

SOBORNOST

St. Thomas the Apostle Orthodox Church

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American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese

*ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE
OF CONSTANTINOPLE*

SERVICES

Wed: Moleben to the Theotokos 6:00 AM

Friday: Moleben to the Cross 6:00 AM

Saturday: Confession 5:00 PM

Great Vespers 5:30 PM

Sunday: Matins (Orthros) 8:45 AM

Sunday School 9:30 AM

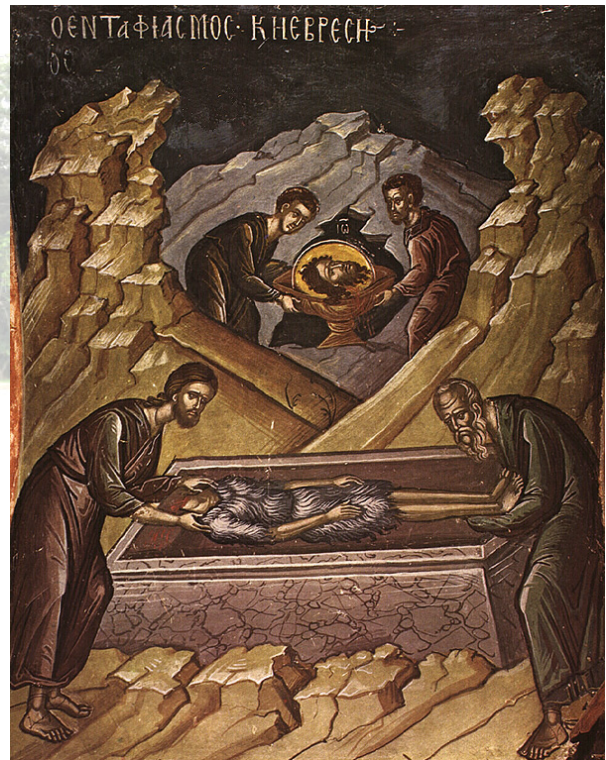
Divine Liturgy 10:00 AM

February 24, 2019 – Sunday of the Prodigal Son | First & Second Finding of the Head of St. John the Baptist

All of us lose our way when we forsake the grace of God. As we wander in far-off lands, searching for the path back home, we slowly begin to realize that we have to choose between life and death. Either we turn to the living God in our distress, or we give in to despair and all its disastrous consequences.

For all its brevity, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the most beautiful narratives the world knows. I somehow wish that it had come to be known as the Parable of the Love of the Heavenly Father. The parable dwells less on the sins of the prodigal than it does on the compassion of the Father. However, the name it has been given is better-suited to our psychology.

As we struggle to regain our deep heart, we see that our tragedy lies in the fact that we have chosen to live mostly outside the house of our Father, outside our heart, far from the very place where the Spirit of God would dwell. When the Apostle Paul says that we are the temples of the living God, he means that our heart is the natural home of the Holy Spirit. This is confirmed by the other great Apostle, Peter, when he says that the Spirit of God's glory should rest in our heart (cf. 1 Pet. 4:14).



Our struggle is not easy. We are conceived in sin, and we go on to accumulate a great measure of corruption. The law of sin rules over our members and we need to uproot it so as to establish within ourselves the law of the two great commandments of the new covenant: to love God with our whole being and to make our neighbor the content of our heart (cf. Mat. 22:37-39). But our struggle is a magnificent one, because it involves crossing over from darkness to light, from death to life, from transitory things to eternal ones, from earth to heaven, from our fallen human nature to participation in the divine nature.

To encourage us in the process of our rebirth, the Church gives us the opportunity to think on the Parable of the Prodigal Son just before Great Lent. Her intention is to show us that however hard our struggle may be, there is no place for despair in our life in Christ. We have complete confidence in our Heavenly Father Who seeks us out and waits with open arms. Not only does He watch us from afar, He even comes to meet us, desiring to lead us into His Kingdom.

