaves the insulation and comforts of the royal palace in order to seek out this ethnic identity. Occasion provides him with poignant insight into his birthright as a son of Israel, for he sees “an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren” (vs. 2:11). The event moves him so strongly that “he killed” (vs. 12) the Egyptian.

When he realizes that his deed has been observed, Moses flees to Midian, a foreign land. There, everything he learned under imperial tutelage comes into play as he drives away the shepherds and helps the Midianite daughters “to water their father’s flock” (vs. 16).

Our roots, our heritage, and our life experiences shape us, for in them, as in every aspect of the created order, the hand of the Lord is present. According to Saint Anthony, “On earth, God has established birth and death; and in heaven, providence and necessity. All things were made for the sake of man and his salvation. Since God is not Himself in need of any good thing, it was for man that He created heaven, earth, and the four elements, freely granting to him the enjoyment of every blessing” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 350).

Our lives are always a work in progress. Although Moses’ story does not reach completion in this passage, his actions advertise the nature of the “coming attractions” soon to be seen.

Since vocation – calling – is necessarily a vocal matter, God speaks directly to set His design before each person. We hear Him in our hearts as He seeks to break the bonds that keep us from responding to His call. Here, we see Moses moving toward his God-ordained destiny, even though his life’s task is not yet fully clear. He gains a wife and children, enjoying the friendly shelter of a strange land, but these are not to be his vocation.

May this early stirring of vocation in Moses encourage us to place unhesitating trust in Christ “and in what He says; and let us daily wait on His providence toward us. And whatever form it takes, let us accept it gratefully, gladly and eagerly, so that we may learn to look only to God, who governs all things in accordance with the divine principles of His wisdom” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 24).

Such watchfulness becomes our compass as we aim toward a life pleasing to God, and toward our true vocation!

I will hear what the Lord God will speak to me; for He will speak peace to His people and to His saints and to them that turn their heart unto Him. – Psalm 84:8

April 9 – Great and Holy Thursday
First Reading at Vespers – Exodus 19:10-19

The Third Day: Exodus 19:10-19, especially vss. 10-11: “Again the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down and solemnly charge the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow. . . . Let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day the Lord will descend upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.’” In three days it shall be our privilege to “behold Christ who is the Son of righteousness bringing life unto all” (Paschal canon). For now, let us heed the holy Prophet Moses, sent by the Lord Himself, and sanctify ourselves in the time that remains. If we are prepared, we shall greet Him with joy even as we tremble (vs. 16).

To be ready, we must heed God’s word given to Moses and “sanctify [ourselves] today and tomorrow” (vs. 10). We must not on pain of death presume to *touch* the holy *mountain* (vs. 12). We cease from every blessed joy of this present life, not even coming “near [our] wives” (vs. 15).

These three directives are to be received in our hearts as basic preparations for Pascha. Let us follow them as best we can, so that we may be cleansed of our sins and veer neither to the left nor to the right, maintaining ourselves reverently before all that is holy. Thus, by God's grace, we dedicate this time leading up the feast to the Lord, and not to ourselves.

Mount Sinai is situated in the Sinai peninsula, where at the Monastery of Saint Catherine the burning bush (vs. 3:1-10) remains protected and venerated. For the children of Israel, the trek from the Red Sea to this mountain required an arduous three-month journey. They arrived dusty, sweaty, and grimy. God required that they set aside two days to sanctify themselves and “wash their clothes” before meeting Him (vs. 19:10).

Surely our God wants us to be clean when we come to receive His divine power and strength from the holy chalice at Pascha. However, “we are not pure or cleansed of evil,” Elder Thaddeus reminds us. “Were He to give us His powers in our impure state, they would turn to black magic” (*Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives*, p. 127).

We must therefore wash off the grime of our bad habits, the sweat of our self-serving efforts, and the dust of the world that so easily clings to us. To this end, we take care to make our confessions before Lazarus Saturday or, at the very least, no later than the service of holy unction on Great and Holy Wednesday.

God Himself requires that boundaries be set, so “that you do not go up to the mountain or touch its base. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely die” (vs. 12). So stringent is this requirement that the Lord Himself sets the terms for any who violate the rule: “He shall surely be stoned or shot with an arrow; whether man or beast, he shall not live” (vs. 13).

For us, it is quite plain: we must systematically destroy everything in ourselves that is casual, flippant, irreverent, and presumptuous. We guard against the temptation to confess today and indulge again tomorrow. In truth, we kill our own hearts and souls when we play such a game. God forbid! May God forgive us!

Much of what defiles us is our unwillingness to set aside our wants – or worse, to mingle them with our devotional life, as if it matters not at all how we prepare to face the living God. Will we tremble at Pascha?

Remember that we are in “the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (Heb 12:23). The blood of Jesus, or which we are blessed to partake, “speaks better things than that of Abel. See that you do not refuse Him who speaks” (vss. 24-25). Let us never fall prey to the invisible wolf, but prepare to meet the living God!

Receive me, O Christ, Thou that lovest mankind, as Thou didst receive the harlot, the thief, the publican, and the prodigal son. Take away the heavy burden of my sins. – Pre-communion Prayer of Saint Basil the Great

April 10 - Great and Holy Friday
First Reading at Vespers – Exodus 33:11-21

Face to Face: Exodus 33:11-21, especially vs. 11: “Thus the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. . . .” We may understand the phrase “face to face” in this quote as a simple adverbial clause: its purpose is to modify the verb *spoke*. In what manner did the Lord speak to Moses? “Face to face” might be replaced by more obvious adverbs – softly, sternly, firmly, directly, openly – or by another modifying clause such as “with understanding,” “as a Master to a servant,” “like an interrogator,” and so on.

But let us examine the Hebrew usage of the word *face* from a different perspective, comparing it to this line from Psalms: “My heart said unto Thee: I will seek the Lord. My face hath sought after Thee; Thy face, O Lord will I seek” (Ps 26:9).

This verse aptly characterizes Moses’ attempt to have the Lord fully reveal Himself, as described in today’s passage (Ex 33:13). After Moses reiterates his plea (vs. 18), the Lord makes an extended response (vss. 19-23). God promises action, but this promise is fulfilled only on the following day (Ex 34:4-8).

Three other aspects of the conversation between Moses and the Lord have bearing on the meaning of the word *face* in this passage. First, we recall that the action takes place “outside the camp” (vs. 7). Second, a cleft rock will have a role to play in God’s revelation (vss. 21-22). Finally, Moses will see the Lord’s glory, but *not* His face (vs. 23).

The fact that Moses is to “return to the camp” (vs. 11) after speaking with the Lord helps us locate their dialogue in the *tabernacle*, the tent described in Exodus 33:7-10. The tabernacle is a place set apart from the bustling community, a place where Moses may quietly seek the face of Lord in deep prayer.

Saint Ambrose notes the importance of such a place apart when he observes, “Jesus departed from the city, so that when you depart from this world, you may be above the world. Moses, who sought God in prayer, kept the tabernacle outside the camp when he spoke with God” (*ACCS Old Testament* vol. 3, p. 147).

In answer to Moses’ repeated request for God to reveal Himself, the Lord outlines a plan. He will “pass before [him] in His glory” and “proclaim [His] name” (Ex 33:19). First, however, He will hide Moses “in the cleft of the rock” (vs. 21) and cover the prophet’s eyes with His hand.

To this sequence of events the Lord adds one definite qualification: “My *face* shall not be seen” (vs. 23). Saint Gregory the Theologian portrays his own search for God using Moses’ experience as his template: “I went up into the mount and drew aside the curtain of the cloud and entered away from matter and material things. . . .

“And then when I looked up, I scarce saw the back parts of God, although I was sheltered by the rock, the Word that was made flesh for us” (“Theological Oration,” *ACCS Old Testament* vol. 3, p. 147). Saint Gregory’s understanding of the rock follows Saint Paul, who speaks of the “spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4).

One puzzle remains: Why does God not permit a man “to see My face and live” (vs. 20)? According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, “Scripture does not indicate that this causes the death of those who look, for how would the face of life ever be the cause of death to those who approach it? . . . Yet it is the characteristic of the divine nature to transcend all characteristics. Therefore he who thinks God is something to be known does not have life, because he has turned from true being to what he considers by sense perception to have being” (*The Life of Moses*).

We now come to the very reason why God humbled Himself and defeated death – to give us resurrection!

