

**Notes from the Sermon on Sunday March 5, 2023:**

***The Sunday of Orthodoxy and the Light of Christ which Illumines All***

When asked why we light candles, Orthodox Christians affirm that it is a reflection on the very nature of Jesus. During the Lenten weekday service, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, in between the first Old Testament reading of Genesis and the second from Proverbs, the priest brings out a lighted candle



and proclaims: **“The Light of Christ Illumines All”**

This weekly Lenten proclamation prepares us for the opening of the Paschal Service when at midnight in the midst of a darkened church the priest brings out the candle and sings

**Come, all of you and take the light  
from the unconquered light;  
Come and glorify the Christ  
risen from the dead.**

and then extends the light among the gathered as everyone proceeds into the night for the Paschal procession.

The Light of Christ illumines the Scriptures and reveals the presence of Jesus.



As we come towards the front doors of our church, we see above the entranceway the icon of the Encounter with Jesus on the way to Emmaus. This encounter proclaims that the risen Christ is revealed in the Scriptures which speak of Him and in the breaking of the bread (the Eucharist): these are the essential things offered to us and to everyone who visits our church.

On this first Sunday of Great Lent, the Sunday of Orthodoxy, when we proclaim the legitimacy of icons we affirm through the illumination of the Scriptures their place in our worship and in our lives.

1) **From today's Gospel**, we heard Philip say to Nathaniel that "we have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth" (Jn 1:45). Jesus says to Nathaniel that he "will see heaven opened, and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (Jn 1:51).

This image of heaven and earth united by the Son of Man – Jesus – first appeared as a dream of Jacob from the book of Genesis:

And Jacob "dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Gen 28:12).

**The dream of one who would unite heaven and earth – who would be both divine and human – is realized and proclaimed in Jesus and in EVERY icon.**

2) **From this week's reading of the Book of Exodus**, we heard God say to Moses that

"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, **8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians**, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...**11** But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" **12** He said, "**I will be with you;** (Exodus 3:11-12).

This same affirmation is made in the prayer for blessing water at a Baptism or on the Feast of Epiphany, the Services which celebrate how God has come and saved His people:

"As the God who is uncircumscribed, without beginning and ineffable, **You came down to earth, taking the form of a servant, being in the likeness of man.** For You could not endure, O Master, for the sake of Your tender mercy, to look down on the human race under the tyranny of the

devil. **You came and saved us...**

**Every icon is a proclamation that God has “come down” in Christ to deliver and be with His people.**

3) **After God proclaims His intent to “come down” and deliver His people**, Moses asks: “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” **14 God said to Moses, “I am who I am.”** He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you” (Exodus 3:13-14).

The Greek form of the Hebrew expression is, “O WN” (pronounced - “ho on”). **Every icon of Jesus contains this expression in the halo around His head. and it both proclaims and connects Jesus to this story, to God’s proclamation, and to God Himself.**

For more on this, see the article by Fr. Steven Bingham:

***On The Origin of O WN in The Halo of Christ***

<https://orthodoxartsjournal.org/on-the-origin-of-%E1%BD%81-%E1%BD%A4%CE%BD-in-the-halo-of-christ/>

**CONCLUSION:**

Each day throughout Great Lent we are reflecting on a chapter from Exodus and in conversation with the poetry of R.S. Thomas. To those who knew him, he exhibited both a lifelong belief in God, but also a sense of doubt. He understood God’s presence, yet often felt His absence. We will hear the words of a similar man on the Fourth Week of Lent who stated, “I believe, O Lord, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

On this the Sunday of Orthodoxy, when proclaiming the legitimate place of icons in our worship and lives, we try to put into words the experiences of the Scriptures in affirming that Jesus is God who:

- unites earth and heaven,
- comes down to deliver and be with His people
- shares the indescribable richness and power of God’s name.

## The Bright Field

by R.S. Thomas

I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the  
pearl of great price, the one field that had  
treasure in it. I realize now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

**Notes from the Sermon on Sunday March 12, 2023:**

***The Second Sunday of Great Lent:  
St. Gregory Palamas and the Experience of Knowing the Unknowable God and One  
Another***

***Gospel: Mark 2:1-12***

**The Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross** (1542-91) in a Ballad described a conversation between God the Father and the Son before the creation of the world.

