

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

**Zacchaeus Sunday**  
**(02.02.2025.)**

**Luke 19:1-10**

And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house. And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold. And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost. **(KJV)**

The arrival of Zacchaeus Sunday on the Church's calendar is a wake-up call for believers to ready themselves for the approach of Great Lent. Now is the time to turn attention to the condition of the soul.

Today is a moment to think about the need for repentance throughout earthly life. Great Lent offers the structure, inspiration and guidance for complete honest and sincere repentance.

Believer exit the Baptismal font united with the Lord Jesus Christ. The journey to the Kingdom of God can be very long. The journey to the Kingdom is filled with dangers, temptations and perils to the soul.

The Church offers the nourishment and guidance for believers to travel the narrow path to the Kingdom. Repentance is essential throughout life. Believers are constantly challenged to remain faithfully on the road to the Kingdom.

Repentance enables the believer to unite and reunite with Jesus Christ when wayward paths are taken. Immeasurable joy in Jesus Christ is experienced at Baptism. Immeasurable joy occurs when a believer repents.

Zacchaeus is an excellent example of repentance. He put forth considerable effort to see and approach Christ. He gave of his wealth to the poor. He restored bountifully to those he deceived.

Jesus' love, care and forgiveness are evident in the life of Zacchaeus. Jesus Visited Zacchaeus' house. Jesus plainly said salvation came to the house. The Gospel states clearly Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.

Each believer is lost to a certain degree. Personal knowledge about Jesus Christ falls short of the full nature and glory of Christ. Personal efforts to follow Jesus Christ always entails a certain amount of sin that needs removed.

The Gospel account of Zacchaeus assures believers of Jesus' love for sinners willing to repent. Zacchaeus's actions open an avenue of hope for believers seeking to unite and reunite with Christ.

Each person has issues in life. Each person discovers personal sins when honest assessments are made of the heart, mind and soul. Keeping the condition of the soul in focus throughout life is of utmost importance.

The soul's importance cannot be overestimated. Only through Jesus Christ can purity come to the soul. Only through forgiveness and the love of Christ can the believer travel the path to God's Kingdom and eternal life.

Daily life in the home and in the community challenges the believer to live in purity. Perils to the soul occur in relationships in the home and in the community. Temptations occur everywhere.

Greed, anger, and ungodly thoughts arise and affect the heart, mind and soul. God's Holy Church offers the teachings and nourishment to address temptations, dangers and perils to the soul.

Zacchaeus is one example of repentance. The Church offers countless examples of repentance in the lives of the saints and martyrs through the centuries.

Being attentive to the teachings of the Church strengthens believers' faithfulness.

Faithfulness to Christ inspires believers to ward off and repel dangers to the soul. Zacchaeus showed by his climbing of the tree the willingness to put forth effort to draw near to Christ.

Living in Jesus Christ requires effort throughout life. Effort is needed to go to church regularly during the year. Expending energy is essential to live according to the teachings of the Church.

Praying daily takes unyielding commitment. Welcoming that which is good for the heart, mind and soul to enter the self takes vigilance and attentiveness. Temptations and perils are repelled only with firm resolve.

Jesus Christ responded to Zacchaeus' initiative to draw near. Jesus Christ welcomes believers drawing near in faith. Serious believers view the arrival of Zacchaeus Sunday with great anticipation.

The approach of Great Lent bodes well for the future. Great Lent opens the door wide for hope in the heart, mind and soul. Opportunities to address personal sin deep in the heart, mind and soul exist throughout Great Lent.

No greater joy exists than unity with Jesus Christ. Repentance makes the joy in Jesus Christ a reality. Thank God for Zacchaeus' example. Thank God for Jesus' Christ's forgiveness, goodness and love.