O our Savior, who loosed the pains of death and revealed resurrection, glory to Thee. – Vespers
Divine Liturgy of Great and Holy Saturday

April 11 - Great and Holy Saturday
Vespertal Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great – Romans 6:3-11

United with Christ: *Romans 6:3-11, especially vs. 5:* “*For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection. . . .*” Saint Paul reminds us of the universality of death, for “by man came death . . . [and] in Adam all die” (1 Cor 15:21-22). In life and death, every human being is inextricably joined to our common forebears, Adam and Eve. This is the reason for the apostle’s expression “by man came death.”

The curse of God – the divine declaration that “you shall return to the ground from which you were taken” because of sin (Gn 3:19) – was spoken to one and all. No matter what we believe about death – whether we call it falling asleep, the result of sin, a biological necessity, or a law of nature – we must all die physically.

As the God-man and our Savior, the Lord Jesus chose to die. He elected to step fully into the shared, common human experience of death and take on Adam’s curse (Gn 3:17-19) in order to redeem us.

We remain subject to death, and the Church wisely keeps this truth before us. During the funeral service we hear the cry: “I weep and I wail when I think upon death. . . . Why have we been given over unto corruption, and why have we been wedded unto death?”

The inescapability of death allows us to appreciate more deeply the glorious proclamation in today’s reading: “We also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection” (Rom 6:5). Saint Paul makes this same connection when he explains that “by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor 15:21-22).

We note, however, that this good news has one condition: “if we have been united together in the likeness of His death” (Rom 6:5). We are to be *united together* in Christ, sharing in His death *and* His Resurrection.

Thus, on the eve of our celebration of the Lord’s Resurrection, the Church also celebrates the mystery of baptism. Along with the catechumens who traditionally enter the Church on Holy Saturday, we are reminded that God has united us to Christ in death and resurrection through baptism, that we may know the power of His own death and Resurrection. Let us raise the ancient song, “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27).

In the original Greek, the phrase *united together* in Romans 6:5 implies “to be generated with.” It is another way of speaking about the mystery of new birth in the Spirit, about the reality that the Lord Jesus explains to Nicodemus (Jn 3:3-8). Perhaps we might translate this phrase more freely at this point to read: “if we have been regenerated with Christ.”

How does this regeneration happen in holy baptism? Christ regenerates us when we unite ourselves to Him. Our choosing and His regenerating are synergistic, a cooperative action we undertake with God.

When God joined us to Christ in baptism, we died with Christ. The curse of eternal death has thus been removed from everyone who is baptized into the Lord Jesus, although physical death remains. Christ was raised from the dead; now we have the power to “walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

Our old man that chose death was crucified with Him “that we should no longer be slaves of sin” (vs. 6). Now, “death no longer has dominion over Him. . . . He lives to God” (vss. 9-10). “Likewise, [we] also, reckon [ourselves] to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body” (vs. 11-12).

Come ye, let us behold our Life placed in a tomb to give life to those who are placed in tombs. . . . Rise by Thine own power, Thou who didst deliver Thyself by Thine own choice for our sake. – Orthros for Great and Holy Saturday

April 12 - Holy Pascha
Acts 1:1-8

The Gift of the Risen Christ: Acts 1:1-8, especially vss. 5, 8: “For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit. . . . You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me . . . to the end of the earth.” When Saint John the Forerunner began his ministry “in the wilderness of Judea” (Mt 3:1), he preached repentance (vss. 2-3, 7-12), baptizing those who came to him and hearing their confessions of sin (vs. 6).

Yet “the baptism of John did not have the power to forgive sins; for John was only preaching repentance and bringing them towards the forgiveness of sins, that is, he was guiding them to the baptism of Christ, in which there is remission of sins” (Blessed Theophylact, *Explanation of the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 33).

When John baptizes with water, he points toward the coming baptism of the Lord by which we may be forgiven. Early in the course of His teaching, the Lord Jesus says, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5).

Christ requires us to repent if we are to enter His kingdom. Our sins also must be forgiven and we must be regenerated spiritually; all this the Spirit of God effects in baptism. This teaching of our Risen Lord is given “to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom also He presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs” (Acts 1:2-3).

As the apostles proclaimed the Lord’s Resurrection, God inspired many to repent and believe. Those who were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for remission of sins received forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit (vs. 2:38). So strong is the correlation between Christ’s Resurrection and baptism that Church replaces the standard trisagion hymn with the baptismal hymn on Pascha: “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27).

Let us put on the Risen Christ, for “if then you have been raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1). If we failed to use the providential time of Great Lent to purify ourselves, there is no cause for despair. According to Saint John Chrysostom, “He giveth rest to him that cometh at the eleventh hour, as well as to him that hath toiled from the first” (Paschal homily).

The Spirit of God is our birthright in Christ! Let the life-giving Holy Spirit, who came upon each of us at baptism, support us now by actualizing the power of Christ’s Resurrection in our lives. Throughout our life, the Holy Spirit helps us to attain deeper repentance, remission of sins, regeneration in Christ, and the renewing of our minds and hearts by the Lord’s counsel and presence.

According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “If a man is stirred by the wisdom of God which seeks our salvation and embraces everything, and he is resolved for its sake to devote the early hours to God and to watch in order to find His eternal salvation (Wis 7:27; 6:14-20), then, in obedience to its voice, he must hasten to offer true repentance for all his sins and must practice the virtues which are opposite to the sins committed. Then . . . he will acquire the Holy Spirit who acts within us and establishes in us the kingdom of God” (*Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 104).

The Holy Spirit waits for us to despise the fetters of our sins, to repent and wash away their stain with tears of thankfulness to the Risen Lord. The Spirit who “is everywhere present and filleth all things” comes into the dismal recesses of our soiled hearts, ever ready to extend forgiveness and to nurture the seed of life planted in us at our baptism. **Christ is risen!**

O life-giving Lord, by Thy Holy Spirit help us to be partakers of Thy Resurrection.

April 13 - Bright Monday
Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

The Apostolic Church: Acts 1:12-17, 21-26, especially vs. 26: “And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.” As we recite the Nicene Creed, our declaration of faith in Jesus Christ, we also affirm our commitment and obedience to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. The present reading focuses on one aspect of this affirmation: that the Orthodox Church is “apostolic.”

In Acts, we learn that the Church considered it essential to maintain the ranks of the twelve apostles. Eleven are named (vs. 13), and when a twelfth is elected – Matthias is revealed as God’s choice – he is “numbered with the eleven apostles” (vs. 26).

The Apostle Peter states that any man designated as an apostle must have accompanied the others “all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among [them]” (vs. 21). Only thus could he “become a witness with [the others] of [the Lord’s] resurrection” (vs. 22). The painstaking care of Saint Luke in recording their names places an eternal seal on these particular individuals and their place in the life of the Church thereafter.

After the Lord Jesus “was taken up” (vs. 22) and no longer physically present, Saint Peter assumes leadership in the process of restoring the apostles’ number (vss. 15-22). Why twelve, exactly? Why this insistence on filling an office vacated by a traitor?

The compelling factor in the number is the will of God (Mk 3:14). Also, as we learn from the Apostle Paul, “not all Israel . . . are of Israel” (Rom 9:6). Finally, we recall that Jacob, the man whom God named “Israel” (Gn 32:28), had twelve sons (vs. 35:23) who became forebears of the twelve tribes of the ancient people of God.

Saint Paul adds, however, that “Israel according to the flesh” (see Rom 9:3-5) was “ignorant of God’s righteousness, and [sought] to establish their own righteousness, [having] not submitted to the righteousness of God” (vs. 10:3).

Now Christ has become “the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (vs. 4). Thus, “if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness” (vss. 9-10).

Jesus selects twelve men whom He sends to proclaim this truth, so that all people might believe in Him as the crucified and risen Christ (Mk 3:14). God does not cast away His people! From a remnant, “according to the election of grace,” He acts “to reconcile the world” to Himself (vss. 11:5,15). He does not create a new Israel, but a new covenant opening Israel to all nations through faith in Christ.

The Twelve assure the continuity from the old Israel to the Church, binding them together as one people. In fact, the apostles were hereditary members of Israel, but observe Saint Luke’s emphasis: they *accompanied* the Lord Jesus and so became authentic witnesses “of His Resurrection” (Acts 1:21).

The historic Church builds “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). She fiercely insists on continuity of teaching, worship, and prayer with the apostles, firmly retaining a connection with these particular, named persons. The teaching of the Twelve is essential for any right sharing of the truth concerning Christ in every generation.

This unified witness of the apostles, in the original Greek, is called *homothymodon*: “with one accord,” “constantly together,” “with one heart” (Acts 1:14) according to the translation. This word, whose Greek root means “soul,” implies shared experience. This very “soul” is retained by the Church today as “apostolic,” a continuation of the apostles’ witness.