The Father says: "My Son, I want to give You a bride who will love You, who because of her worth deserves to share Your company." The Son replies: "I am very grateful, Father. I will show My brightness to the bride you give Me...and I will hold her in My arms, and she will burn in Your love, and with eternal delight she will exalt Your goodness."

The Father concludes: "Let it be done, then, for Your love has deserved it." And having said these words, He created the world.

Throughout Great Lent we have been listening to the poems of the Welsh Anglican priest, **R.S.Thomas**. He also tells the story of the conversation between God and the Son before the creation of the world, and how the Son will respond. Here's his poem that was sent out today.

***The Coming***

by R.S. Thomas

And God held in his hand  
A small globe. Look he said.  
The son looked. Far off,  
As through water, he saw  
A scorched land of fierce  
Colour. The light burned  
There; crusted buildings  
Cast their shadows: a bright  
Serpent, A river  
Uncoiled itself, radiant  
With slime.  
    On a bare  
Hill a bare tree saddened  
The sky. many People  
Held out their thin arms  
To it, as though waiting  
For a vanished April  
To return to its crossed  
Boughs. The son watched  
Them. **Let me go there, he said.**

As we have slowly been moving chapter by chapter through the book of Exodus we have heard how God revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush and informed him that His name was “I am.” Above all, God had seen and heard the afflictions of the Jewish people and announced that He has “come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians” (Exodus 3:7-8).

The Orthodox Church Fathers and our liturgical Tradition proclaim that these responses were not made by God “in general,” but were already manifestations of Christ, though Moses could not completely recognize Him yet. It was Christ who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. He would grant the Law to Moses in the darkness of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19) and it was the voice of Christ heard and expressed by the Prophets. All of this, as we’ll see in August, comes together in the Feast of the Transfiguration when Moses and Elijah finally meet Christ in person, face to face, upon Mt. Tabor.

As expressed in the poems of St. John of the Cross and R.S. Thomas it would be Christ Himself who before the creation of the world was committed to loving humanity and was prepared to “go there” – to enter into the human condition.

- 1) On this the 2nd Sunday of Great Lent we remember, **St. Gregory Palamas** (1296-1359). He was a renowned theologian and church leader whose essential message was a direct affirmation: Though God in His “essence” remains unknowable, He continually reveals Himself in ways that humans can comprehend and engage. As stated by Fr. John Meyendorff:

**“The living God is accessible to personal experience because He shared His own life with humanity.”**

2) We hear this in today’s Gospel (Mark 2:1-12) when Christ not only desires to heal the paralytic, but forgive his sins. The scribes “who were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Christ is able to heal and forgive – because He is indeed God.

- 2) The other significant aspect from today’s Gospel is the impact upon Jesus of the four friends who brought the paralytic to him for healing: **“When Jesus saw their faith...”**

The intercessory power of the worshipping community can sometimes be underestimated, yet offering before the Lord all those who are broken, paralyzed in physical and spiritual ways, and any who are in need of healing is a function within every liturgical gathering.

Moreover, just as the nature of God is incomprehensible, yet also revealed in ways, so it is within each person – who is both a mystery to themselves and to others, but has aspects that are understood by all in some way.

If we can acknowledge the statement of St. John Chrysostom that “The universe is our parish,” then we can at least be willing as well to explore how every person and aspect of life that enters our community becomes an opportunity for an encounter with the healing presence of Christ who “has shared His life with humanity.”

- 3) **CONCLUSION:** In commemorating St. Gregory Palamas today we affirm both God's transcendent and incomprehensible nature, yet also affirm during Great Lent, and within every Liturgy that God – in Christ – is committed to sharing His life and love with each person. He desires to “go there” and to enter into the midst of human life, “working salvation in the midst of the earth” (Psalm 74:12).

In the following poem shared yesterday by R.S. Thomas God is present in creation and we can hear him “speaking,” all of which is manifested “in the metabolism (all that's required to maintain life) of the being of love.”

*Alive*

by R.S. Thomas

Alive.  
It is alive. It is you,  
God. Looking out I can see  
no death. The earth moves, the  
sea moves, the wind goes  
on its exuberant  
journeys. Many creatures  
reflect you, the flowers  
your colour, the tides the precision  
of your calculations. There  
is nothing too ample  
for you to overflow, nothing  
so small that your workmanship  
is not revealed. I listen  
and it is you speaking.  
I find the place where you lay  
warm. At night, if I waken,  
there are the sleepless conurbations  
of the stars. The darkness  
is the deepening shadow  
of your presence; the silence a  
process in the metabolism  
of the being of love.

**Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, March 19, 2023:**

***The Sunday of the Cross and the Power of Outstretched Arms***

We have reached the midpoint of Great Lent and have before us the Cross – both as a source of strength and encouragement, but also as a sign of what is to come.

During Great Lent we have been reading each day a chapter from the Old Testament book of Exodus. This past week we heard about the encounter between the Israelites and the wilderness tribe, the Amalek. Here's an image of this encounter and the text:



Now **Amalek** came and attacked Israel in Rephidim. And Moses said to Joshua, “Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.” So Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. **And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed;** and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses’ hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword (Exodus 17:8-16).

Though we never hear this text read liturgically, the image of Moses with outstretched arms defeating Amalek has been understood as a prefiguring of the sign and power of the Cross and it will be presented to us again on our parish feast day – the Elevation of the Cross – (September 14).



Here are some texts from the Feast:

Moses prefigured you, O precious Cross, when he stretched out his hands on high and put Amalek to flight (Vespers, "Lord, I Call")

In times past Moses, standing between the two men of God, prefigured in his person the undefiled Passion. Forming a cross with his outstretched hands, he raised a standard of victory and overthrew the power of all-destroying Amalek. Therefore, let us sing to Christ our God, for He has been glorified (Matins, Canon, Canticle One).

In today's Sermon I want to explore several ways this interconnection between "outstretched arms" and the Cross might be considered.

1) **As an answer to political prayer:** The Cross has been seen since the early days of Christianity as a sign of God's power over the devil and death itself. In connection with these themes it has also been recognized as providing God's support for political victories, with the sense that the victor will be the means by which God transforms societies and cultures. Perhaps the most important example of this is the story of the Emperor Constantine.

But in later Byzantine history and even modern history, the nature of the Cross as a means towards political victory has been emphasized in uncomfortable ways. For example, as Professor George Demacopoulos, Professor at Fordham University recently presented a lecture entitled, "***Soson, Kyrie, ton laon sou (Save, Lord, your people) and the sacralization of violence in ecclesiastical texts***" (a link is available in the Resources section below).

Here, for example, are first few lines - the bold text is the original translation and the italics is how we sing currently sing it:

"O Lord, save Your people and bless your inheritance.

**Grant victory to the emperor over the barbarians /** *Grant victory to the Orthodox people over their adversaries*

This approach to the Cross and the place of God in resolving political issues can be seen in the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine. It has different interpretations depending on who one sees as one's enemies and who is perceived as an aggressor or one in defense against an aggressor.

2) **As a spiritual answer:** Throughout history and various cultures, outstretched arms have offered a image of beseeching one's divinity. We are considering the image of Moses and the battle against Amalek. Here's a verse from the Psalms that we hear at every Vespers:

Lord, I Call upon You, hear me.

Let my prayer arise in Your sight as incense

And let the lifting up of my hands be an evening sacrifice (Psalm 141:2).

St. Paul wrote to Timothy: “I will, therefore, that people pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands” (1 Timothy 2:8).

In early Christian iconography some of the first images of a praying person expresses this action (the “*orans*”):



3) **Jesus on the Cross:** But the most profound image that connects outstretched arms with the Cross and God’s power is revealed by Jesus on the Cross. He himself said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

St. Athanasius explores this sense of the crucified Christ – with outstretched arms – drawing all people to Him:

Jesus with one arm “drew His ancient people” and the Gentiles with His other arm - “joining them together in Himself.”

**Conclusion:** The image of the Cross as expressed through the visual sign of outstretched arms has a long history and we will return to the story of Moses and Amalek in the celebration of our parish’s 50th anniversary.

But the power of this Cross beyond how it has been used at times to accomplish political victories is manifested in how Jesus desires above all to reveal His victory over the devil and death in the action of drawing all people to Himself.



*Tell Us*

by R.S. Thomas

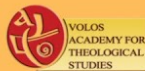
We have had names for you:  
The Thunderer, the Almighty  
Hunter, Lord of the snowflake  
and the sabre-toothed tiger.  
One name we have held back  
unable to reconcile it  
with the mosquito, the tidal-wave,  
the black hole into which  
time will fall. You have answered  
us with the image of yourself  
on a hewn tree, suffering  
injustice, pardoning it;  
pointing as though in either  
direction; horrifying us  
with the possibility of dislocation.  
Ah, love, with your arms  
wide, tell us how much more  
they must still be stretched  
to embrace a universe drawing  
away from us at the speed of light.

