

Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, December 17:

“A Sense of Shared Experience” and “A Holy Cross Christmas Carol”

Scriptures:

Epistle: Colossians 3:4-11

Gospel: Luke 14:16-24

1) **FALL AND GET UP AGAIN:** A person visiting a monastery asked one of the monks what he does each day. The monk replied: “All we do is fall and get back up again.” This is, no doubt, an experience most of us understand.

In the verses prior to the beginning of today’s Epistle to the Colossians, St. Paul wrote:

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is...For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God (3:1,3).

The first verse in today's reading is: “When Christ who is our life appears...” (3:4).

Falling and getting back up again, one might say, is the common Christian experience. When one is baptized the liturgical and sacramental sense is that of going down into the water and dying with Christ in order to likewise be raised with Him to life. For He is our life.

This common sense of “falling and getting up again,” of dying and rising with Christ has been identified by Thomas Merton as the “**Paschal rhythm of Christian life.**”

2) **THE PASCHAL RHYTHM AND THE HARMONY OF THE CRUCIFIXION AND NATIVITY**

OF JESUS: Fr. Thomas Hopko wrote that “the liturgical verses and hymns for Christmas and Epiphany, the Pascha of Christ’s incarnation and manifestation in the flesh, repeat those of Easter, the Pascha of Christ’s death and resurrection. The Lord’s birth and baptism are directly connected to His dying and rising. He was born in order to die. He was baptized in order to be raised.”

The harmony between the events is overwhelming (*The Winter Pascha*, 10).

3) **THE FOREFATHERS** and our own “forefathers and mothers”: Today, on this the 2nd Sunday before Christmas we remember the “Forefathers” of Christ - those, primarily Old Testament representatives, who longed for the coming of God’s presence in their lives. We have had the icon of the “Tree of Jesse” on our center table throughout Advent



and on Saturday evening we heard this verse:

Come all who love the feast,
let us praise in psalms the assembly of the Forefathers:
Adam, our first Father,
Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek,
Abraham, Isaac and Jacob;
and those who came after the Law:
Moses, Aaron, Joshua,
Samuel and David,
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel,
and with them the Twelve Prophets:
Elijah, Elisha, and all the rest,
Zachariah and John the Baptist:
all those who proclaimed Christ, //
the Life and Resurrection of the human race!

As we conclude the celebration of our 50th Anniversary this year, we want to include our own “forefathers and mothers,” our builders and benefactors, who longed-for God’s presence in the midst of our own community. We want to recognize their shared hopes and proclamation of Christ, as “the Life and Resurrection of the human race.”

3) IN THE MIDST OF THE FURNACE AND THE FLAMES:

We also remember today the Prophet Daniel and the Three Holy Youths - Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego. We learn about them in the Old Testament book of Daniel and we hear their story on Holy Saturday. But today it is good for us to recognize their experience which can be common to us.

Upon being cast into the burning, fiery furnace for not worshipping the golden idol set up by King Nebuchadnezzar something remarkable happened.

The King looked into the furnace and was astonished. He said to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king."

He answered, "But I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods" (Dan 3:22-25).

The Christian community has always understood this "fourth person" as the prefiguration of Jesus Himself, as the one who is always there - with us - in the midst of the furnace and the flames.

Fr. Hopko explained that: "In classical iconography the 'fourth person' in the furnace is depicted as Jesus bearing great wings and entitled 'the great counsel of the angels' from the prophecy of Isaiah (see Daniel 3 and Isaiah 9):



4) **A SENSE OF SHARED EXPERIENCE:** Recently on the WHYY program, "*Fresh Air*," Terri Gross interviewed the poet, Christian Wiman, who teaches at the Yale Divinity School. He has been struggling with a rare form of cancer for eighteen years. Terri asked him:

"You say that one of the things that brought you back to Christianity was the moment Jesus said on the cross, 'My God, why have You forsaken me?' Did you feel forsaken when you were sick? Why was it that line helped bring you back to Christianity?"