O Christ the Rock, who doth openly glorify the rock of faith manifest in the Twelve whom Thou didst forechoose from the disciples, enable us faithfully to continue their witness. – Feast of the Holy Apostles

April 14 - Bright Tuesday
Acts 2:14-21

The Church Catholic: Acts 2:14-21, especially vs. 16-17: *“But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh. . . .’”* Yesterday we explored what it means to call the Church apostolic; today’s passage from Acts invites us to explore the catholicity of the Church. The Nicene Creed uses the word *katholikos* for this aspect of the Church, which in koine Greek means “universal,” “whole,” “entire.”

On the day of Pentecost in AD 33, the new Church community was born of the Spirit. Saint Peter, joined by the other apostles (vs. 14), proclaimed important words from God for all mankind to hear: a declaration of blessings available now to “all flesh” (vs. 17).

This proclamation from those “standing up with” (vs. 14) Peter represents the teaching, worship, and prayer of a community called *catholic*. This community is the Church whose Gospel is announced by apostles from God, presenting a message to every people, every culture, every time and place.

The Church is catholic because she is a living miracle of unity in Christ. She is composed of a diversity of persons brought together into a single whole. This living reality of many-as-one reveals the Church to be an icon of the Holy Trinity. Just as we distinguish three Persons in one Godhead, we point to the diverse peoples gathered around their bishops in one worldwide catholic Church.

Even in nascent form on the first Pentecost, the Church is the true, tangible Israel of God, one in heart and soul with her Lord and Messiah, Jesus. As the Church spread geographically, she remained united, gathered around her apostolic leaders and their successors, the bishops.

“Let no one, beloved brethren, make you to err from the ways of the Lord,” warns Saint Cyprian of Carthage. “Let no one take sons of the Church away from the Church. . . . Let them be alone for themselves who have wished to perish . . . let them alone be without bishops who have rebelled against bishops” (*ANF* vol. 5, p. 318). The catholic Church gathers around her pastors.

Above all, we call the Church catholic because her message is universal. She proclaims a complete Gospel for the entire world. In the Apostle Peter’s sermon, he quotes the Prophet Joel to explain how the Holy Spirit is poured out on humble people from an isolated, out-of-the-way place called Galilee.

The apostles can be understood by those present, even those speaking different languages, because their proclamation of Christ is for “all flesh” (vs. 17). Their words apply to the common problems and needs of every human being. The Church extends Christ’s healing in a catholic message that reaches every so-called foreign race or language. The Good News will be proclaimed until every knee bows to Jesus Christ (Phil 2:10-11).

The Church is catholic, being united by the one name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, God, and Savior. He became incarnate so that our relationship with God the Father might be healed. It matters not if we are male or female, young or old, slave or free (vs. 18). In blood and spirit we are all the same.

Thus, “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). Our Orthodox and catholic Church extends Christ’s healing to the ends of the earth, preserving one faith, under one apostolic leadership for all people in their greatest need.

O Lord, confirm and strengthen Thy holy orthodox, catholic, and apostolic Church, increase it and keep it in peace and preserve it unconquerable forever. – General Prayer of Intercession

April 15 - Bright Wednesday
Acts 2:22-38

The Holy Church: Acts 2:22-36, especially vss. 31, 33: *“His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. . . . Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.”* From Saint Peter we learn that the Church is *holy* – and yet in the Book of Revelation the blessed Evangelist John hears the saints who stand before God Almighty singing the song of the Lamb: “For You alone are holy” (Rv 15:4). All of Scripture asserts that only God is holy.

Do we admit contradiction, then, by affirming that the Church is holy? Not at all, for the apostles teach that we “are the body of Christ, and members individually” (1 Cor 12:27). The Church, as the Body of Christ, is included in Saint Peter’s assertion in Acts 2:27 that Christ the Lord is holy. Indeed, Christ is *the* “Holy One” spoken of in Psalm 15:10, which the apostle quotes. Bought with His precious blood, His body – the Church – is likewise holy.

The Church, this mystical creation of the Savior, is both human and divine. We correctly say, before holy communion, “I am unworthy to receive Thy holy Body. . . . I have affronted Thy goodness, O God, and broken Thy commandments.” And yet when we gather together in Him, we are more than a sum of sinful men and women.

Our priests rightly say, “Holy Things are for the holy.” And we rightly answer, “One is holy, One is Lord: Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father.” Partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, the Church becomes His Body, for He dwells and abides in us. In Him we are exalted to the right hand of God (vs. 33).

Let there be no doubt: the Church is holy, even here on earth, having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit (vs. 33). We are sinners; the Church is holy.

Saint John the Evangelist saw this holy, incorrupt Church in a vision: “Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rv 21:2).

From our earthly nation we inherit our worldly citizenship, culture, and language. In the Church, we inherit holiness, incorruption, and the end of every blemish. Purity and holiness come to us now from eternity. That which is to come assures the holiness of the Church, despite the sins we bring to God to be healed.

“And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light. . . . But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life” (Rv 21:24, 27). Our task is to struggle, to cast sin aside, and to strive for the holiness that God is creating in us by means of His grace and mercy.

Worshiping within the Church on earth draws us near to the throne of God, no matter how humble the congregation, the building, the music, or our human efforts. The liturgy draws us into the holiness that already exists in the Church. Thus the envoys of Prince Vladimir, after visiting Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, could say: “We were out of ourselves, not knowing if we were on earth or in heaven.”

Christ purifies the Church as we worship in “the Holy Spirit He poured out” (Acts 2:33). Our mind struggles with what our flesh sees and what our Spirit-filled heart knows. The Holy Spirit illumines our hearts so that we may behold the holiness that exists.

Every Divine Liturgy begins with this prayer: “O Heavenly King, the Comforter, who art every where present and fillest all things, come and abide in us and cleanse us of every stain.” The the Spirit makes the Church holy “unto the fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven.”

O Lord, be mindful of Thy holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, which is to the ends of the earth; and give peace unto her whom Thou hast purchased with the Blood of Thy Christ.

April 16 - Bright Thursday
Acts 2:38-43

The Church is One: Acts 2:38-43, especially vs. 42: “*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.*” The Apostle Peter addresses a multicultural gathering of the “men of Israel” (vs. 22). Many fellow Jews hear him and recognize that God “made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (vs. 36). “Cut to the heart” (vs. 37) by their complicity in rejecting the Messiah, they ask what they must do to be “saved from this perverse generation” (vs. 40).

The answer is to heed God’s call: to repent, to be baptized into Christ, and to continue “steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (vs. 42). Only through our spiritually organic unity with the Lord’s Body, the Church, can we persevere in this life and enter into eternal existence.

The Holy Spirit unites the members of the Church into the living Body of her Lord, Jesus Christ. The Spirit unites our community and guides the Church, creating a living communion in and through Himself. The Church cannot be other than *one*.

If we accept the possibility of several churches (even so-called branches of the one Church), we embrace false dogma, asserting that God the Father does not fully honor the prayer of His only-begotten Son, for the Lord Jesus prays that His apostles “all may be one” (Jn 17:21). God is not divided, nor is His Church divided!

Within the Orthodox Church there is rich cultural, linguistic, and historical variety, while at the same time we discern deep unity and continuity with the apostles. Division is plainly evident among those who separate from the Church and leave “the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship . . . the breaking of bread [and the] prayers” (Acts 2:42). This is how the tragic and manifest fragmentation of modern Christendom begins.

Unity is a gift from God, given to those who hold fast to the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship (vs. 42). Christ prays to the Father to save the apostles “from the evil one” (Jn 17:15) and to “sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (vs. 17).

When people choose separation from the Church, they disdain the apostles knowledge of “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 . . . ” (1 Jn 1:1). The unifying truth of the Church is revealed in the Incarnate Christ (Jn 14:6). He alone is Truth.

The Holy Spirit guides the Church “into all truth” (Jn 16:13). He directs her to Jesus Christ, and thus the Church is able to continue “steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42) no matter how many new circumstances, questions, and issues arise.

What of Christians whose teachings are not fully Orthodox? The Church has never held that the false teaching of those who are in error are necessarily condemned. There are many sheep outside, as well as wolves within.

Unity comes to those who continue in the apostles’ *fellowship* (vs. 42), who actively respond to the Spirit. When heresy is coupled with pride or arrogance, fellowship and unity is disrupted. The Lord says to the prideful and arrogant: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Mt 7:23).

We are to seek unity through right doctrine concerning the Lord Jesus, and by continuing in right fellowship with His apostles. To sustain this unity, God nurtures the faithful through the Eucharistic life, in “the breaking of bread, and prayers” (Acts 2:42). For this reason the Church guards the liturgy as carefully as the integrity of her doctrine and holy fellowship.