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**Zacchaeus Sunday. Venerable and God-bearing Father Guthymius the Great.  
January 20/February 2, 2025. Hidden Valley, Pennsylvania. Father Rodney Torbic**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

*The blessing of a home is one of the most beautiful and profound traditions of our Orthodox faith, deeply connected to the Feast of Theophany. On this day, we commemorate the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Jordan River, where He sanctified the waters for the salvation of mankind. The Church blesses the waters on this holy day, as a powerful symbol of spiritual cleansing and renewal. Just as the holy water blessed on Theophany represents the sanctification of all creation, the blessing of our homes with this same holy water brings God's blessing, peace, and divine presence into our lives.*

*Saint Luke of Crimea, a great archbishop and surgeon, taught us that "Where there is prayer, there is peace, and where there is peace, there is God." Just as Christ's baptism sanctified the waters, the blessing of our homes with this same holy water grants us the grace of the Holy Spirit, bringing peace, protection, and God's presence into our homes. By receiving this blessing, our homes become places where God's grace dwells, reminding us to live in harmony with His will.*

*We invite you, dear brothers and sisters, to open the doors of your home to God's blessing this Theophany season. Schedule the blessing of your home and allow the prayers of the Church, the sanctified water, and the presence of the Holy Spirit to fill your home with light and peace. Father Dragan Vukovic is available for this sacred act and can be reached at 814-244-4063.*

*May the blessing of the Holy Spirit be with you and your families, granting you health, love, and spiritual joy.*

*With love in Christ,*

*Yours in the Lord,*

*Fr. Dragan Vukovic*

## The Story of a Rape Survivor Who Refused Abortion

*It often happens that people defending abortion rights, in an attempt to back up their position, talk about pregnancies resulting from rape. Their typical argument: A woman can't have a baby born from such a crime! I met Elena, a victim of a rape. She had no fear and became a mother. Here is her story:*

I was only eighteen: I had just received my high school diploma and was getting ready to enter a university. A neighbor of mine invited me to his place... On the surface, he seemed like a nice guy, active in sports, always well-mannered and attentive: He'd help his elderly neighbors by bringing their heavy bags back home or assist local kids at finding lost kittens and puppies, taking them back to their young owners. I didn't suspect anything; besides, the neighbor said that we would celebrate my graduation with cake and tea. So to say, we are good neighbors, aren't we? He must have added something to my tea, because I suddenly felt dizzy and my eyesight got clouded. My neighbor's words suddenly sounded unnaturally long and drawn out... I came to my senses early in the morning, lying on his sofa, feeling pain in my stomach; there were blood stains; I was dressed, yet all my clothes were twisted, as if someone else had put clothes on me... I knew now that something really bad had happened to me. My host at first replied to my questions with a joke and then got angry. "But it's what you wanted," he said, "otherwise you wouldn't have come here... Besides, everything was wonderful last night... You are all like that, you smile first and flutter your eyelashes, and then you whine later, saying, how did it all happen, how dare you?"

Feeling totally confused, I ran home and took a long shower. I sobbed... I had friends and boyfriends, but I had never become intimate with anyone. I never said anything to my mother, I was afraid to upset her and I also didn't want to hear that it was all my fault, that I didn't warn her; and it all looked like as if I had intentionally gone to meet him at night, when she was working a night shift.

A month later, I began to feel unwell: the fragrance of my hand cream made me feel nauseated and anywhere I went it felt like I lacked fresh air, even when I was outside. I blamed it on suffering from inner turmoil and troubling thoughts, as I couldn't easily forget that dreadful day and the sordid actions of someone I knew. A week later, I lost conscience while I was shopping. Someone called an ambulance. That's when I found out that I was pregnant.

There was no sense hiding it from my mother anymore; she was my family. I cried as I shared the whole story and my mom cried with me. She threatened to file a legal complaint to the local prosecutor's office and, if that didn't help, she promised to take care of the abuser with her own bare hands. I managed to talk her out of taking any action, but she was upset that I failed to tell her right away and this was why we didn't call in police and didn't go to the doctor for an evaluation. As a result, the criminal got clean away and now there was nothing we could prove.