## Resources

### The Defeat of Amalek

by Fr. Andrew Stephen Damick

<https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/asd/2020/09/14/the-defeat-of-amalek/>



## Live Webinar



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“‘Soson, Kyrie, ton laon sou (Save, Lord, your people)’ and the sacralization of violence in ecclesiastical texts”

*George Demacopoulos*

Starting soon...

**Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, March 26, 2023:**

***“The Cross, the Annunciation, and Doubting-Belief” / “Suddenly”*** by R.S. Thomas

***Readings:***

**Luke 1:24-38**

**Mark 9:17-31**

Having had his 16th ranked team, the Fairleigh Dickinson Knights from Hackensack, NJ, defeat number one ranked, Purdue, and pull off one of the most remarkable victories in the history of college basketball, coach Tobin Anderson immediately realized that he had a problem: he had not brought enough clothes:

***“I had belief, but I’m not sure I had that much belief. I’ve got to do some laundry.”***

On this the 4th Sunday of Great Lent, we find ourselves at a point of intersection: having heard of the reality of the Cross last week, and continuing to celebrate the Annunciation, Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that God would enter the world through her, we are reminded of the father’s response to Jesus’s statement in today’s Gospel:

“If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.”

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears,

***“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”***



In the account of the Annunciation, Mary herself has many questions, which the artist Henry Ossawa Tanner captured in the above painting.

As described by St. Luke:

But when she saw him (Gabriel), she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was.

Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?”

After the birth of Jesus, Luke notes that:

“Mary kept all these things in her heart, pondering them” (2:19)

and later after an event when Jesus was 12 years old, it was said that

“Mary treasured all these sayings in her heart” (2:51).

In addition to working through a chapter from the book of Exodus each day throughout Great Lent, we have been hearing a daily poem from the Welsh Anglican priest, R.S. Thomas. John McEllhenney who came to know Thomas well throughout the 1990s until his death in 2000 called him a “doubting-believer” – one who believed in God throughout his life, but also struggled in identifying God’s presence in the midst of what often seemed to him like an absence.

1) **Sources of Doubt:** In his book, “*A Masterwork of Doubting-Belief: R.S. Thomas and His Poetry,*” McEllhenney listed **four sources of doubt** (pp. 23-27)

- Personal experiences such as the death of a loved one, divorce, job loss, failure to live up to one’s goals, psychological depression – a host of dark nights of the spirit
- Science: Scientists simply do not need God.
- History: It narrates events that cause us to cry out, “Where was God while that was happening?”
- The Bible’s God: The Bible’s God is elusively present in human lives – being often unseeable, unpredictable, and unknowable – a self-concealing God.
- In the Eucharistic Prayer of St. Basil we hear:

You, O God, are “invisible, incomprehensible, and indescribable”

2) **Why Does God Hide?** McEllhenney goes on to discuss, “**Why Does God Hide?**”

- God hides to keep us from thinking we can prove the existence of God; hides to prevent us from supposing we can comprehend God.
- God hides to draw us into a lifelong quest for God, because that which we cannot grasp has a way of grasping us.
- God, by refusing to be had, keeps us fascinated with God. God hides to shape us as lifelong pursuers of more: more understanding of what we can understand about God; more passion in our quest for a deeper relationship with God; more love of God; self, and others.

**3) Returning to Moses and Exodus - Going Up the Mountain and to the Thick Darkness Where God Was:** Throughout Exodus God reveals Himself and His expectations of Moses and the people in ever-deepening ways:

- In Exodus 3: God at Mt Horeb (also known as Sinai) is revealed in the light of a bush, which is burning but not consumed (the liturgical texts for the Annunciation speak of Mary as this bush – she gives birth, yet still remains a virgin)
- When Moses and the people return to Mt Sinai, as he follows God’s instructions Moses is not led into greater clarity and increasing brightness, but rather –