Be mindful, O Lord, of Thine holy, orthodox, catholic, and apostolic Church; confirm and strengthen her, keep her in peace and preserve her unconquerable. – General Prayer of Intercession

April 17 - Bright Friday
Acts 3:1-8

The Power of Resurrection: Acts 3:1-8, especially vs 6: “Then Peter said, ‘Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.’” The healing of a beggar lame from birth is described in Acts. The account is truly an icon that enlarges our vision of the Resurrection. Saint Peter’s healing of this man transforms the Resurrection from an isolated event, concerning only the Lord Jesus, and shows us the power of the risen Christ ever at work in this world.

Christ gives us life and delivers us from the many tombs in which we find ourselves stuck. The lame man, with his lifelong disability, is eking out an existence in the living death of beggary, which parallels the affliction plaguing every descendant of Adam (vs. 2). Yes, we are born mortal and consigned to inevitable death.

Two apostles come across the lame man as he is begging (vs. 3). They do what the Church does for us, who are likewise crippled by sin and begging mercy from God. They awaken his heart to the reality of life in Christ, to rising and walking (vs. 6). The Church extends God’s power of the Resurrection to us and reveals that we can walk and leap before God, as He intends for us to do (vss. 4-8).

We know sin’s deformities all too well, and how unworthy we are to enter the courts of the Lord. Yet in the Church we experience the compassionate power of the risen Lord Jesus, who brings us to His footstool. Thus the apostles, by the power of the risen Christ, help this lame man to worship his Creator for the first time “within the Temple” (vs. 8).

Let us examine the conditions under which the Church extends the power of Resurrection into our lives. First and foremost, the Church goes about its regular cycle of prayer and worship. In this passage, the Church is represented by two apostles, Peter and John. They are not out on a mission looking for beggars or wounded outcasts, but simply going up to the Temple at the ninth hour to attend the final service of the day (vs. 1).

Healing, then, takes place within the ongoing routine of prayer. The power of the Resurrection is manifested in the context of the Church’s life and worship. Indeed, the ninth hour marks the time for “thanksgiving for what we have been given during the day and for our achievements; and confession of our failures, our voluntary or involuntary misdeeds, and those perhaps unknown to us, whether in word or deed or in the heart itself, asking God’s mercy for all through our prayers” (Saint Basil the Great, *The Long Rules* II, Q37).

The apostles are following their regular schedule of prayer when they are confronted by the lame man in need. “Ever blessing the Lord,” the apostles are preparing to “sing [Christ’s] Resurrection: for in that He endured the Cross for us He hath destroyed death by death” (Paschal hours). The power of the Resurrection occurs within the Church’s life of worship.

Further, we note how the apostles rely on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ when they reach the gate of the Temple. Here, God shows us that “the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom 10:12-13).

Indeed, Peter and John place no faith in their own abilities. They trust wholly in Christ’s authority. They give what they know: the compassion of Jesus. They trust in Him that everyone should be healed and brought to the knowledge of the living God. They expect Christ, their Risen Lord, to act.

Full of faith, they take the lame man by the hand and lift him up (Acts 3:7). To all who come attentively to the Church, the Lord extends His hand for our healing.

Arise O God: help us and redeem us for Thy name’s sake! – Prayer Before the Gospel at Orthros

April 18 - Bright Saturday
Acts 3:11-16

This Perfect Soundness: Acts 3:11-16, especially vs. 16: “Yes, the faith which comes through [Christ] has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.” A few years ago, a paramedic sustained severe spinal injuries while caring for a patient being transported by ambulance. When the ambulance was forced off the road by a dump truck, he was thrown violently around inside the vehicle. During the yearlong battle that followed, his faith, hope, and love as an Orthodox Christian illumined all around him: fellow parishioners, professional colleagues, hospital workers, and many others.

Despite many prayers, this servant of God did not survive his injuries. However, the Lord He loved and trusted gave him a more “perfect soundness.” Like the account of the lame man in today’s epistle, his experience challenges us to consider the very highest form of healing.

Drawing from both stories, we may note three signs of *perfect soundness*. First, we must hold firmly to apostolic truth. Second, we are to draw strength from God in weakness. Lastly, we must believe steadfastly in the name of Jesus Christ.

When the lame beggar is healed, two reactions occur instantaneously. As “the lame man . . . held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon’s, greatly amazed” (vs. 11). The beggar is cured of serious physical disability, but more importantly, his heart is healed.

We read in verses 1-8 how the lame man springs to his feet and enters the Temple with the apostles, “walking, leaping, and praising God” (vs. 8). Now, this sequel passage adds that he “held on” to Peter and John. Touched by the power of the name of the Lord Jesus, he clings fiercely to the apostles from whom he has gained knowledge of the highest, most perfect healing.

The same was true of the injured paramedic: even as his bodily strength drained away, he held firmly to the apostolic truth. As a result, a life-giving message radiated from him to everyone he met, for we are always drawn to those whose lives are filled with truth.

At various points during the paramedic’s battle for life, his physical condition declined to the point that no one expected him to make it. Yet time after time he rallied, and sometimes even progressed. At one point he even left acute care, moved into rehabilitation, and from there was admitted to a small hospital in his home town.

During his ordeal, he displayed remarkable inner strength and a mighty resolve to recover, inspired by a determination to provide for his wife and three children. In his spiritual fortitude, he was much like the lame man in today’s account from Acts. Everyone knew that Christ Jesus was the source of his strength.

God gave both the paramedic and the lame man at the Temple gate unwavering faith in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Saint Peter emphasizes that the lame man’s healing comes from the Lord: “And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong” (vs. 16).

The name of the Lord represents His sovereign power and authority. Our Lord has the capacity to pour His strength into our weakness, to make us strong in heart, soul, and even body: “Make firm my knees, and my bones likewise” (post-communion prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator).

However, as Saint Peter points out, we must bow down to the dominion of God with corresponding trust (vs. 16). God is seeking to heal us – let us never let Him go! When we pray for healing in the name of Christ, we are assured of receiving His perfect soundness.

O Christ my God, strengthen my weak soul and body and heal me by Thy grace.

April 19 - Second Sunday of Pascha (Thomas Sunday)
Acts 5:12-20

At Cross Purposes: Acts 5:12-20, especially vss. 17-19: “Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him . . . and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out.” Today’s reading from Acts begs us to consider what it means to be *in* the will of God vs. being at cross purposes with His will. We learn that God accomplishes His purposes “through the hands of the apostles” (vs. 12). Then the Sadducees, as they “laid their hands on” the apostles (vs. 18), exemplify how we oppose God. Finally, the angel who frees the apostles provides another example of working in accord with God’s purposes (vs. 19).

God carries out His purpose through the *hands* of His apostles (vs. 12) and later through the bodiless hand of His heavenly messenger (vs. 19). Ironically, the Temple authorities, who are supposedly in God’s service, put their *hands* on the apostles to defeat the will of God (vs. 18). Are we ourselves ever at cross purposes with God, putting our hands into the service of ends that conflict with His will?

The will of God is constant and eternal. His divine love and power are revealed through the apostles, God’s people, and His angels. When we read of “signs and wonders” (vs. 12), we must be careful not to misinterpret these means that God sometimes uses to carry out His intended purposes. The Lord does seek to inspire awe “through the hands” of His servants. We are not magicians or illusionists with a set of tricks and spectacles.

Scripture states that the apostles and the people who gathered with them are of “one accord” (vs. 12). God’s abiding purpose is to unite our mind, will, and emotions with Christ and the Church. This is the Gospel that our Lord commissions the Church to proclaim.

Ever since men first stretched out their hands to disobey God and fell into sin and death, the Lord of compassion has been working to rectify the tragedy created by our contrary desires. Saint Paul speaks of “the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph 3:11) – the salvation of all who repent and become united with the fellowship of the apostles.

The Church, like her Lord, is in the business of restoring mankind. She heals the sick (Acts 5:15) and frees those possessed by demons (vs. 16). “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn 3:8).

The high priest and his party are filled with “indignation” (vs. 17), or *zelos* in the original Greek. *Zelos* is a strong feeling, either for or against. In this case they are jealous, spiteful, and envious of the apostles, for the authority of the priests is being challenged in “their” Temple.

Men these leaders deem to be ignorant are preaching Christ’s Resurrection, an idea they consider ridiculous. Having rid themselves of the leader of the Galileans, the priests are now plagued by His followers preaching the Resurrection.

Even worse, the people are following them! Because the priests are afraid, they try to silence these self-styled teachers. Our own opposition to God often has its roots in deficient theology, self-righteous morality, self-seeking, and pride. Let us beware of such vices in ourselves, lest we too be found opposing God.