Then, it got even harder. My mother kept telling me that I should interrupt this pregnancy. It was no joke—a baby from a criminal! But I knew from the beginning that I would keep this baby. Against all odds! I was baptized into Orthodoxy, but I wasn't a church-going Christian and had never received communion or gone to confession. Occasionally, my mother and I would come to church on major feasts, such as Christmas or Pascha, and we'd donate food on Ancestral Memorial Saturdays. We would also come to church before such major life events as school graduation exams at the ninth and eleventh grades, or to buy candles and light them before the icon of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker. Sadly, that was it for our church life. But I had heard and knew that abortion was a sin. I remember how my grandma said to my mother many years ago: 'I had so many abortions, and I remember them all, despite having so many; but it turns out that it is a sin. It makes me feel so sad! You could have had brothers and sisters... Maybe even your father wouldn't have left us like he did when, late in life, he fell in love and went to live with her...' In return, my mother also lamented that while my dad was still alive, she had three abortions. I will never dare to condemn my grandmother or my mom, they are good people, who gave me everything and who loved me and helped others. But still, I do have to say that their lives were anything but easy. My grandma became very ill before she died: she was treated for a long time for an illness, but she felt worse and worse. My mother and I did everything to help her and during her final months we fed her thin porridge and soups from a feeding cup and carried her to the bathroom to give her a bath. Then, we found out that the doctors had misdiagnosed her, that she had cancer, and it required a completely different treatment... We found this out when it was too late.

My parents lived in harmony and never quarrelled, but when I was nine, my father was attacked by street thugs who took his wallet, beat him badly and left him lying on the ground. He could have been saved, but the passersby assumed that he was one of those drunks who would cut his face after falling down or get in fights while drunk, and now he was simply sleeping, lying outside... No one called for an ambulance... My mother suffered terribly after his death, and she even had to stay in a neurological clinic and take sedatives and sleeping pills for a long time.

I didn't want to have an abortion. Some unknown force as if led me towards the church. I had my first confession at the age of eighteen. I told everything about myself, my grandma and my mom's stories. Batiushka said that we should pray for our loved ones, while I must to get ready to give birth. He supported me in my desire to protect life. I remember what he said: Why is it that a sex offender is guilty, but it is a tiny innocent baby who gets punished? I asked about genes, since my mother was very concerned about that. She thought that it's not as dreadful to become a single mother as it is to have a baby with the genes of a criminal. What if he inherits a propensity for crime, like his father?! The priest told me: 'We pray and ask the Lord to give us health and well-being, and a believer always adds, Thy will be done. We should act likewise: to pray and believe in His mercy.' I began to attend Liturgy services, give confession and take Communion.

That's when I felt for the first time that the Lord is near and He extends His hand to me. For example, I had heard so many terrible things from my neighbors and older friends about rude and opinionated doctors, and so I was really worried about visiting an obstetrician's office. But I

happened to have a very kind and all-understanding woman as my obstetrician. When she heard my story and my desire to be a mother, she said, “This is the first happy news I’ve heard today—you are the first one who wants to maintain her pregnancy and not interrupt it!” Then, she suddenly added that I am not to worry about the genes. She explained, “Otherwise, we’d have something like this: Scientist’ children would receive academic degrees at birth or a son of a thief would be immediately registered as a criminal... But, that would be ridiculous, right?! You will give birth, you will love and nurture your child, and then you will get married: everything will be alright!’

I had an uneventful pregnancy, all my tests came out perfect, and the baby developed correctly. Except that my mother and I got in an argument and I stopped talking to her, as she was way too worried about me and she feared that I will have “God knows what.” I didn’t harbor ill feelings against her, she was brought up during Soviet times and there were still some people who couldn’t understand that life was a gift from God. Besides, life doesn’t begin after birth, or from the moment of a first heartbeat, or once the baby’s nervous system has been formed, etc., etc. It begins at conception.

I gave birth to a healthy and beautiful girl. I had an easy delivery. It was nothing like what I had imagined, that I would scream the loudest or simply die from pain—no, as it turned, it out it wasn’t all that scary.