Christian Wiman replied: "You know, Simone Weil once said that if there was no resurrection, that would be enough for her - the story of Jesus dying on the cross of God, suffering with us, of making suffering have a meaning, and making that a shared experience - that would be enough for her.

I know what she meant. I have felt rescued by that because in the deepest despair, as I say, is the absolute lack of meaning. It's not necessarily what's going to happen to you, although that can be part of it. But it's the fact that life doesn't have meaning.

And in those moments, I think Christianity reaches into those moments. It doesn't provide an answer to them.

It's simply a sense of shared experience, a sense we are not alone."

CONCLUSION - A HOLY CROSS CHRISTMAS CAROL: At the end of today's Liturgy we will offer our annual Christmas Program. This year we are calling it, "A Holy Cross Christmas Carol." As our children will assemble the pieces of the Christmas story we will be singing many of the traditional Christmas carols.

But our hope as well is to recognize and honor the "shared experience" of those who have personally come to know the "Paschal rhythm" of "falling and getting back up again," of dying and finding life in Christ, our true life.

We want to affirm the harmony between Christ's crucifixion and His Nativity.

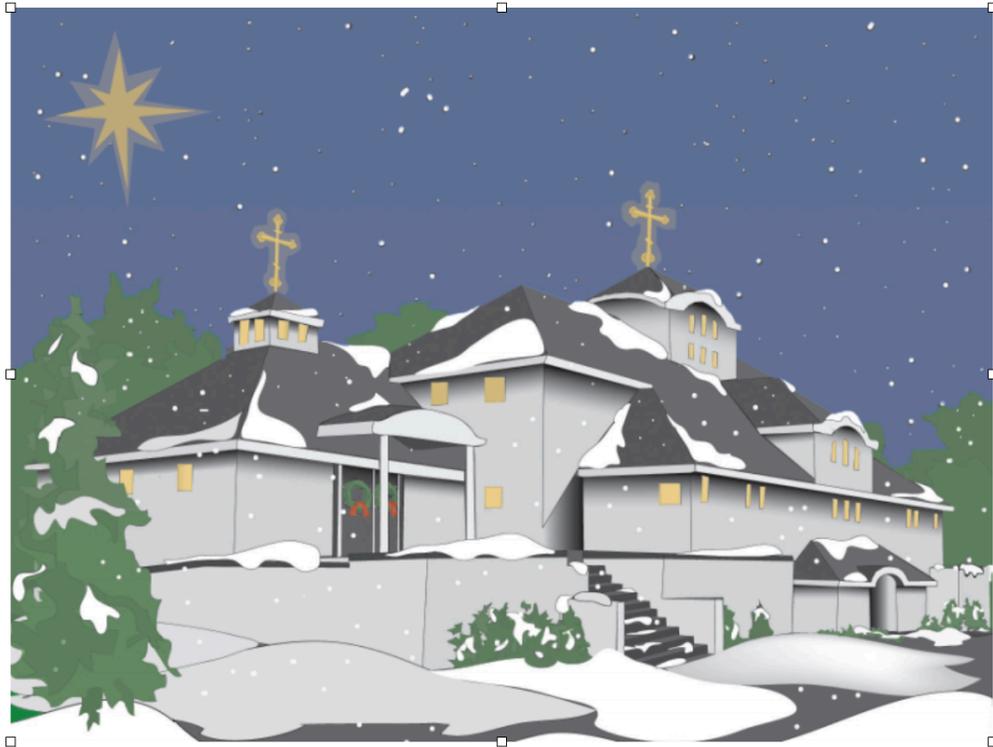
We want to celebrate the common hopes, prayers, and songs of Christ's "Forefathers" and our community's "forefathers and mothers" who chose to bring our community together under the sign of the Cross - the shared experience of all people.