In Proverbs, we learn that “the Lord opposes the arrogant, but He gives grace to the humble” (Prv 3:37). Saint Peter quotes this verse in 1 Peter 5:5. Let us strive for humility and pray to be corrected. We ask mercy for all “who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and . . . come to their senses” (2 Tim 2:25-26).

Lord, I have fled unto Thee: teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God. –The Doxology

April 20 - Monday of the Second Week of Pascha
Acts 3:19-25

Responses to the Gospel – Conversion: Acts 3:19-26, especially vs. 26: *“To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities.”* In this week’s series of readings in Acts, Saint Luke explores many possible responses to the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel. The stage is set when Peter and John go up to the Temple for prayer at the ninth hour (vs. 3:1). There they encounter a beggar (vs. 3:2-5) who has been lame for many years. God uses the apostles to heal him (vss. 3:6-10), and this restoration draws a crowd into the large open portico at the entrance of the Temple (vs. 3:11).

Now, responding to the people’s evident interest, the Apostle Peter seizes the occasion to proclaim the Gospel (vss. 12-18). His preaching evokes a variety of responses. Many in the crowd are moved to commitment and belief.

The apostles use these new opportunities to follow up on their witness, but the Temple authorities formulate a policy to constrain further preaching of what they consider to be an aberrant theology. The Church prays for bold demonstrations of the power of Jesus’ name, and for the courage to speak in His name. A collision looms.

Today’s passage reveals the steps that Peter uses to appeal to the crowd through his preaching – steps that ultimately led to the conversion of “many of those who heard the word [and] believed” (vs. 4:4). Looking back at Acts 3:12-18, we see that the chief apostle focuses his proclamation plainly and directly on the observable facts of the Gospel.

After the natural break that occurs between verses 18 and 19, Saint Peter begins his step-by-step appeal to his listeners to respond with true belief. Let us examine the points in his appeal.

First, the apostle describes the main thing required of those who wish to live a Christian life: *repentance* (vs. 19). There can be no conversion, no true Christianity, no vital commitment, no new life, and no blessing without a fundamental change of heart.

In order for us to repent, God must open our eyes so that we see ourselves as sinners. If true repentance follows this revelation, then godly sorrow is induced. This sorrow in turn leads to confession and the struggle to follow Christ in every aspect of our life.

Next, Saint Peter explains the divine gifts that come to us if we persist in repentance. Over time, our sins “may be blotted out” (vs. 19). When this happens, our sin has been “cast into the depths of the sea” (Mic 7:19). This forgiveness is experienced in many ways: as cleansing, acceptance, love, and joy, all of which Saint Peter summarizes as “times of refreshing” (Acts 3:19).

The the apostle then announces the return of Christ (vss. 20-21). We, his listeners, receive fair notice that we shall face this very Jesus who is being preached, either for our complete “restoration” (vs. 21) or to be “utterly destroyed among the people” (vs. 23), i.e., for our eternal condemnation.

The chief apostle focuses our attention on prophecies of separation from God and rejection from His covenant promises (vss. 22-24). He underscores these two alternatives with examples of God’s consistent actions as found in Scripture.

However, Saint Peter now makes a personal, reassuring appeal to all who will listen to him, including us. His message is that sonship is already ours. We are “sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers” (vs. 25).

Finally, the apostle emphasizes God’s promise to bless all who turn “away . . . from . . . iniquities” (vs. 26). He reemphasizes the primary and basic action of the heart that every person must make to realize the healing power of the Gospel: all of us must repent!

Help us, O Lord, to complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

April 21 - Tuesday of the Second Week of Pascha
Acts 4:1-10

Responses to the Gospel – Witnessing: Acts 4:1-10, especially vs. 10: “Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole.” At Pentecost, Saint Peter preached Jesus the exalted Christ, witnessing that He is the divine Giver of the Holy Spirit. On that occasion some three thousand people joined the Church (vss. 2:14-41). Later, when Peter publicly healed a man lame from birth (vss. 3:1-10), he appealed to the crowd to embrace the Gospel (vss. 19-26). As a result, another two thousand became followers of the Way (vss. 4:4; 9:2).

Mass conversions of this magnitude would not go unnoticed in any city, let alone a nation’s religious capital. Predictably, the apostles’ witnessing now catches the attention of the Jews’ governing council, composed of men already in opposition to the Church and her message. The authorities “laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day” (vs. 4:3).

The Holy Spirit uses the apostles’ message to draw people into the Church, but this development meets with hostility from the nation’s leadership (Mt 24:9; Jn 16:2-4), as Christ had warned. However, the apostles now gain an unexpected opportunity to speak before the Sanhedrin – the very group that found the Lord Jesus guilty of blasphemy and pressed for His crucifixion under Pilate.

This council will be asked to accept the true Lord and Messiah. If its members reject Him, Peter and John may be found guilty of civil disobedience, subversion, or the use of occult powers, and may themselves face a death sentence.

Addressing this group, Saint Peter proceeds to make seven points with the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:8). He begins with objective fact: the verifiable healing of a “helpless man” (vs. 9). Confronted with the accomplished fact of this beneficent “good deed,” how can the council avoid the objective evidence and positive social outcome? And yet we remember that Lord Jesus was condemned by these very leaders.

Next, Saint Peter addresses the central issue: the *power* and *means* of the healing (vs. 7, 9). Is it demonic? Does Saint Peter blasphemously claim it to be the work of God? Indeed, he boldly identifies Jesus, the man the council had found guilty of death, with God. Furthermore, he declares that God brought about the healing through Jesus’ *name* – His authority and power (vs. 10).

The Apostle Peter thus names Jesus and identifies the healing as the work of the supposed criminal the council had found guilty. He asserts what the Church steadfastly teaches: this very Jesus, who was executed, has eternal, effective, and present powers (vs. 10).

Most startling of all for the Sanhedrin is the implication that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. This very point was raised at Jesus’ trial (Lk 22:67-70) and used as evidence to convince the Roman overlords that He was an insurrectionist.

Peter acknowledges that the Lord Jesus was crucified, but he then proclaims the Resurrection of the Lord “whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 4:10). The Risen Christ is responsible for the healing of a paralytic hopelessly crippled from birth.

The apostle bluntly charges the council with the death of the Messiah “whom you crucified” (vs. 10). He then declares Jesus to be the “chief cornerstone” (vs. 11) of the New Jerusalem, claiming Christ as the source of personal and national salvation (vs. 12).

What does Saint Peter’s teaching mean for us? Do we stand with the apostles, or do we covertly agree with the Sanhedrin? Do we proclaim Him Lord, or not?

Shine, New Jerusalem, the glory of the Lord has shone upon you. Exult and be glad! – Paschal Canon

April 22 - Wednesday of the Second Week of Pascha
Acts 4:13-22

Responses to the Gospel – Consternation: Acts 4:13-22, especially vss. 13-14: “And they realized that they [the apostles] had been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it.” Not all who hear the Gospel perceive it as the true foundation for our life. Sadly, many turn away from the truth – or look for it in the wrong places. As Saint John Climacus reminds us, “If you seek understanding in wicked men, you will not find it.”

Many of us are captive to our passions. Saint Peter of Damascus compiled a list of the passions, identifying 298 (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 205-6). Any one of them may lead us to refuse Christ’s call.

The Sanhedrin’s refusal of the Gospel in today’s epistle seems especially poignant. Although these leaders sit on the highest council of God’s people, they reject the apostles’ words. Captive to the passions, especially envy and pride, they disdain the apostles’ witness as that of “uneducated and untrained” men (vs. 13).

We may characterize the Sanhedrin’s response to Saint Peter’s presentation as one of consternation – a dismayed confusion. We Christians understand the rejection of the Gospel as a tragic and momentous mistake. For many members of the Jerusalem council, this rejection would bear bitter fruit. Worse, their decision would have lasting effects on “Israel after the flesh” (1 Cor 10:18).

As a devout Jew, Saint Paul struggled against the reluctance of his own nation to accept the Gospel. He found in the Church the true Israel of God. Thus, he concluded, “blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:25-26).

Let us examine the Sanhedrin’s response to Peter and John to discover the cause of their consternation. May the grace of God and our ascetic labors cleanse us of the passions that prevented the council from embracing the Gospel of salvation.

First, Saint Luke observes the Sanhedrin members marveling at the apostles’ *boldness* (Acts 4:13). They are intimidated, but not because they are faced with superior students of Scripture. Indeed, the council members are highly trained. Lacking illumination by the Holy Spirit, however, they hesitate before the truth.