**“Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was” (Ex 20:20)**

- We can think of the path of our own lives and perhaps even the nature of our growth as a community – especially as we celebrate our upcoming 50th Anniversary this fall – in the same ways. We are led from simpler and clearer moments to times and decisions that are not always as simple or clear, but can lead us to a deeper understanding of ourselves – if we remain diligent and patient.
- It is often said that: **“God loves everyone as they are, but He doesn’t want us to stay that way.”**
- Throughout Exodus we have been hearing how God called Moses and the people to become a “holy nation and a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6). He took and loved them as they were – even though Moses often tried to convince God that he did not have the talents or sometimes confidence and desire to do what God wanted of him as a leader. God had to tolerate the complaints of the people and their requests to go back to their predictable lives as slaves in Egypt. His love required a variety of efforts to form and shape them.
- At the same time, God made it clear that He was a “jealous” God and would not tolerate idolatry or religious “adultery.”
- God accepted His people as they were, but never stopped trying to reveal Himself and to do everything possible to form and transform them – moving them from one level to another, from what they could understand at one point to what more could be possible.

## CONCLUSION:

- On this Sunday we have the opportunity to consider how God desires to move us from what we have come to understand of ourselves and of our community to another, deeper and richer understanding through ever-more provocative paths and questions.
- We think of this now at this point of intersection between the reality of Christ's cross and the bearing of our own crosses.
- We hear it in the announcement both to Mary and to ourselves about how God desires the impossible possibility of finding a place to dwell within us in ever more revealing ways.
- We pray like the father in today's story for courage and mutual support during those times when our own belief is mixed with unbelief and when we are also "doubting-believers."
- In the poem, "**Suddenly**" by R.S. Thomas we see that this can come when God in the risen Christ reveals Himself in ways that can "come, unannounced, remarkable merely for the absence of glamour."

\*

### **Suddenly**

by R.S. Thomas

As I had always known  
he would come, unannounced,  
remarkable merely for the absence  
of clamour. So truth must appear  
to the thinker; so, at a stage  
of the experiment, the answer  
must quietly emerge. I looked  
at him, not with the eye  
only, but with the whole  
of my being, overflowing with  
him as a chalice would  
with the sea. Yet was he  
no more there than before,  
his area occupied  
by the unhaloed presences.  
You could put your hand  
in him without consciousness  
of his wounds. The gamblers  
at the foot of the unnoticed  
cross went on with  
their dicing; yet the invisible



garment for which they played  
was no longer at stake, but worn  
by him in this risen existence.

**Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, April 2, 2023:**

***Conversation Partners:  
United to One Another and Finding Mercy and Grace***

On the Sundays of Great Lent and a few other times during the year (the eves of Christmas, Epiphany, Holy Thursday, and Holy Saturday) we celebrate the Liturgy of St. Basil.

Here is one of my favorite Prayers which is offered just after the consecration of the Gifts:

**And unite all of us to one another who become partakers of the one Bread and Cup in the communion of the Holy Spirit.** Grant that none of us may partake of the holy Body and Blood of Your Christ for judgment or condemnation. **Instead, may we find mercy and grace with all the saints who, through the ages, have been well-pleasing to You:** ancestors, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, teachers, and every righteous spirit made perfect in faith.

Especially for our most holy, most pure, most blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and ever-Virgin Mary.

This Prayer reminds us of two things as we come to know ourselves better in the light of Jesus Christ:

- In the development of a Christian life and in the reception of Holy Communion we not only participate as individuals or have a personal relationship with Jesus, but are united to one another “in the communion of the Holy Spirit.”
- Secondly, we hope that our partaking does not lead to judgment or condemnation, but that we might find “mercy and grace with all the saints who, through the ages, have been well-pleasing” to God.

1. **CONVERSATION PARTNERS:** Throughout the whole year we have the opportunity of exploring these themes by welcoming an assortment of “conversation partners.” Some of these “partners” will be texts - Biblical and liturgical – but they will include canonized saints, and “every righteous spirit made perfect in faith” – or at least, those who are trying to acquire that kind of spirit.

2. **FINDING MERCY AND GRACE WITH ALL THE SAINTS, WHO, THROUGH THE AGES, HAVE BEEN WELL-PLEASING TO YOU:**

Mercy is a sign of God’s “steadfast love” which endures forever, and never quits. His grace is the gift of His presence in every situation and relationship. It’s possible, in learning about the lives of the Saints, to see how this has worked in their lives and how a prayerful relationship with the Saints and the Virgin Mary can lead to our own acquisition of these gifts.