Such, then, is the love of the Heavenly Father. The troparion sung at the beginning of the service of the monastic tonsure is known as 'The Fatherly Embrace': "Into Your Fatherly embrace make haste to receive me, who have wasted my life like the prodigal son. Consider the unfailing treasure of Your mercies, O Savior. Despise not a heart now come to want; for in compunction I cry to You, "O Lord, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before You." Monasticism is a fearful leap of faith into the strenuous labor of repentance, yet at the very outset we sing this tender hymn, which reminds us that nothing is impossible, for we have tasted of God's love.

Let us turn to the parable itself. The younger son says to his father, 'Give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' God has the utmost respect for the freedom of His children and He gives us what we claim as our own, without any resistance. He does not force us to love Him for anything we undertake as a result of coercion has no eternal value. Love has value when it is freely given from a faithful heart, otherwise it is worthless.

'And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.' Here we see clearly the dynamics of evil. Once we have accepted even the slightest bad thought, we make a small opening for the enemy to enter. He then pulls us further and further down and we are less and less able to resist. As our Fathers teach us, we must nip such thoughts in the bud, or else it is impossible to break free unless we call upon the Saints of the Church for help. Thus does the force of evil suck the soul down into the bottomless pit of sin and perdition, in a quick movement of degeneration. How terrifying is this far country, that place from which God is

absent, referred to in the Scriptures as hell. We alienate ourselves from the Father's love whenever we leave His house. We reject His protection, having come to take it for granted, and we journey far away from home, far from the embrace of the Father's love.

'He wasted his substance with riotous living.' This means that he threw away his very being - his essence and his hypostasis. He threw away the dignity of sonship. He forsook the honor of being a son of his one true father, and became like a wild beast. When man makes light of the grace bestowed on him by the Heavenly Father, he loses everything. And truly, it would be better for man never to have come into the world than to be cut off from the good pleasure of God's mercy. As the Psalmist says, 'His lovingkindness is better than life' (Ps. 63:3).

'There arose a mighty famine in that country and he began to be in want.' Nothing is more fearful than the dryness that follows God's withdrawal. Nothing compares to the pain of being separated from God's grace. And when this happens in consequence of man's own transgression and disobedience, the agony is greater still, and he begins to be 'in want.' He hungers and thirsts, and instead of the Fatherly arms which formerly enfolded him, he is now gripped in the oppressive embrace of the arms of death.

This far country of famine is the world we see around us, the world which has rejected God and His grace and whose inhabitants live desolate. Their storehouses and pockets might be full, but their hearts are hollow. This famine of the heart is a terrible thing. A heart filled with the grace of God is in want of nothing for the Lord is its wealth. Man then endures poverty joyfully, for he perceives all afflictions as opportunities for rejoicing in the Lord. Poverty can so concentrate a man's attention on the Spirit of God that great energy is released within him, enabling him to endure all manner of adversity. As for the empty heart, there seems to be no end to its misery.

The mighty famine in that far country is not simply the famine of a dried-up heart, of a heart of stone bereft of grace: the unfortunate son, who enjoyed great comfort in the house of his father, has so distanced himself from God and His Kingdom of love, that he has become affiliated to the alien kingdom of the demons, for he has submitted to their evil designs. When man is not engaged in the work of God, in collaborating with God in the working out of his own salvation, then it is easy for the demons to take him in hand and make him work for them. They appoint him to feed swine, that is, they lead him to stoke the deadly fire of the passions. And there is nothing to be reaped from such labor but the curse of death. In the Old Testament, a curse, in addition to being the consequence of sin, can also be the result of negligence in accomplishing the work of God, as the Prophet Jeremiah

testifies: 'Cursed be he who does the work of the Lord deceitfully" (Jer. 48:10). A half-hearted attempt to do the work of God attracts a curse upon a person, even if he lives in the house of God. Our God is indeed a jealous God, and He cannot bear division in the heart of man. He will not settle for a lesser or even a greater share of man's heart: He yearns for man's whole heart not out of selfishness but so that He may fill it with the fullness of His divine life.

