

Saint Nicholas Serbian Orthodox Church
971 St. Clair Rd, Johnstown, PA 15905
Rev. Presbyter Dragan Vukovic
(814) 244-4063

Forgiveness Sunday
(03.17.2024.)

Matthew 6:14-21

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. **(KJV)**

Forgiveness Sunday is the opportunity in God's Holy Church to resolutely begin the Fast and the journey to Pascha. Believers are to be forgiving in their relationships in the same way that God forgives.

The Gospel is clear. If believers are not forgiving of others, personal forgiveness cannot be expected from God. Believers can be free of burdensome impediments in relationships by sincerely forgiving and by seeking forgiveness.

Burdensome impediments arise in relationships that cause them to be unhealthy and not fully loving. Relationships in families, at school or at work and in the parish need restored to good health with love from time to time.

The Church encourages believers to restore healthy relationships through forgiveness. Seeking forgiveness from each other and being forgiving of each other opens relationships to restored unity with Jesus Christ.

The Holy Scriptures help us to understand personal relationships and put them in context. St. John's Epistle states: "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God."(I John 4:7)

Husbands and wives benefit from consistently forgiving each other. Parents and children strengthen and renew their relationships through forgiveness. The Gospel is clear about the value of practicing forgiveness with each other.

Parishes are stronger and thrive when forgiveness is regularly practiced among parishioners. Casting away bad memories that burden relationships allows for new beginnings in Jesus Christ.

Believers seeking and granting forgiveness from each other remove barriers to unity in Christ. St. John's Epistle states: "For this is the message ye have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." (I John 3:11)

The Lord Jesus Christ showed how to love by His humility, by the washing of His disciples' feet and by His death on the Cross. Great Lent intends believers to love as Jesus would have us love.

We love by forgiving each other and by seeking forgiveness from each other. St. John Climacus whom we commemorate on the Fourth Sunday of Great Lent expressed in writing how to love in the book The Ladder of Divine Ascent.

St. John Climacus said: "Do not wish to assure everyone in words of your love for them, but rather ask God to show them your love without words." * Actions in personal relationships reveal the contents of the heart, mind and soul.

Today the Church is at the entrance of the Great Fast. Believers are challenged to honestly examine their relationship with the Lord God. The Fast is a time to seriously examine our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Searching the heart, mind and soul daily throughout Great Lent is beneficial. Repentance is possible for sins when a new beginning in Jesus Christ is desired. Holy Confession and Communion afford new beginnings in Christ.

The Fast expects believers to honestly assess whether the Baptismal commitment to Jesus Christ as King and as God is fully honored. Restoring purity to the soul comes through repentance.

The Gospel directs believers to seek treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not consume and thieves do not break in and steal. Great Lent is the time to seriously determine our true treasures.

Do we treasure material things over our relationship with Jesus Christ? Do we pursue goals and engage in activities that have nothing to do with Jesus Christ? Do we act like the Pharisees outwardly but have hearts harboring ill of others?

Great Lent nourishes believers seeking salvation of their souls. Great Lent encourages believers to restore their healthy relationship with Jesus Christ. Great Lent is the time to cleanse the Baptismal garment of the sins accumulated.

The Lord Jesus Christ said: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Mt.4:17) Pascha seems far off in the distance. Great Lent will proceed rapidly. Each day is to be used wisely.

We do not know when our next breath may be our last. We do not know the time or the hour when Jesus Christ will return for the Great and Final Judgment. Like the wise virgins, let us be prepared. (Mt. 25:1-13)

Thank God for the arrival of Great Lent. Thank God for Forgiveness Sunday and the opportunity to begin anew with each other and with God. May our hearts, minds and souls rejoice in Jesus Christ today.

Thank God for the merciful love afforded for each person. Thank God for the opportunity to repent. Thank the Lord Jesus Christ for having journeyed to the Cross and for rising from the Tomb for our salvation.

Forgiveness Sunday. Venerable Gerasimus of the Jordan. March 4/17, 2024. Hidden Valley, Pennsylvania. Father Rodney Torbic

*St. John Climacus. The Ladder of Divine Ascent. Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, Massachusetts, 2012)

The Great Blessing of Water and the Home

The Great Blessing of Water in our homes takes place after the Feast of Theophany, the Baptism of Christ, bringing the holy water & prayer in which Christ was baptized to our homes, as a blessing upon our families.