Despite our disputes, my mother couldn’t stay at home and she came to meet us at the maternity hospital. When she saw her granddaughter for the first time, she cried and her heart melted. She took her in her hands. “Oh, I love her so much! Well done, dear! It’s impossible even to imagine now that I could have talked you into having an abortion...”

Sure, I didn’t go to college after school, but later on I entered a teaching school and I am working as a teacher of Biology and Chemistry. My mother was my help! When I was in my final year, I met a young man and we got married. Again, it was Divine Providence and the mercy of the Lord—my husband always wanted to have children, but he was sterile as the result of getting the mumps in childhood. That’s why he was so happy when he learned about my daughter. She is eight now and we plan to adopt more children, to share our warmth and love with others.

You must be reading this and wondering: How do I look at my daughter, am I struggling with the thought she was born as the result of a rape? No, I look at her with love and joy, and I am thankful to the Lord that I am her mom. She helped me to mature and become smarter, and thanks to her, I found faith. Yulia—that’s her name—is a happy and kind child. She is a good student, she swims, and what’s more—she never misses a lesson at her Sunday school; she is preparing to sing in a church choir and dreams about becoming a choir director.

*Alexandra Gripas*

PLEASE REMEMBER TO ORDER  
YOUR SUBS TODAY FROM THE  
CHOIR (PLEASE SEE DAN  
GJURICH) OR CALL KRISTINA AT  
814-241-9428

## Services this Week

- Sunday Of the Publican and the Pharisee (02.09.2025.)
  - Transfer of the Relics of St John Grysostom; St Danilo of Karlovac
  - *Divine Liturgy starts at 10:00 AM.*

**Donations January 26, 2025**

**Offering - \$615.00      Candles - \$120.00    Dues - \$100.00**

**Building Fund**

**IMO Natalie Ofsanko**

Francis & Janet Matten - \$50, Johanna Kosik - \$25

**IMO Nancy Gula**

Mariam Smith - \$50, Richard & Suzette Gardenhour - \$25

Joann Uzelac - \$20

**Large Candles**

IMO Lazo & Bosa Vuckovich from Helene Gleason

IMO John & Millie Pavich and Daughter Connie Bartis from Olga Bulich

IMO Brother Joseph Kondas from Richard Kondas

IMO Jeffrey Smith -41 years of marriage from wife Mariam Smith

IMO Dorothy Thomas from John & Patricia Pavich

IMO Joseph & Amelia Kondas from Richard Kondas

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**Our New Library!**

We will be offering a selection of books for our parishioners to borrow for your enjoyment. All reads will be recommended by Father Dragan. At this time we have two available, "Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: Finding the Way to Christ in a Complicated Religious Landscape" and "Memory Eternal: Living with Grief as Orthodox Christians" - These titles are available in the Candle Room. Please feel free to sign one out and return when completed. If you have any suggestions, please speak with Father Dragan.

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**Nut, Apricot, and Poppyseed Rolls are still available!**

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**St. Sava Celebration -Sunday, February 2, 2025**

Join us today following Divine Liturgy for the blessing of the Slavski Kolac and Zito, with Kum Brayden Simms and Kum Marcus Simms. Following the Luncheon, we will continue our celebration with a program from the Sunday School Students.



# **UPCOMING EVENTS**

## **Fish Fry**

Friday, February 7, 2025

## **Lenten Fish Fries**

Friday, March 7th to Friday April 11, 2025

## **Lenten Vespers**

**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – St. Mary of Egypt**

Sunday, April 6, 2025 – 5:00 PM

**\* Palm Sunday – Sunday, April 13, 2025**

**\* PASCHA! – Sunday, April 20, 2025**

**\* St. Nicholas Anniversary Celebration–**

Sunday, May 18, 2025

**\* Polka Fest – May 30, – June 1, 2025**

**\* Band of Brothers – July 2025**

**\* Taste of Serbia – Saturday, August 9, 2025**

**\* Johnstown Slavic Festival –**

September 19–20, 2025