Our Christmas Program is called:

A Holy Cross Christmas Carol

For Fifty Years:

Brought and Held Together by the Cross and the Paschal Rhythm of Life



ORTHODOX CHURCH OF THE HOLY CROSS

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2023

The Program is attached below and includes the story of our parish as told by one of our “founding mothers,” Lynn Siry and includes her explanation of how our community chose the name of the “Holy Cross.”

A Holy Cross Christmas Carol

The Story of Holy Cross Church as told by Lynn Siry (from the 40th Anniversary Video, 2013, revised 12/23)

The Orthodox Church of the Holy Cross was born when two couples met at St. Thomas Greek Orthodox Church in Cherry Hill. The Leons, Alexander and Stacey, were actively involved in St. Nicholas Church in Philadelphia and my husband, Dennis and I, the Sirys, were very involved in St. Stephen's Church, also in Philadelphia.

In the summer time, traffic was horrendous coming back from Philadelphia. We could get into Philadelphia with no problem on a summer day, but it took an hour and a half for a 30 minute drive from Philadelphia back to New Jersey. Both couples had decided - we didn't even know that the other couple would be there - but had decided to go to Saint Thomas Church.

Lo and behold, we saw each other and had a conversation after the service. And that was when the whole question of: "Wouldn't it be nice to have an Orthodox church in South Jersey?" was first raised - no English speaking church existed at that time.

And that was the kernel that planted the seed that started the whole movement. This occurred in July, 1973. From then on things began to move: Letters were sent to the dean of the district, meetings were held with Fr. Nehrebecki, who was the dean and is kind of our godfather in a way because he helped to provide the beginning of our parish.

At the first service we had fourteen people and members of the choir. We looked forward to seeing those people every Sunday. If a couple was missing everybody panicked because we thought we had lost them.

At that time we were meeting in the auditorium of the Stockton Elementary School. We needed to set up every single Sunday - everything needed to be portable. We had a closet space where everything fit. Shortly after starting our first services we began to have coffee hour and someone would have to pick up the Dunkin' Donuts and that brought a little more social talk at the end of each service.

From there we went on to Maple Shade where we stayed for a long period of time, almost ten years. And that's where most of the people began to come to the church.

Joe came as a choir director and he began to want to rehearse. So, as a group the choir was rehearsing in the rectory. The choir always had a feeling of camaraderie.

To be part of this church, to experience the growth that has been occurring, to be contributing to Orthodoxy and to be part of the plan of a family, a church family that loves one another, that works with one another, that enjoys being together and always has a happy face has been a wonderful growing experience for me, personally.

It's kept me here for a longer period of time than I ever expected to stay in Cherry Hill. I expected to stay here for 1 year and I've been here for the whole 50 years. And I don't anticipate leaving anytime soon.

So it has been a warm kind of experience because of the loving, caring people that are within the parish.

I am often asked how our parish chose the name of the “Holy Cross.” We were aware that certain saints were especially popular among various Orthodox ethnic groups and we considered many different ones. Then someone stated: “It would be nice if we could have an image, name our church after something that would be important, that would have filled the life and concerns of all the saints, and in fact, of every person and that they would know something of this aspect of their faith and of their lives as it relates to Jesus Christ.”

Then someone else said: “How about we name it - the Church of the Holy Cross - because everyone knows something about that.”

And I think it was a perfect choice.

CHOIR

TONE 6 (Holy Friday Matins, 15th Antiphon, 6th Gospel / 9th Royal Hour of Christmas)

Today He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the tree.

Today He who holds the whole creation in His hands is born of a Virgin.

The King of angels is decked with a crown of thorns.

He whose essence none can touch is bound in swaddling-clothes as a mortal Man.

He who wraps the heavens in a cloud is wrapped in the purple of mockery.

God, who in the beginning fashioned the heavens, lies in a manger.

He who freed Adam in the Jordan is slapped in the face.

He who rained manna on his people in the wilderness is fed on milk from his Mother's breast.

The Bridegroom of the Church is affixed to the cross with nails.

The Bridegroom of the Church summons the wise men; the Son of the Virgin accepts their gifts.