3. **OUR LENTEN PARTNERS:** During this Lenten Season this opportunity has taken the forms of a daily engagement with

- \* the story and characters within the Book of Exodus
- \* the poetry of the Welsh priest, R.S. Thomas

4. **TODAY: ST. MARY OF EGYPT on Forgiveness and Love:** On this last Lenten Sunday, we remember St. Mary of Egypt

Here's some background on her life (<https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2023/04/02/18-5th-sunday-of-great-lent-st-mary-of-egypt>) and below is the Kontakion:



Having been a sinful woman,  
you became through repentance a bride of Christ.  
Having attained angelic life,  
you defeated demons with the weapon of the Cross.//  
Therefore, O most glorious Mary, you are a bride of the Kingdom.

We think of Mary in the context of the Gospel lesson assigned for this Sunday – the story of the woman – considered “a sinner” – who comes before Jesus in repentance: weeping, washing His feet with her tears, wiping them with the hair of her head, kissing His feet, and anointing them with fragrant oil.

When questioned by a Pharisee on the appropriateness of this behavior Jesus tells a

parable of two people being forgiven various debts: Simon, the pharisee, concludes that the one who was forgiven more, would love more.

Jesus concludes by noting: **“Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.”**

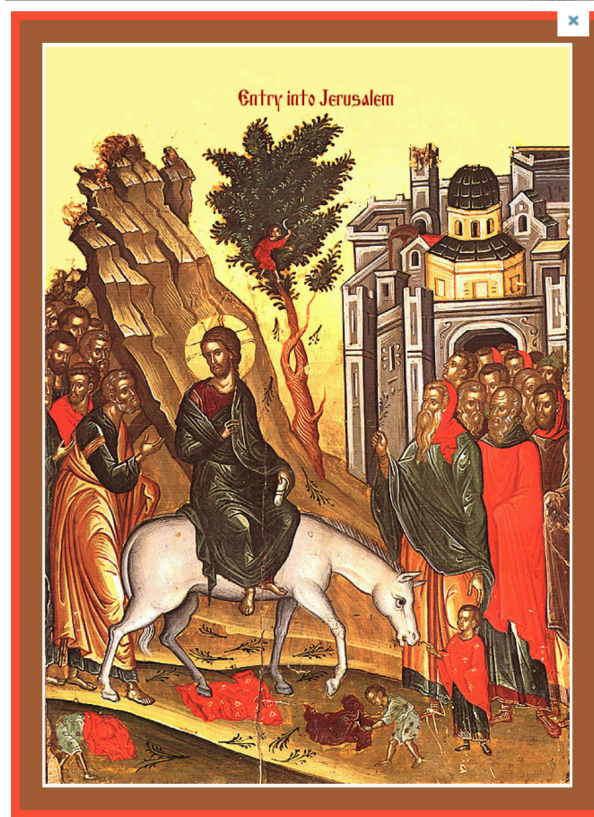
Mary reminds all of us who have fallen likewise in various ways, that it is possible to be forgiven by God of our behaviors and to become those who are called to His Kingdom.

**5) CONCLUSION: IN CONVERSATION WITH THE SCRIPTURES, THE SAINTS, THE VIRGIN MARY, AND ONE ANOTHER:**

Being united to one another in the Eucharist and in the communion of the Holy Spirit – finding mercy and grace in these relationships – are the opportunities provided for us in the life which God reveals and shares within our community experiences during the whole of the year and especially as expressed in our Lenten worship.

Notes from the Sermon on **Palm Sunday**, April 9, 2023:

***The Jerusalem of the Heart***



1) For over 400 years people have come to an area of western Texas, just above what is now the Mexican border, to cross between a particular mountain range. In English it is known as the “passageway to the North” and in Spanish it is called, “El Paso Del Norte” – we recognize it as the city of El Paso, Texas. The fate of immigrants and the process of immigration are very controversial topics, with many political overtones, yet all of us having come directly or through our relatives from another country understand something of the immigrants’ plight: wanting a better life or freedom for themselves and their loved ones. We are in many ways familiar with their stories and understand something of their songs.