The council sees that the apostles are uneducated – they lack the refinements of learning, as their speech and manners reveal (vs. 13). On the other hand, these fishermen knew Jesus, who is the source of all truth and knowledge. For a full three years Peter and John associated with the Lord in prayer, teaching, worship, and at table. The lesson is clear: before all else we must seek a deep, intimate relationship with Christ our God, rather than trusting exclusively in worldly knowledge.

When the Sanhedrin hears of the teaching and ministry of the Lord Jesus, its members misconstrue His message, doctrine, and activities and those of the apostles (cf., Mt 15:2; Jn 2:18-25). We are reminded of the importance of dedicating ourselves to knowing the Lord in prayer, asceticism, Scripture, and liturgy!

The Sanhedrin had decided that Jesus must be arrested and put to death based on secondhand reports and endless rumors. They acted out of envy and for the purpose of retaining their power. Let us never brush away the truth about Him for the sake of expediency! May God grant us the desire to know Him, love Him, and serve Him above all.

Blessed art Thou, O Holy One. Enlighten me with Thy statutes. – The Doxology

April 23 – Thursday of the Second Week of Pascha
Acts 4:23-31

Responses to the Gospel – Bold Strength: Acts 4:23-31, especially vs. 31: “And when they had prayed . . . where they were assembled together . . . they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.” Opportunities to proclaim the Gospel were plentiful for the apostles. The Holy Spirit moved many to believe (vs. 4:4). Yet some who could have believed chose not to; they lived by human wisdom or expediency. Such people did not grasp the basics of the apostles’ witness, but tried to intimidate the apostles into silence (vss. 4:17, 21).

Despite everything that befell the nascent Christian community, the faithful were empowered because when “they were assembled together . . . they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (vs. 31). How the community prayed is crucial, so let us consider the distinct requests included in their prayers.

First, we note the similarity between the early Church’s prayers and the present-day prayers of the anaphora during the Divine Liturgy. When we read the phrase, “they raised their voice to God with one accord” (vs. 24), we hear the echoes of the present-day bidding at the anaphora, “Let us lift up our hearts.”

The word “accord” shares the same Greek root as the word for “heart.” Just as the early Church prayed to “God who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them” (vs. 24), we lift our hearts to God, “Master of all, Lord of heaven and earth, and of all creation both visible and invisible,” as we say in the liturgy of Saint Basil.

Above all the apostles’ prayers, like the anaphora, are Eucharistic: they are filled with praise and thanksgiving for the mighty acts of God. They celebrate God the Creator of all, Lord and Ruler of all nations.

The early Christian community understands God as the source of all power, and they know that in Christ the Lord carries out His determined purpose (vss. 27-28). They rejoice to see God accomplish His purpose and to see the futility of the plottings and counsels of the earthly rulers who oppose Him. They witness as those who know that neither fate nor the blind forces of nature, neither luck nor destiny, are in control of history.

God is Lord; He cares for His people and loves us, and He sets His hand upon events for our healing and triumph. Let us rejoice, for God is with us. Let all the peoples understand and submit themselves, for God is with us!

Finally, we observe how the prayer of the apostolic assembly petitions the Lord for *boldness*, to speak the word of God forcefully (vs. 29). Not only do they ask for boldness, but they also beg God to match their efforts as needed with “signs and wonders . . . done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus” (vs. 30). We who partake “of the divine, holy, immaculate, immortal, heavenly, life-giving and dread Mysteries of Christ” boldly give thanks to the Lord who does wonders.

In the words of Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “Great is the power of prayer, and it brings most of all the Spirit of God, and is most easily practiced by everyone. We shall be blessed if the Lord God finds us watchful and filled with the gifts of His Holy Spirit” (*Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 92).

Let us ask for God’s blessing with true boldness when we come to the Divine Liturgy, that He may match our puny efforts and witness with signs and wonders. We are not merely there in order to be present at the liturgy, but to make of it a true “work” of the people. Let us pray earnestly and concentrate our hearts in one accord with what is said, that we may strengthen the witness of the Church and our own witness before God and the world.

Fill us, O Lord, with Thy Holy Spirit that we may ever speak Thy word with boldness.

April 24 - Friday of the Second Week of Pascha
Acts 5:1-11

Spiritual Suicide: Acts 5:1-11, especially vs. 4: “*You have not lied to men but to God.*” Many people today treat religious ideas and speech with flippancy and irreverence. Others assume that religion is merely an ideology that supports the social order. Few stand before the Lord in awe, dread, and fear. In light of these trends, let us examine ourselves!

If we abandon a soul-shaking “fear of the Lord,” we adroitly remove any thought of God from our life-and-death concerns, and even from consciousness itself. We consider affairs that come from “the hand of the Lord” (vs. 11:21) as passing events along our journey through bland existence.

Let us be honest with ourselves. Do we always address God with the tone of awe found in this post-communion prayer: “Ever shelter me, guard and keep me from every soul-corrupting deed and word At Thy fearful second coming make me, the sinner, worthy to stand at the right hand of Thy glory”?

Our contemporary secular lifestyle differs sharply from what the Holy Fathers teach. These two worldviews are ultimately irreconcilable. Are we Orthodox Christians committed to living with a heightened consciousness of our need for “humility and contrition of heart, and meekness in . . . thoughts, and deliverance from the bondage of . . . vain imaginings”?

The Apostle Paul provides us with the reason for rejecting any manner of living without God: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31). He warns us to “beware . . . lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God” (vs. 3:12).

The present and constant danger for all of us is the possibility that our vital relationship with God will leach away. We strive to remember that God alone is able to “cleanse [our] conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (vs. 9:14). Otherwise, we find ourselves numbered among the living dead, thrust away from His faithfulness and lost “in that land that is forgotten” (Ps 87:13).

As we consider the account of Ananias and Sapphira, we recall the importance of holy fear of the Lord. Two people – a married couple, ordinary people like ourselves – commit spiritual suicide. The option they choose remains insidiously available to us today. It is no fable; let us be attentive!

This foolish pair confuses external action with interior purpose. Most of members of the early Jerusalem Christian community were mindful of the urgent grace of God upon their lives to the point of disdain for material possessions. Like Barnabas, they sold their properties, “brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4:37).

In this way they directly expressed what it means to be “of one heart and of one soul” (vs. 32) in the Church. They could not abide the idea that “anyone among them . . . lacked” (vs. 34). Two forgetful souls, however, decide to hold back some of the proceeds from the apostles, while feigning to give all they have. Their pretense ignores any concern for the state of their hearts – the fatal step toward spiritual death.

Ananias and Sapphira only masquerade piety. It is not simply a matter of holding back a portion for their financial needs, but rather of believing that the act itself is sufficient. They seek approval by playing the part and seeming to do as the others. When they choose to “lie to the Holy Spirit” (vs. 5:3), Satan enters the vacuum of their hearts instantly, and they die.

Mere acts merit approval from neither God nor man. “The purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5) – all else is spiritual suicide. Rather, “blessed is the man . . . in whose mouth there is no guile” (Ps 31:2).

Lord, turn not Thy face away from me lest I be like them that go down into the pit. – Psalm 142:8

April 25 – Saturday of the Second Week of Pascha
Acts 5:21-33

A Prince and Savior: Acts 5:21-33, especially vs. 31: “Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” If we are to grasp the full import of the encounter between the Sanhedrin and the apostles, we may wish to start today’s reading at Acts 5:20 and finish with verse 42. However, the key to the apostles’ message is found in verse 31, quoted above, which summarized the position of Saint Peter: the Lord Jesus is our God, Prince, and Savior, offering repentance and forgiveness to all who acknowledge Him.

Saint Peter calls Jesus a “prince,” although the original Greek does not imply nobility in the way the English translation does. Rather, the apostle presents a puzzle to the Sanhedrin, whose members consider Jesus a self-styled, uneducated peasant revolutionary who stirred up the people with dangerous hopes of liberation from imperial Rome.

The apostle does call Him *archegos*, which means “a charismatic leader for God’s people during times of repression” (e.g., Jgs 11:8). However, he is not referring to a military leader, as in the English word “captain” (another possible translation of *archegos*).

Instead, Saint Peter aims at a sense of the word that comes closer to “author” or “source.” In Acts 3:15, for example, he speaks of the Lord as the “*archegos* of life.” The Church still employs this title for Christ liturgically, calling him “Author” and “Giver” of life, the One “bestowing life on those in the tombs,” etc.

When the Apostle Peter couples *archegos* with “savior,” he clearly indicates that the Lord Jesus is the “Author of life.” The Sanhedrin might understand a savior to be merely a revolutionary liberator, but the last two expressions in verse 31 make it clear that Peter believes Christ to be humanity’s Savior from sin and death.