The unfortunate and accursed prodigal son 'desired to fill his belly with the husks that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.' This verse sheds light on a fearful reality: when God abandons us, men and even angels are unable to help. It is of course man who has abandoned God's Kingdom of life and light for the kingdom of death and darkness, and in doing so he has subjected himself to the dynamics of evil, and all his effort is spent on mere survival. But in trying to survive in the kingdom of sin and death, he cannot avoid sinking more and more deeply into sin, and the curse he draws down on himself is correspondingly greater. The more he gives in to the passions, the more he is starved of God's presence, for man's heart cannot be satisfied by the pleasures of this world, but only with the incorruptible consolation of the Spirit of God.

No matter how corrupt a man may have become through sin, or how far he may have sunk into the bottomless pit, he will always retain within himself a certain nobility that cannot be destroyed, namely, the image of God in which he has been created. And God has implanted within our being the possibility of repentance, so that we can turn to Him and ask for His forgiveness at any time of our life. Indeed, God bestows great honor upon the man who 'comes to himself', who examines his heart and then speaks with God responsibly, that is, in the truth of repentance. The Lord then pours out the refreshing waters of His mercy upon him. Having created man after His own likeness, God has implanted in his nature the *desire* for divine sonship, as He responds with these blessed and saving words: 'All that I have is yours.' That is to say, 'The fullness of my life, O man, is now your life.' What God is by nature, He bestows on man; and man is made a god by grace.

The pain and hunger of the prodigal son force him to look within. Great courage is needed if a man is to come to himself, to look at his heart and confront the real and mortal poverty which has come to define him. But as soon as he perceives and confesses his state, God hastens to help him. He enlightens him by showing him where he now finds himself. In this peculiar vision God enlightens man 'from behind', as Father Sophrony says. He does not contemplate God. Rather, he becomes aware of his own sins. Grace reveals what is lacking in him; he becomes aware of the hell in which he dwells and from which God is absent - just as a ray of light suddenly shows up the dust in a darkened room. Knowledge of his spiritual poverty enables him to discern those incorruptible things that are divine, to pursue

these only, and to despise the corruptible things of temporal existence. This is the beginning of wisdom, for knowledge of one's true state inspires one with the fear of God (cf. Ps. 111:10).

The moment of man's 'coming to himself' is highly significant. The hesychasts of the fourteenth century made much use of this phrase, which indicates the way in which sin draws the mind to the external world. The mind, the senses, and man's life as a whole are dissolved and dispersed. In order to be healed the mind must be reunited with the heart in a movement towards wholeness. His mind must descend and settle in the heart: only when it is reunited with the heart can it effectively govern man's being. And when man's whole being, including his body, is gathered into the heart, a third movement takes place, this time towards God Himself. The overall pattern has a circular character according to the holy hesychasts. Having 'wasted all his substance' in the outside world (the first movement), the prodigal son then 'comes to himself' (the second movement), so as to direct his whole being towards the Father's embrace (the third movement). But in order to reunite his mind to his heart, man must do battle with the multitude of thoughts provoked by the enemy, most of which are rooted in pride. Having discovered his heart, however, man begins to see the origin of such thoughts, as well as the direction they will take. They no longer deceive him as easily as before, because he learns to guard the entrance to his heart. And when he finally abides within his heart, only humble thoughts will arise there to nourish his being.

Most of us live outside our heart, and our mind is in a constant state of confusion. Some good thoughts may surface from time to time, but the majority will be harmful, and this destructive condition will prevail as long as we continue to ignore our heart. But in the end the pain is too much to bear and we begin to seek the way back. Remembering his father's house, the prodigal son comes to himself and says, 'How many hired servants of my father's house have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!' We all have buried memories of our Father's house, for our soul will forever retain traces of the grace of being clothed with Christ in Holy Baptism. Moreover, each time we partake of the Holy Mysteries, our being is indelibly marked with God's goodness. In the heart of the prodigal, now, another humble thought surfaces: "I will arise and go to my father..." The process of inner regeneration has now begun, for he has resolved to rise from his fall. Having seen the reality of his perdition, he now returns within himself and towards God. His dynamic increase in God has begun. He is ready to be enlightened and cleansed, for he has begun to speak truthfully with God from the depth of his heart. The prayers of a fragmented mind have neither clarity nor depth, but a mind that is reunited with the heart overflows with humble prayer and has such strength that it reaches the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. 'Father, I have