2) Over the 40 days of Great Lent we have been reading each day a chapter from the Old Testament book of Exodus, which as a Greek word, means, “the way or path out.” It describes how God in hearing of the Israelites’ suffering and affliction under the Egyptians will “come down and deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians” and lead them out of captivity to freedom (Exodus 3:7-8). Each day during Holy Week one of the assigned readings in the lectionary of the Orthodox Church is a section from Exodus. In a passage we will hear on Holy Friday, Moses says to God: **“See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me...”** God replies, **“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest”** (Exodus 33:12-14). In the final chapter of Exodus we hear how “at each stage

of their journey, as the people finally leave their position at Mt. Sinai, they will be led [by God] during the day by a cloud during the day and by fire at night.”

These stories of being freed from captivity and finding new life are part of the memory of the Jewish people each year as they celebrate Passover. They are essential as well for the Christian community in providing the stories and imagery for our own understanding of how God has “come down,” accompanied us with the “Presence” of Christ, and maintained this Presence through the Holy Spirit at “each stage” of our life journey. These stories and songs also offer us the necessary language for our own liturgical celebrations: in addition to the daily Holy Week readings we will hear the story of the Passover on Holy Saturday, sing the joyous hymn of the people as they have gone through the “Red Sea” (or the Sea of Reeds) with the refrain, “For Gloriously Has He Been Glorified,” and inaugurate our Paschal celebration with the words used by the people when - led by God - they finally broke camp at Mt. Sinai and moved with the ark of the covenant:

“Let God, arise, let your enemies be scattered,  
and let your foes flee before you” (Numbers 10:35).

We will sing a slightly different version as presented in Psalm 68:

“Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered;  
let those who hate him flee before him.”

3) We heard last Sunday how Jesus and his disciples were “going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them” (Mark 10:32). Today we are present with them as Jesus enters the city and the people who feel that he is the expected Messiah respond by taking branches of palm trees and go out to meet him, shouting, the verse from Psalm 118:

“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (John 12:13).

We have been considering to this point how certain people today and the Israelites of long ago have journeyed geographically from one place to another in order to be liberated and to find a better life for themselves and their families. All of us probably know something of this story.

The events of Jesus’s entrance into Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week require a certain consideration of geographic details as well. But the judgment that his presence enacted upon the people then and even now upon us remains active and demanding.

Perhaps this is why the above line from Psalm 118, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,” is chanted so often during the Palm Sunday Services and is embedded several times within every Divine Liturgy, particularly at those moments when the presence of Jesus is affirmed: at the time of the Anaphora, before the consecration of the Bread and Wine, and just before the consecrated gifts of Holy Communion are distributed.

So, our response to His entrance into our life and that of our community continues to raise questions and challenges.

4) Moreover, our response to His presence has significance for us liturgically and as members of a community, but also in how we react in the most personal of ways. It can be helpful to imagine Jerusalem as not just a city within a certain country, but as a location within our hearts. There we can examine how we have recognized and affirmed the presence of Jesus in our lives or disregarded Him as not fulfilling our expectations. Perhaps in our own ways, we have even contributed to His crucifixion if not actively then at least by our indifference to Him or to those in whom He dwells.

The English poet, Malcolm Guite, summarized this way of looking at the location of “Palm Sunday” in a sonnet which he explained in this way:

“The inner journey is more necessary than ever, and in the following sonnet I have explored the truth that what was happening ‘out there’ and ‘back then’ as Christ entered Jerusalem is also happening ‘in here’ and ‘right now’. There is a Jerusalem of the heart. Our inner life also has its temple and palaces, its places of corruption, its gardens of rest, its seat of judgement.”

### ***Palm Sunday***

by Malcolm Guite

Now to the gate of my Jerusalem,  
The seething holy city of my heart,  
The saviour comes. But will I welcome him?  
Oh crowds of easy feelings make a start;  
They raise their hands, get caught up in the singing,  
And think the battle won. Too soon they'll find  
The challenge, the reversal he is bringing  
Changes their tune. I know what lies behind  
The surface flourish that so quickly fades;  
Self-interest, and fearful guardedness,  
The hardness of the heart, its barricades,  
And at the core, the dreadful emptiness  
Of a perverted temple. Jesus come  
Break my resistance and make me your home.

5) **CONCLUSION:** The journey to discover the possibilities of real life and living sometimes require geographic travel through places and time, in the passage to or out of somewhere, but most often will lead to a place within where we can come to know and respond to the person of the crucified and risen Jesus in the most direct way.