Traditionally, in most Orthodox parishes, the priest personally visits all his parishioners each year to pray with them in the place where they live, and to bless their surroundings with the newly sanctified water of Theophany (January 19).

We also bring the blessed water to our homes to use throughout the year to bless our homes and to drink whether we are ill or as part of our daily prayer life.

"There are many occasions in family life when a sip of holy water can help to remind us of the blessing that was given 'to bestow sanctification', 'unto healing of soul and body', 'to be a fountain welling forth unto life eternal', as the priest prayed in the litany of Epiphany day."

Weaving Christ into Our Lives

The blessing of homes by these holy waters maintains the spiritual association between the 'family church' and the parish, as well as again providing for the sharing of God's spiritual gifts. ... This annual blessing is not as elaborate as the blessing of the new dwelling, but because of this it should not be overlooked, for it is in this way that the grace of God is extended to individual dwellings.

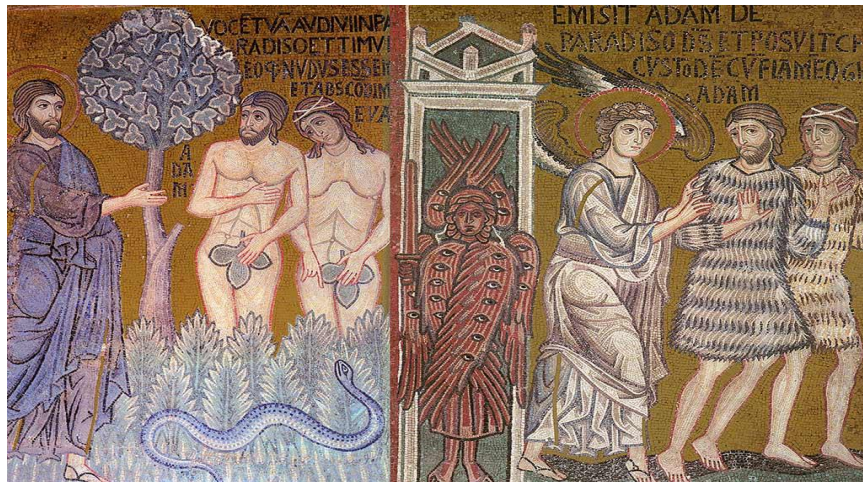
When the children are present, they have the opportunity to see the parish priest in a different and personal situation. If the priest permits, they can lead the way through the house, or hold a candle. They can show him their rooms or pets or favorite toys. They receive a blessing with water. For children, the house blessing shows the connection of the Church to the home. This is a perfect time to introduce your small children to having their bedrooms blessed as a 'shield of armor' to protect them when they sleep and all the fears they may have as children do so often.

In Summary

What does it mean to ask God to bless something? All things in the world have been spoiled right along with us. God must bless His world again in order for it to be the way that He wants it to be. For this reason God sent His Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit to the world: to bless everyone and everything that He made, to make all things good again. When the priest comes to bless our homes, he asks God to have mercy on the house, to rid it of every evil and to fill it with every blessing.

***What a wonderful way to begin the New Year!
Schedule your Visit with Fr. Dragan Vukovic directly
by calling your parish priest 814-244-4063
God bless you all!***

Forgiveness (Gheesefare) Sunday



Introduction

The Sunday of Forgiveness is the last Sunday prior to the commencement of Great Lent. During the pre-Lenten period, the services of the Church include hymns from the Triodion, a liturgical book that contains the services from the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, the tenth before Pascha (Easter), through Great and Holy Saturday. On the Sunday of Forgiveness focus is placed on the exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, an event that shows us how

far we have fallen in sin and separated ourselves from God. At the onset of Great Lent and a period of intense fasting, this Sunday reminds us of our need for God’s forgiveness and guides our hearts, minds, and spiritual efforts on returning to Him in repentance.

Biblical Story

The Sunday of Forgiveness, the last of the preparatory Sundays before Great Lent, has two themes: it commemorates Adam’s expulsion from Paradise, and it accentuates our need for forgiveness. There are obvious reasons why these two things should be brought to our attention as we stand on the threshold of Great Lent. One of the primary images in the Triodion is that of the return to Paradise. Lent is a time when we weep with Adam and Eve before the closed gate of Eden, repenting with them for the sins that have deprived us of our free communion with God. But Lent is also a time when we are preparing to celebrate the saving event of Christ’s death and rising, which has reopened Paradise to us once more (Luke 23:43). So sorrow for our exile in sin is tempered by hope of our re-entry into Paradise.