sinned against heaven and before you.' Man then discovers the power of humility, and sees that the only right attitude is to render all glory and honor to God, and to himself 'the shame of face' (Dan. 9:7 LXX) because of his sins. He now puts all his trust in the Father's mercy, and no longer in his own corrupt self, and this disposition of heart leads to true repentance. As we read in one of the great 'kneeling prayers' at Pentecost: "Against You we have sinned, but You only do we worship." We are sinful and unworthy of His mercy, but we have full confidence in Him Whom we worship. This 'but' cannot be said without faith, and this faith is the rock upon which we build our spiritual life.

The prodigal son then abases himself still further: 'I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired servants.' He does not say 'one of your servants.' Servants generally belonged to their master's family, and would spend their lives within his household. But hired servants had no quarters in the master's house and could be dismissed at any time. Thus, the prodigal son sees fit to place himself in the same class as a temporary worker, a servant of the least importance. Such humble thoughts are characteristic of those who truly repent, with each thought manifesting deeper humility than the previous one. The fire of repentance leads the penitent to the very depths of his nothingness, whence only God can lift him up again. (The Lord Himself has shown us this path; first His descent into hell, and from there His ascent to the highest heaven.) Man gains in wisdom as he humbles himself, for he develops and unshakable faith in God's mercy, knowing that He will unfailingly lift him up in His own good time (1 Pet. 5:6). Once man has found his heart, his one care is to continually fish for such thoughts as will lead him into this downward course of repentance. We know that whoever is led by the Holy Spirit does not cease to abase himself. And the further down a man goes, following in the way of Christ, the higher he will be raised with Him.

Just as the energy of evil propels man towards perdition, so does the energy of God's grace transform man when he aligns his life with the will of God. When man enters into salvation, every humble thought gives birth to an ever humbler thought, as every evil thought is taken captive through obedience to Christ (cf. 2 Cor 10:15). God's grace then raises man to the glory of the embrace of his Heavenly Father, and restores him to sonship.

Great affliction made the prodigal son find his heart and led him to discover the spiritual realm of repentance through a series of humble thoughts which revived his soul. 'I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you".' Such is the power of a humble thought. In just a few words, Holy Scripture points towards the sublime reality which is the hidden purpose of this parable: when a man returns to his heart and begins to

accumulate grace by humbling his mind, he becomes brave as a lion in his repentance. Moreover, his determination grows in strength so that he is ready to endure the furnace of hell itself. Come what may, he now possesses such courage and boldness that he will always run to God and be ready to make a leap of faith towards Him.

'When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion.' What kind of father other than our Heavenly Father is able to see so clearly from afar, even from behind the mountain ranges of our sins? How astonishing it is that God should wish to follow after man into the abyss of hell and sin! Indeed, He never takes His eyes off us: He watches and waits patiently for us to come to ourselves. Only then does He raise us to His own glory. He has humbled Himself before us in love, having overcome the death of sin.

The father 'had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and *covered him with kisses.*' He runs, falls and kisses. These three verbs communicate great strength. God runs to meet the man who repents, so as to grant him the strength to fulfill his intention to return. God falls upon the very neck of man so that man becomes a God-bearer, a 'horse' who carries God. How wonderful are these images the Gospel uses to show us God's infinite love and humility! What a God we have! He so loves man that He becomes his servant, including him in His own life and Kingdom. God showers His mercies upon the man who repents, and this is the beginning of eternal life with God, a life which neither declines nor ends. And as man becomes a bearer of God, he goes from strength to strength and his joy only increases from fullness to and even greater fullness.

No sooner does the compassionate father hear the words of his son than he presses him to his breast and kisses him. The father knows his change of heart and, in his joy, does not even listen to his confession. So ardently does he desire to restore his repentant son that he orders his servants to bring the best robe. The same happens when we repent and stand before God and weep: God forgives us before we even know it. But let us also remember that the truth of our repentance is sealed only when we confess our sins before a man 'of like passions' (Acts 14:15), a priest of the Church of Christ.