For Christians, the Lord Jesus is both King and God, as the Apostle Peter implies when he speaks of His being “exalted to [the] right hand” of God (vs. 31). The Lord Jesus reigns in heaven, equal in nature with the Father. Because Christ is King and God, Israel ceases to be understood from a nationalistic or geographic standpoint. Christ seeks followers who obey Him from the heart, and He pours forgiveness into our hearts as we repent.

Let us consider the apostle’s claim that the Lord Jesus will “give repentance to Israel” (vs. 31). Saint Peter does not understand repentance as a simple human action, but as a gift from God. Although repentance is manifested in human actions, the inclination to repent and the inner power to change come from God by grace.

Indeed, Christ is the true source of our repentance. Every heartfelt impulse to confess, to weep for our sins, to struggle against them, or to live virtuously is a gift from God. As the faithful, we live out repentance as Christ’s gift to His Israel, the Church.

Furthermore, Christ intended this gift for us even before the foundation of the world. Imagine what might have happened if the Sanhedrin members had opened their hearts to Saint Peter’s words and received this blessed gift of repentance!

Nevertheless, the blessing is ours: we receive Christ as the source of our repentance and forgiveness. The good thief discerned this reality while on the cross, for the word of the Cross is repentance and reconciliation (Col 1:28).

Saint Peter lovingly declares this truth to the Sanhedrin and calls on them, as he calls on us now, to repent and to be forgiven by the Author of life. Christ alone saves us from eternal separation from God. Let us heed the Gospel of the Lifegiver in the word Saint Peter proclaims!

Open unto me the doors of repentance, O Lifegiver, for trusting the compassion of Thy mercy I cry to Thee, Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy great Mercy. – Lenten Hymn

April 26 – Third Sunday of Pascha (Sunday of the Holy Myrrhbearers)
Acts 6:1-7

Principles for Ministry: Acts 6:1-7, especially vss. 2-3: “Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. . . .’” Although this reading does not explicitly state that the chosen seven were ordained as deacons, tradition reads it as such. Certainly the Greek verb *diakonein* (“to serve”) in verse 2 is the basis for the name of the diaconate, or order of deacons. In early times, in keeping with apostolic practice, seven deacons always served under each bishop.

That particular rule was discontinued, but many apostolic principles found in Acts still apply to ministry today. First is the principle that ethnicity should never block a candidate from ministry in the Church. Unlike ancient Israel, the Church is united through the blood of Christ “out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rv 5:9).

The Jerusalem congregation, in response to the complaint that the widows of the Greek-speaking members were being neglected by the Aramaic-speaking majority (Acts 6:1), chooses to appoint seven men with Greek names (vs. 5). The leadership appears sensitive to the need to quell any hint of ethnic divisiveness in the life of the Church.

Today, there are many ethnic groups in the Church, yet ethnicity should never exclude anyone from ministry, including ordination. Rather, the exclusion of a candidate because of ethnicity is a serious sin against the Lord’s very Body.

Second, care is taken for the defenseless and dependent, such as assuring that widows are not neglected (vs. 1). Our priests today bring the holy chalice to communicants in wheelchairs, and to those in hospitals and nursing homes who can no longer visit the temple. This principle of care for the helpless extends to social services and every ministry the Church provides.

A third principle may be seen in the effort to protect pastoral ministry by assuring that the apostles are not be diverted from their essential work of teaching and worship by other community needs (vss. 2-4). Let us protect our clergy so they may conduct their ministries and not have their time and energy drained off into mundane tasks.

Fourth, the Jerusalem Church assigns specific persons to each essential ministry in the life and functioning of the community (vs. 3). Let us avoid allowing the business of all to become no one’s business. Poor planning and a neglect of roles and functions can lead to disorder within a congregation. Let us do what we can to support the distribution of delegated work assignments.

Fifth, we note that the selection of those who serve in ministry should be a cooperative process involving the Holy Spirit, the people, and the pastors. The seven are men “full of the Holy Spirit” (vss. 3, 5). It is the people’s role to reply, “Axios!” at an ordination when the bishop declares, “Axios, he is worthy.” Let us wholeheartedly support our clergy and leaders!

A sixth apostolic principle requires that candidates for ministry exhibit the active presence of the Holy Spirit, showing signs of wisdom (vs. 3) and faith (vs. 5). Of course only God sees the heart, and sometimes mistakes are made. The deacon Nicolas later became the leader of a heresy condemned by the Lord and the Church (Rv 2:6, 15). As we participate in selecting leaders, let us strive to do God’s will.

Finally, we observe that commissioning for ministry takes place in the Church’s assemblies for prayer (Acts 6:2, 6), including ordination to both the major and minor orders. In many communities, elected and appointed lay officers are also blessed at the end of liturgy.

O Lord, confer Thy Holy Spirit on those Thou dost call to minister in Thy Church. – From the Rite of Ordination

April 27 – Monday of the Third Week after Pascha
Acts 6:8-7:5, 47-60

Opposition and Growth – The Blood of the Martyrs: Acts 6:8-7:5, 47-60), especially vs. 7:58: “They cast him out of the city and stoned him.” In New Testament Greek, *martyrs* means “a witness to a circumstance.” The verb *martyreo* means “witness,” “give evidence,” or “bear confirming testimony.” After the stoning of Stephen, who was the first witness to die for Christ, the word soon took on the meaning it still bears today: A martyr is one who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty for witnessing and refusing to renounce his religion.

Christian martyrs are witnesses to the defeat of death through the triumph of Christ our God, the Lifegiver. Christ’s martyrs are far more than brave heroes – they are the foundation of the Church! As the third-century apologist Tertullian observes, “The oftener we are mown down . . . the more in number we grow; the blood of the Christians is seed.”

Saint Stephen’s martyrdom reveals the truth of Tertullian’s principle, which we discover repeated throughout the Book of Acts. This same spirit is found in those Christians who faithfully resist error, for the faithful receive God’s strength to stand against falsehood and foster the spread of truth.

The opposition to “the wisdom and the Spirit” of Saint Stephen (vs. 10) comes from from the “Synagogue of the Freedmen” (vs. 9). These men, who experienced slavery on behalf of Judaism, are filled with emotional zeal and thus impervious to the truth of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Invariably, the fiercest opponents of our faith attack believers based on past experiences that formed in them an emotional devotion to false ideas. However, we “have seen the true light . . . and received the heavenly Spirit, worshiping the undivided Trinity.” We need only stand calmly in Christ when confronted by opposition.

The Sanhedrin, frustrated by godly wisdom, orchestrates a plan to get rid of Stephen, suborning men to lie and make a case for blasphemy and execution (vss. 11-14). We ourselves may be fired, exiled, branded, or have our testimony ignored in stony silence. Let us heed the Psalmist: “With the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption; and He shall redeem Israel out of all his iniquities” (Ps 129:5).

The high priest asks Stephen about the truth of the charges (vs. 7:1). Likewise, if we are required to speak, we must heed the Lord without worrying “what you should answer, or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Lk 12:11-12).

As a witness for Christ, Stephen reviews the history of God’s people beginning with Abraham (Acts 7:2-8) and ending with the Lord Jesus. He appeals to the council to repent of its complicity in the crucifixion of “the Just One” (vs. 52). We repeat the history of salvation every time we recite the Nicene Creed: “and was crucified for us by Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried, rising on the third day...”

Echoing the words of the Creed, Stephen receives a vision of Christ now reigning in heaven. The saint cries out: “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (vs. 56). Our Lord’s defeat of death is confirmed by His Resurrection, Ascension, and His sitting at the right hand of the Father.

“Cast . . . out of the city and stoned” before witnesses (vs. 58), the holy martyr forgives his executioners (vs. 60). Christ’s triumphant seed is then cast forth upon “a young man named Saul” (vs. 58). Stephen’s witness reaches the nations: “My flesh shall dwell in hope. For Thou wilt not abandon my soul in hades, nor. . . suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption” (Ps 15:9-10).

O first of strivers among the martyrs, who saw thy Savior in glory, plead for our souls. – Orthros of the Feast of the Transfiguration

April 28 – Tuesday of the Third Week of Pascha
Acts 8:5-17

Opposition and Growth, continued – Preaching the Word: Acts 8:5-17, especially vss. 4-5: “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.” Despite the world’s darkness and the evils it spawns, God infuses His will into everything that happens here. We see the Protodeacon Stephen martyred (vs. 2) and God’s enemies wreaking havoc on the Church, scattering her members (vs. 4). Yet the Spirit of the Lord still dwells in the hearts of the faithful, who share the truth of the Gospel by going “everywhere preaching the word” (vs. 4).