We worship Your Passion, O Christ.

We worship Your Passion, O Christ.

We worship Your Passion, O Christ.

We worship Your Nativity, O Christ.

We worship Your Nativity, O Christ.

We worship Your Nativity, O Christ.

Show us also Your glorious Resurrection. / Show us also Your holy Theophany!

Opening Call: From the Matins for the Nativity of Christ

"COME YOU FAITHFUL

Come You Faithful,
See the place where Christ is born
Let us join the Magi, the Kings from the East
And follow the guiding star.
Angels sing their praises and shepherds in the field offer hymns saying:
Glory to God in the Highest
to Him who in the cave this day is born
Of the Virgin and Theotokos.

1. ONCE IN ROYAL DAVID'S CITY

Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed.
Mary was the that mother mild
Jesus Christ her little child.

He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all,
And his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall
With the poor and mean and lowly
Lived on earth the Saviour holy.

2. ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH

Angels we have heard on high sweetly singing o'er the plains.
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their joyous strains
GLORY IN EXCELSIS DEO!

Come to Bethlehem and see Christ whose birth the angels sing.
Come adore on bended knee
Christ the Lord, the newborn King.
GLORY IN EXCELSIS DEO!

3. WE THREE KINGS

We three kings of Orient are
Bearing gifts we traverse afar.
Field and fountain, moor and mountain
following yonder star.

REFRAIN:

O star of wonder, star of night.
Star with royal beauty bright.
Westward leading, still proceeding
guide us to Thy perfect light.

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,
Gold I bring to crown Him again.
King forever, ceasing never
Over us all to reign.

REFRAIN:

4. WHAT CHILD IS THIS

What child is this, who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom Angels greet with anthems sweet.
While shepherds watch are keeping.
This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and Angels sing.
Hast haste to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

5. SILENT NIGHT

Silent night, Holy Night!
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon Virgin Mother and child;
Holy infant, so tender and mild.
Sleep in heavenly peace.
Sleep in heavenly peace

Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia,
Christ the Savior is born!
Christ the Savior is born

Silent night, holy night!
Son of God love's pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth.

6. IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER

In the bleak midwinter
frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron,
water like a stone:
snow had fallen,
snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter,
long ago.

What can I give him,
poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd,
I would bring a lamb,
if I were a wise man
I would do my part,
yet what can I give him,
give him my heart.

7. O COME, ALL YOU FAITHFUL

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant
O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem.
Come and behold Him, born the King of Angels:
O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him
Christ the Lord.

Sing, choirs of angels;
sing in exultation;
sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above!
Glory to God, in the highest!

O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him
Christ the Lord.

8. PRE-SCHOOL CLASS PRESENTATION

9. HYMN TO ST. NICHOLAS: O WHO LOVES NICHOLAS...

O who loves Nicholas the Saintly



1. O who loves Ni - cho - las the saint - ly, O who serves
2. He who dwells in God's ho - ly man - sions is our help
3. Ho - ly Saint, heark - en to our pray - ers; let not life
4. Ni - cho - las, pray for us who love you. O Fa - ther,



Ni - cho - las the Saint - ly, him will Ni - cho - las re - ceive,
on the land and o - ceans. He will guard us from all ills,
drive us to de - spair. All our ef - forts shall not wane,
hum - bly we be - seech you. We will al - ways praise your name;



and give help in time of need. ho - ly Fa - ther Ni - cho - las!
keep us pure and free from sins, ho - ly Fa - ther Ni - cho - las.
sing - ing prai - ses to your name, ho - ly Fa - ther Ni - cho - las.
your great deeds we will pro - claim for - ev - er, for - ev - er.

10. CONCLUSION:

JOY TO THE WORLD

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room.
And Heavn' and nature sing.
And Heavn' and nature sing.
And Heav'n and Heav'n and nature sing!

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love, / And wonders of His love, / And wonders, wonders, of His love.