Having embraced his son, the father transmits his very life and all his riches to him, as if he had never left home, as if his sins were mere specks of dust on a mirror. He wipes them all away, leaving the glass as clean as it was to begin with. 'Bring forth the best robe...!' The father clothes him in the robe of honor and glory, and puts a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. According to the Holy Fathers, the robe is the honor of sonship; the ring signifies the strength to live a sinless life in keeping with God's commandments. Moreover, in ancient times, if someone

gave his ring to another, this meant that he had transferred his authority to him. And this is precisely what God does when a sinner returns: God gives him the authority of an heir to His own life. Shoes too are a sign of sonship: only servants would walk barefoot, whereas shoes were the mark of a free man.

'Bring the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry.' The father, rejoicing, makes a festival of his son's return. As the Lord says, 'Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner who repents.' Indeed, on earth we live between two worlds: we receive the rays of light from the Kingdom of Heaven and shadows of darkness from the underworld. And depending on our free choice to embrace either the one or the other, the moment of our passing will be a gateway either into eternal bliss, or into the oppressive darkness of our own perversity. But the Heavenly Father has only one thought: 'This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' His joy is boundless. How immense must be the Heavenly Father's longing for our salvation! Indeed, His longing for our return is what brings us to repentance.

The return of the prodigal son did not, however, bring joy to his elder brother, who was working in the fields outside his father's house. He represents the Pharisees who would never have rejoiced at the return of a sinner. For them every sinner is deserving of hell. They trusted only in their own righteousness, and in justifying themselves they proved to be outside their heart, out in the fields. Like the elder son of the parable, they believed they were on God's side. Little did they know that they had never actually given their heart to God, to their Father in heaven (Prov. 23:26). They knew nothing of God, nor were they ever in communion with His Spirit; rather, they believed that their mechanical observance of the Law somehow obliged God to save them.

'And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.' It was impossible for the elder brother to understand what was going on, which is why he had to find out from a servant, who replied, 'Your brother is come; and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' The elder son, in his self-righteousness, was angry. He responded as if he did not have a heart, or rather as if he had a heart of stone. He refused to go into the house, as if saying to God, 'If you receive sinners into your Kingdom, I prefer to remain outside.' Unfortunately, this is the attitude of many Christians. Few of us truly rejoice at the return of a brother who has led a sinful life. And if he goes on to make spiritual progress, we very often resent it.

'Therefore his father came out, and entreated him.' Just as the father went to meet his prodigal son, so he comes out to meet the elder son as well. God humbles

Himself before every one of His children, in order to gather us all into His household. But how many of us refuse to partake in the joy of our Heavenly Father! Instead, we say with great and unfeeling arrogance, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, neither did I at any time transgress your commandments, and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends.' This answer shows that our relationship with our Heavenly Father is not a relationship of love and in this we are far from perfection. Moreover, our salvation is uncertain if our relationship with Christ is not marked by humble love. The words of the elder son are a sign that his heart is not 'salted' with love. He continues with even greater bitterness: 'As soon as this your son was come, who has devoured your living with harlots, you have killed for him the fatted calf.' What resentment he feels against his brother! He accuses him, judging him according to his sins, unable to see the transformation that has occurred in his soul.

Then the compassionate father, in his infinite goodness, replies, 'Son, you are ever with me, and all that I have is yours.' This is perhaps the most moving sentence in the whole parable. The father overflows with the desire to heal his son of jealousy. It is as though he says, 'I have already given you all that I have. Why envy your brother? I ask you only to love me as a son.' If the elder son's heart had been with his father then the joy of his father would have been his own joy. The glory of his brother would have been his own glory, just as the light of a candle does not diminish when other candles are lit from it. When we show God that we love Him as true sons, we are then able to receive all that is His, His very life and all the wealth of His gifts.