Saint Philip, one of the newly appointed deacons, travels to Samaria to evangelize its people (vss. 5-13). Through Philip’s preaching, God expels demons and heals the infirm; many people are baptized in Jesus’ name. As Saint Philip “preached Christ” (vs. 5), “the miracles which he did” (vs. 6) deeply affect the populace of Samaria through exorcisms and healings (vs. 7), the joyful heeding of the message (vs. 8), and baptisms (vs. 12).

This sort of preaching follows the true pattern of missionary work. It demonstrates the power inherent in “the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (vs. 12). As Saint Peter of Damascus observes, “Thou givest Thy servants the power to do even greater things, so that we may be still more astonished . . . for through Thee Thy saints perform all their miracles” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 128-9).

God gives the power of miracle-working to Philip so that the Samaritans may be united to Christ, from whom comes universal healing (vs. 12). “Christianity is neither philosophy nor ‘natural’ religion, but mainly healing,” declares Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos in *Orthodox Psychotherapy* (p. 27). The goal of Gospel-based ministry is always to make us whole, to give us life – renewing and freeing our fallen and enslaved humanity.

If we consider the values, practices, and assumptions of the Samaritans to whom Saint Philip brings the Gospel, we see that their way of life parallels his, providing much common ground for his preaching of “Christ to them” (vs. 5). Despite the suspicions that sometimes divided Samaritans and Jews (Jn 4:9; 8:48), these familiar neighbors shared many aspects of their ethnicity, culture, and religion, including the same Scriptures, worship, and hope in God.

We likewise have a great deal in common with many of our neighbors. For the most part, we and our non-Orthodox neighbors read the same Old and New Testament, believe in many of the teachings found in the Nicene Creed, and enjoy shared values and practices. Like Saint Philip, however, we are witnesses to the fullness of truth that God would give to those around us.

The concluding portion of the present reading describes how the apostles complete the outreach that Saint Philip initiates. As soon as “the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God” (Acts 8:14), they send Peter and John to “[pray] for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit” (vs. 15) and “[lay] their hands on them” (vs. 17).

Orthodox outreach begins with friendship and attraction; it is completed within the apostolic life of the Church. True evangelism is never individualistic, although it is personal. The true faith always leads us into communion through the holy Mysteries and participation in the apostles’ fellowship and teaching.

What the Apostle Philip begins, the Church of the apostles completes. Indeed, without the illumination and indwelling of the Holy Spirit through the worship and common life of the Church, the healing that begins for us at baptism may easily wither and be lost.

I will come into Thy house in the multitude of Thy mercy: Lead me, O Lord, in Thy righteousness that with a clear mind I may glorify Thee forever. – Prayer upon Entering a Church

April 29 - Wednesday of the Third Week of Pascha
Acts 8:18-25

Opposition and Growth, continued – Not for Sale: Acts 8:18-25, especially vs. 21: “*You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God.*” The Sanhedrin condemned Saint Stephen on two counts: first, because he accused them of murdering Jesus based on His rightful claim to be the Messiah (vss. 5:30; 7:52), and because he reported seeing Jesus standing “at the right hand of God” (vss. 7:55). Although they found Christ guilty of blasphemy, in reality they feared the reprisals of the occupying the Roman army (Jn 18:14).

The Sanhedrin’s members fall into the passion of outrage when Saint Stephen confronts them with their evil decision. We too often err in our moral choices when we fail to notice that our solutions exclude God’s providence, or may even compromise the truth. How many “successful” people routinely make these sorts of “convenient” choices!

When Simon the magician attempts to buy some of the power manifested by the apostles (Acts 8:18-19), it exposes another possible clash between true faith and the lies of this world. Underlying Simon’s appeal are dangerous assumptions contrary to the nature of the Holy Spirit and the relationship between the Lord and His creation. Let us examine these dangers closely.

The Apostle Peter instantly discerns that Simon’s proposal is contrary to the teachings of the faith. The chief apostle rebukes him (vs. 20), telling the magician plainly that his request shows that his heart is “not right in the sight of God” (vs. 21).

Many English translations miss the point of verse 21, for they represent the original Greek word *logo* – a reference to the Gospel – as “message” or “matter.” When Saint Peter tells Simon, “You have neither part nor portion in this matter,” he is actually saying: “You disclose how twisted your heart is, for you have departed from true Gospel and from the God-pleasing practice of the Church.” Simon misses the import of sacred truth.

In his rebuke of Simon, the apostle speaks of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as “the gift of God” (vs. 20). Simon, however, perceives the apostles’ power merely as an impersonal force, a view which is consonant with his experience as a magician and manipulator of occult power. An impersonal force does not give, it merely generates output. When we choose magic, gaming, or a cause-and-effect approach to life, we are dancing with error.

Science tells us that a nuclear reaction changes latent energy into manifest power, either in the form of an explosion or the generation of electricity. Every impersonal view of creation assumes that power comes from fate or from impersonal forces. This assumption is shared by secularism, magic, and pantheistic paganism.

However, God is not a force, but a Person. He gives us personal power, He changes hearts, He works miracles. When we detach God from so-called real life and divorce Him from creation, we disregard Him who brings everything into existence from non-existence and continuously sustains it. God’s power may not be manipulated, sold, or exchanged.

When Saint Peter calls on Simon to repent, he speaks tentatively: “Pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (vs. 22). To repent, Simon must change his deeply held assumptions, for he does not know God.

God discloses to Peter the passion of greed underlying the magician’s request. Despite baptism, Simon remains sick to the core of his being. And yet he is not beyond the reach of God, although like many of us he is deeply seared in conscience (1 Tim 4:2). May we humbly repent of our rationalizations, passions, and sins whenever they run counter to the truth.

Help us; save us; have mercy upon us; and keep us, O God, by Thy grace. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

April 30 – Thursday of the Third Week of Pascha
Acts 8:26-39

Opposition and Growth, continued – The Way: Acts 8:26-39, especially vss. 30-31: “So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.” Let us take a moment to compare the magician Simon (vss. 9-24) with the Ethiopian eunuch in today’s reading. The sorcerer’s heart was reticent toward God’s truth, while the eunuch appears ready for and open to eternal salvation.

The Ethiopian eunuch is on pilgrimage already, seeking to know God. He is guileless, receptive to the Gospel, and ready to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior. He merits neither rebuke nor warning, for he asks only for instruction and initiation into the life in Christ.

Historically, the eunuch is not a type of person we would ordinarily expect to encounter on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza in the first century. He serves as the chief financial officer for a queen (*candace*) of Ethiopia. The territory then called Ethiopia lay within the borders of southern Egypt, extending south from Aswan into northern Sudan and including the Nubian desert, while modern Ethiopia lies much farther south.

The official religion of Ethiopia was still pagan. The monarch, believed to be the child of the sun, was treated with great veneration. Thus the mundane functions of government became vested in the hands of the royal mother, known as the Candace.

That her treasurer would be interested in Judaism and travel the distance from ancient Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship is not surprising, however. There was a large, established Jewish community in ancient Ethiopia, remnants of which remain to this day. However, the eunuch’s presence so far from home, and his evident interest in Scripture, reveal him to be a man seriously searching for truth.

We meet the eunuch on the return portion of his journey, coming back from Jerusalem. As he travels he reads aloud from Isaiah, the great prophet of the Old Testament (vs. 28), a customary form of study, meditation, and worship. Even though he has worshiped formally in Jerusalem, his heart continues on its quest. Thus he is ready to hear the Gospel, which alone can satisfy the longings of the human heart.

When Philip the deacon runs up to him, the eunuch reveals his heart’s openness. “It tells well also, that the eunuch looked not to the outward appearance, said not, ‘Who art thou?’ did not chide, not give himself airs, not say that he did know,” observes Saint John Chrysostom. “On the contrary, he confesses his ignorance. . . . Look how free he is from haughtiness” (“Homily 19 on Acts,” NPNF First Series, vol. 11, p. 122).

The Ethiopian demonstrates his readiness to embrace Christian life by his actions. At an Orthodox baptism, the candidate must likewise act. He must present himself to the priest beside a sponsoring Christian. Having received the prayers of exorcism, he spits on Satan.

The candidate demonstrates his belief in Christ by confessing the Nicene Creed and bowing before the Lord. Adult candidates then enter the water, or prepare for water to be poured over them, as the eunuch does: “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” (vs. 36).

When we are challenged, let us follow the eunuch in declaring, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (vs. 37). His response encourages us to obey the Spirit, like Saint Philip, so that God may reach other hearts through us. Who knows what desert road may bring us to a seeker thirsting for the Truth?

O Lord, being called of Thee, may I ever give myself up to fulfill Thy holy will! – Western Rite Collect for Saint Andrew the Apostle