The second theme, that of forgiveness, is emphasized in the Gospel reading for this Sunday (Matthew 6:14-21) and in the special ceremony of mutual forgiveness at the end of the Vespers on Sunday evening. Before we enter the Lenten fast, we are reminded that there can be no true fast, no genuine repentance, no reconciliation with God, unless we are at the same time reconciled with one another. A fast without mutual love is the fast of demons. We do not travel the road of Lent as isolated individuals but as members of a family. Our asceticism and fasting should not separate us from others, but should link us to them with ever-stronger bonds.

The Sunday of Forgiveness also directs us to see that Great Lent is a journey of liberation from our enslavement to sin. The Gospel lesson sets the conditions for this liberation. The first one is fasting—the refusal to accept the desires and urges of our fallen nature as normal, the effort to free ourselves from the dictatorship of the flesh and matter over the spirit. To be effective, however, our fast must not be hypocritical, a “showing off.” We must “appear not unto men to fast but to our Father who is in secret” (vv. 16-18).

The second condition is forgiveness—“If you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you” (vv. 14-15). The triumph of sin, the main sign of its rule over the world, is division, opposition, separation, hatred. Therefore, the first break through this fortress of sin is forgiveness—the return to unity, solidarity, love. To forgive is to put between me and my “enemy” the radiant forgiveness of God Himself. To forgive is to reject the hopeless “dead-ends” of human relations and to refer them to Christ. Forgiveness is truly a “breakthrough” of the Kingdom into this sinful and fallen world.

Icon of the Feast



The icon of the Sunday of the Last Judgment incorporates all of the elements of the parable from Matthew 25:31-46. Christ sits on the throne and before him the Last Judgment takes place. He is extending his hands in blessing upon the Theotokos on his right, and John the Baptist on his left. Seated on smaller thrones are the Apostles, represented by Peter and Paul, a depiction of the words of Christ in Matthew 19:28. (1.)

The icon shows Adam and Eve standing before Jesus Christ. Prior to their descent into sin through disobedience, Adam and Eve were blessed with a beautiful relationship of communion and fellowship with God. However, they were tempted by the devil appearing in the form of a serpent to disobey God and eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:15-17).

When they took of the fruit and sinned, they realized that they were naked. Further, when “they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden”...they hid themselves “from the presence of the Lord” (3:8). The icon shows Adam and Eve attempting to cover themselves with fig leaves as they try to hide, and yet they stand ashamed before the Lord.



Because of their disobedience the Lord expelled them from the garden. The icon shows the Archangel of the Lord directing them out of Paradise, through the gate of Eden where God placed “the cherubim and a sword flaming and guarding the way to the tree of life” (3:23-24). Adam and Eve are dressed in the garments of skins made for them by God (3:20).

Orthodox Christian Celebration of the Sunday of Forgiveness

The Sunday of Forgiveness is commemorated with the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, which is preceded by the Matins service. A Great Vespers is conducted on Saturday evening. The hymns of the Triodion for this day are added to the usual prayers and hymns of the weekly commemoration of the Resurrection of Christ. The naming of the Sunday is taken from the commemoration of the Exile of Adam and Eve from Paradise and from the Gospel reading of the Divine Liturgy.

Scripture readings for the Sunday of the Last Judgment are: At the Orthros (Matins): The prescribed weekly Gospel reading. At the Divine Liturgy: Romans 13:11-14:4, Matthew 6:14-21.

The Sunday of Forgiveness is also known as Cheesefare Sunday. This is the last day that dairy products can be eaten before the Lenten fast. The full fast begins the following day on Clean Monday, the first day of Great Lent. On the evening of the Sunday of Forgiveness the Church conducts the first service of Great Lent, the Vespers of Forgiveness, a service that directs us further on the path of repentance and helps us to acknowledge our need for forgiveness from God and to seek forgiveness from our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the first time that the Lenten prayer of St. Ephraim accompanied by prostrations is read. At the end of the service all the faithful approach the priest and one another asking for mutual forgiveness.