How gentle are the Lord's words! How greatly He desires to heal us of petty jealousy. Elsewhere in the Gospel, after the Lord's Resurrection, Peter asks Jesus about John. Peter had seen John leaning on the breast of the Lord during the Last Supper, and this had remained in his mind. Having himself denied Christ, he felt ashamed. So he asks the Lord, 'What shall [John] do?' And the Lord answers, 'If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to you? Follow me.' (John 21:20-22)

In other words, it should not concern us how God deals with one person or another. We should aim only to follow Him faithfully *ourselves*, and then we will hear the blessed words, 'All that I have is yours.' And indeed, when our heart is with God we lack nothing, for whatever He gives our brothers is also a gift to us.

'It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this your brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.' If we follow God faithfully our one desire will be the salvation of all, and then our own salvation will follow of itself, for our desire will be united to God's desire that all men be saved. (*from Remember Thy First Love by Archimandrite Zacharias*)

20th Annual
**Lenten
Retreat**

*Saturday,
March 30,
2019*



Featuring
**HANK
HANEGRAFF**

"Bible Answer Man"
and his journey to
the Orthodox Faith

[www.oneplace.com/
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9 am - Registration
10am - Opening Session
12:30 - Lenten Lunch
1:30 - Closing Session
3:30 - Vespers
and Depart

To register, go to the "Events"
section of the church website at:
www.schgochurch.org, call 410-573-2072
or email officeschannapolis@gmail.com



St. CONSTANTINE
AND HELEN

Sts Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox Church
2747 Riva Road, Annapolis, MD 21401

Today's Epistle Lesson – St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 6:12-20

Brethren, all things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, but God will destroy both it and them. Now the body *is* not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God both raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make *them* members of a harlot? Certainly not! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body *with her*? For “the two,” He says, “shall become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit *with Him*. Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

Today's Gospel Lesson – Saint Luke 15:11-32

The Lord said this parable, "A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to *his* father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls *to me*.' So he divided to them *his* livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him *anything*. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put *it* on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on *his* feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill *it*, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry. Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has

come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’ But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. So he answered and said to *his* father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.’”

A Word From the Holy Fathers

Now again, my beloved, has God brought us to the season of the feast, and through His loving-kindness we have reached the period of assembly for it. For that God who brought Israel out of Egypt, even He at this time calls us to the feast, saying by Moses, ‘Observe the month of new fruits, and keep the Passover to the Lord your God (Deut. 16:1):’ and by the prophet, ‘Keep your feasts, O Judah; pay to the Lord your vows (Nah. 1:15).’ If then God Himself loves the feast, and calls us to it, it is not right, my brethren, that it should be delayed, or observed carelessly; but with alacrity and zeal we should come to it, so that having begun joyfully here, we may also receive an earnest of that heavenly feast. For if we diligently celebrate the feast here, we shall doubtless receive the perfect joy which is in heaven, as the Lord says; ‘With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I say unto you, that I will not eat it, until it is fulfilled with you in the kingdom of God (Lk. 22:15-6).’ Now we eat it if, understanding the reason of the feast, and acknowledging the Deliverer, we conduct ourselves in accordance with His grace, as Paul says; ‘So that we may keep the Feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:8).’ For the Lord died in those days, that we should no longer do the deeds of death. He gave His life, that we might preserve our own from the snares of the devil. And, what is most wonderful, the Word became flesh, that we should no longer live in the flesh, but in spirit should worship God, who is Spirit. He who is not so disposed, abuses the days, and does not keep the feast, but like an unthankful person finds fault with the grace, and honors the days overmuch, while he does not supplicate the Lord who in those days redeemed him. Let him hear, though fancying that he keeps the feast, the Apostolic voice reproving him; ‘You observe days, and months, and times, and years: I fear lest I have labored among you in vain (Gal. 4:10, 11).’

For the feast is not on account of the days; but for the Lord's sake, who suffered for us, we celebrate it, for 'our Passover Christ, is sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7).' Even as Moses, when teaching Israel not to consider the feast as pertaining to the days, but to the Lord, said, 'It is the Lord's Passover (Ex. 12:11)....

– St. Athanasius the Great, Festal Letter 6

First & Second Finding of the Honorable Head of the Holy Glorious Prophet, Forerunner, and Baptist of the Lord, John

After the Beheading of the Holy Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist John (August 29), his body was buried by disciples in the Samaritan city of Sebaste, and his venerable head was hidden by Herodias in an unclean place. Saint Joanna (June 27), the wife of King Herod's steward Chuza (Luke 8:3), secretly took the holy head and placed it into a vessel and buried it on the Mount of Olives in one of Herod's properties. After many years, this property passed into the possession of a government official who became a monk with the name of Innocent. He built a church and a cell there. When they started to dig the foundation, the vessel with the venerable head of John the Baptist was uncovered. Innocent recognized its great holiness from the signs of grace emanating from it. Thus occurred the First Finding of the Head. Innocent preserved it with great piety, but fearful that the holy relic might be abused by unbelievers, before his own death he again hid it in that same place, where it was found. Upon his death the church fell into ruin and was destroyed.

During the days of Saint Constantine the Great (May 21), when Christianity began to flourish, the holy Forerunner appeared twice to two monks journeying to Jerusalem on pilgrimage to the holy places, and he revealed the location of his venerable head. The monks uncovered the holy relic and, placing it into a sack of camel-hair, they proceeded homewards. Along the way they encountered an unnamed potter and gave him the precious burden to carry. Not knowing what he was carrying, the potter continued on his way. But the holy Forerunner appeared to him and ordered him to flee from the careless and lazy monks, with what he held in his hands. The potter concealed himself from the monks and at home he preserved the venerable head with reverence. Before his death he placed it in a water jug and gave it to his sister.

From that time the venerable head was successively preserved by devout Christians, until the priest Eustathius (infected with the Arian heresy) came into possession of it. He beguiled a multitude of the infirm who had been healed by the holy head, ascribing their cures to the fact that it was in the possession of an Arian. When his blasphemy was uncovered, he was compelled to flee. After he buried the

holy relic in a cave, near Emesa, the heretic intended to return later and use it for disseminating falsehood. God, however, did not permit this. Pious monks settled in the cave, and then a monastery arose at this place. In the year 452 Saint John the Baptist appeared to Archimandrite Marcellus of this monastery, and indicated where his head was hidden. This became celebrated as the Second Finding. The holy relic was transferred to Emesa, and later to Constantinople. (*from oca.org*)

Social Team for March 3

Team 7 is up next week – Single, Wright H, Thomidis, Sticht. Don't forget!

Church Work Days Scheduled

We are planning to do some yard work, cleaning and organizing in the church and house on February 26, beginning at 9 AM, and on April 20 after Divine Liturgy. All are invited and welcome to join in on the fellowship.

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In Your Prayers – Please Remember... His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW, His Eminence Metropolitan GREGORY, Fr. Joseph & Family, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi of Aleppo, Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of Aleppo, His Grace Bishop Neofitos of Nyeri and Mt. Kenya, Fr. John & Pani Betty Jean Baranik, Presbyteria Katie Baker and family, Santiago Alzugaray, Jeffrey Carey, Tatyana and Slava Chumak & family, Xenia Chilkowich, Jon Church, Ramius Connour, Curtis Cooper, Luke Cooper, Tina Crull, Mary Diane David, Ron Dominiecki, Linda A. Georgiev, Heather Himler, John Homick, Cameron Houk, Helen Janowiak, John M. Janowiak, Tucker Karl and family, Robert & Pam Karpin, Andrew Kinn, Kopan family, Brian, Helen, and Luke Mahony, Valentina Makowelski, Susan Matula, Anna Meinhold, Dn. Henry Middleton, David & Kathryn Newman, Bobby Nutter & Family, Henry & Lisa Osborne, Westin Perry & Parents, John Reece, Mary Reed, Chris & Kaitlin Rixey, Jerry Von Ronne, Anne Rosario, James, Theodore and Christina Ristas, Samson Family, Sharon Sheptak, Alexander Shostko, Bernie Takabayashi & family, Dawn & Faith Ulmschneider, Lydia Vita, Christine, Marshall, Nathaniel, Subdcn. Nectarios and Ia, the Syrian Christians displaced by war, Mother Virginia Marie and the Carmelite Nuns of Port Tobacco, and all those in need of our prayers. (Please advise Fr. Joseph of changes.)