Orthodox Christians are encouraged to enter Great Lent in repentance and confession by attending these services, coming for the Sacrament of Confession, and dedicating themselves to worship, prayer, and fasting throughout the Lenten period. The first day of Lent, Clean Monday, signifies the beginning of a period of cleansing and purification of sins through repentance.

On the Saturday before this Sunday, the second of three Saturdays of the Souls are held. This is a special commemoration when the Church offers a Divine Liturgy and Memorial Service for the departed faithful. This is considered a universal commemoration of the dead. Through the memorial services, the Church is commending to God all who have departed and who are now awaiting the Last Judgment. This specific Saturday is a general commemoration of all the

ascetic Saints of the Church, both men and women. As we set out on the Lenten fast we are reminded that we will make this journey as members of a family, supported by the intercessions of the Saints.

Hymns and Prayers of the Feast of the Prodigal Son

Exapostelation of Matins (Tone Two)

Wretch that I am I disobeyed Your good commandment, O my Lord. And being stripped of Your glory, alas, with shame I am laden. And I have been evicted from the pure delights of Paradise. O merciful and compassionate, have mercy on me who rightly has been deprived of Your goodness.

We were expelled of old, O Lord, from the Garden of Eden, for wrongly eating from the tree. But, O my God and Savior, You once again have restored us through Your Cross and Your Passion. Thereby, O Master, fortify and enable us purely to finish Lent and to worship Your holy resurrection, Pascha our saving Passover, by the prayers of Your Mother.

Prokeimenon of Vespers (Tone Plagal Fourth)

Idiomela: Turn not away Thy face from Thy child for I am afflicted; hear me speedily. Draw near to my soul and deliver me.

Stichos: Thy salvation, O God, hath set me up. The poor see and rejoice.

Kontakion (Tone Plagal Second)

O Master, Guide to wisdom, Giver of prudent counsel, Instructor of the foolish and Champion of the poor, make firm my heart and grant it understanding. O Word of the Father, give me words, for see, I shall not stop my lips from crying out to Thee: I am fallen, in Thy compassion have mercy on me.

Sources

The Lord Confronts the Disobedience of Adam & Eve; The Expulsion from Paradise, Nave Mosaic from Palatine Chapel, Palermo, Sicily. Mid 12th Century.

The Lenten Triodion. translated by Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1994), pp. 46-47, 168-188.

Schmemmann, Alexander. Great Lent: Journey to Pascha (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1969), pp. 27-30.

Barrois, Georges. Scripture Readings in Orthodox Worship (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), pp. 29-30.

Farley, Donna. Seasons of Grace: Reflections on the Orthodox Church Year (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2002), pp. 87-90.

Services this Week

- **Theodore's Saturday
(03.23.2024.)**

Mart. Quadratus of Gorinth; Theodore of Komogovina

- *Divine Liturgy starts at 09:30 AM*

- **1st Sunday of Lent – of Orthodoxy
(03.24.2024.)**

- **Please bring the Icons for the procession**

- **St Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem -**

Divine Liturgy starts at 10:00 AM

Donations March 10, 2024

Offering - \$ 1,535.00 Candles - \$85.00 Dues - \$100.00
Donations - \$200.00 From Alan Hurt

Large Candles

IMO Mary Ellen Locher-Byrd from Helene Gleason
IMO Mike & Mildred Tumbas from Milica Knepp
IMO Grandparents Amelia & Pete Mastovich from Rick Kondas
IMO brother Joseph Kondas from Rick Kondas

UPCOMING EVENTS

FISH FRIES

Friday, February 16th thru Friday, March 29th.

TODFAY - Sunday, March 17th - Cheesefare Sunday
Luncheon following Divine Liturgy

Sunday, March 24th - Sunday of Orthodoxy 4:00 PM
St. John the Baptist Orthodox Church
427 1st St. Conemaugh - 15909

Choir rehearsal Tuesday, March 19th
Following the Great Canon of Saint Andrew beginning at 6 PM,
rehearsal to follow at St. John

Sunday, April 21st - 5th Sunday of Lent
Lenten Vespers at Our St. Nicholas
Speaker Fr. Stefan Djoric - 5 PM

Sunday, April 28th - Palm Sunday

Sunday May 5th, PASCHA