

THE MESSENGER

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH

"Behold I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness; Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight." Mark 1:2-3

Christ is Born! December 2020 Glorify Him!

VISION:

Love God, Love your neighbor and spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ as an Orthodox Christian community.

MISSION:

The mission of St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church is to welcome and serve people with love, truth, joy and peace, and to create an environment that encourages all to seek salvation through Orthodox Christianity.

CORE VALUES:

Love, Worship, Community, Learning, Service

Pastoral Guidelines related to Covid-19

The *Messenger* goes to the printer on the 15th of each month for the following month. The calendar of events may or may not be reflective of what we will do in the month of December. As we have been doing each month, we lead off *The Messenger* with some pastoral guidelines related to Covid-19. Should regulations be made more or less strict, we will adjust accordingly.

We are now allowing up to 125 people to worship each Sunday, the first 85 who arrive will be seated in the church and the remainder in the hall. We still will ask that everyone sign up on SignUpGenius to attend services. It is safe for 85 worshippers plus 10 workers to be in the church at one time and still be social distancing. We will continue to celebrate the Divine Liturgy on Saturdays and Sundays (with the exception of December 26 and January 2). If the rule on social distancing should change during the month of December, the Saturday Divine Liturgies will be cancelled.

We will celebrate Paraklesis weekly. It will be held on Wednesday, December 2 at 5:00 p.m.; Wednesday, December 9 at 6:00 p.m. and Wednesday, December 30 at 6:00 p.m. On Wednesday, December 16 we will have the Christmas Candlelight Service at 6:00 p.m. and on Wednesday, December 23, we will have the Royal Hours of the Nativity at 9:30 a.m.

Until the pandemic is over and we hear otherwise, we will continue to utilize SignUpGenius in order to attend the Divine Liturgy and other services. We will continue to check temperatures and seat people according to social distancing guidelines. We will continue to ask that people not congregate after services. Our Parish leadership meets on a regular basis to discuss taking the next steps, and proceeding cautiously as we open up "a little more" each month.

You may sign up for any Sunday or any other service where you wish to worship. Also, if you are able to worship not on a Sunday, please do so, so that we can reserve Sunday for those who can only worship on Sundays. If you sign up and can't make a service, please take your name off the list as soon as you know you can't attend, so make room for others to come. We want all services to have as many people as possible. **Also, the crew who helps outside at the check-in table will leave the outside table to worship at 10:15 a.m. We ask that if you are attending the Divine Liturgy, that you please be courteous and arrive on time. If you arrive after 10:15 a.m., please knock on the side door and someone will come outside to assist you. However, no one will be admitted to the church during the Gospel and the sermon as this is disruptive. This is approximately 10:20-10:30 a.m. Thank you for your cooperation on this.**

For those who are not able to worship in person, we will continue to live-stream all services. We will also continue to provide Sunday school materials for our children, our teens and our adults on-line until this pandemic is over, and until Sunday school in person resumes.

The latest information will always be available on our website and through constant contact. Both our Metropolis and parish protocols for coming back to church safely are on our website. Thank you for your patience in filtering through all of our constant contacts. It is really the most effective way to communicate news and comments during this time.

Finally, a big thank you for the large crew of volunteers who assist in order to make sure we are safe at every service—the nursing ministry, the welcome ministry, the ushers, the altar servers, and the guest chanters. Everyone has done a great job coming together to make sure we can offer regular worship, as well as these extra services in a way that is safe.

Father Stavros' Message

O Come, Let us Adore Him!

The year 2020 is probably the most “anxious” year collectively in the history of our country. The covid pandemic brought fear of sickness, fear of shortages of toilet paper, food, and cleaning supplies, fear of overreach of government control on many aspects of our lives, fear that this was far more serious or far less serious than the media was leading us to believe, fear of civil unrest, fear of saying the wrong thing and having it broadcast on social media, fear of voting, and fear for the future.

At the beginning of the year, we chose a word for the year for our parish, as we do every year, and the word for 2020 wasn't “fear”, it was “TIME.” TIME has passed slowly it seemed this year. There is one month of TIME left, and there certainly is a chance to end the year on a positive note, if we spend this TIME wisely.

There are lots of things going on in our parish during this last month of 2020. So, as usual, get comfortable in your favorite chair, so you can read about the joys, opportunities and challenges that face our community this month.

Nativity Fast Project

In Mid-November, we were introduced to the Nativity Fast Project, a bag filled with gifts sent to all of our parishioners. Hopefully you received yours and are making use of the many things that were inside.

The purpose of this project is two-fold: To give the community a project we can do together, as a community, even as we are still separated because of covid. This is a way for all of us to be engaged as a community in something together. Second, and more important, this gives us a meaningful and joyful way to prepare for the feast of the Nativity. In the Nativity Fast bag that was sent to you, you hopefully found and started reading the book “Let All Creation Rejoice.” It provides a short reflection to be read every day from November 15-January 7. If you haven't started the book, you can double up on the readings until you catch up. They aren't long. There is also a guidebook for you to use as a journal, to meditate on scripture, or just write out thoughts. There is a CD of our choir singing Christmas carols, a votive candle to burn on Christmas, a calendar of Christ-centered tasks to do each day, magnets, stickers, and lots of other things to help bring us focus as we prepare to celebrate the Birth of Christ. I would like to thank the small group of people who got together and in a matter of a few weeks brought this project from conception to completion.

I encourage you to participate in this project for yourself. It will bring for a more meaningful celebration of the Nativity this year!

We Are Going to Set Two Records in Our Parish This Year—Most Liturgical Services and Most Money Given to Charity

A Record Year for Worship

We are on pace to celebrate a record number of Divine Services in our parish. This year, the number is on pace to exceed 240. The previous high is 205. So, we will set a record and then

some. Because of the pandemic, we celebrated Divine Liturgy 28 of the last 30 Saturdays of the year. (In a normal year, we would have celebrated Divine Liturgy on about 5 of those Saturdays instead of 28 of them.) We have also offered a Paraklesis service just about every Wednesday since the pandemic began, so that is well over 30 extra prayer services this year. In the month of December, we are scheduled to celebrate the Divine Liturgy 17 more times, three Paraklesis Services, our annual Christmas Candlelight Service and the Royal Hours. Add in a baptism and two weddings and you can see there will be at least 23 services offered in our church in December.

Why is that important?

It's important because the central thing we do in the Orthodox Church is receive Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion. This is the most important thing you can do in your life—to receive Christ often, to have this intimate encounter with Christ as often as you can.

However, it is not just receiving Holy Communion that is important. The entire celebration of the Divine Liturgy is important. The Divine Liturgy is the consummate prayer. It touches on issues that are of “community concern”, such as praying for peace in the world, for our city and country, for those who are sick and suffering, those who are traveling, etc. It is very possible that, wrapped up in our own concerns and stresses, that we don't remember the issues of the community in which we live. The Divine Liturgy makes sure that these issues are not forgotten.

O come
let us
adore
Him



None of us reads Scripture enough, and many times we do not understand the Scripture passages we read. There is an instructional element to the Divine Liturgy, as a sermon is given in order to help us understand what we are reading in Scripture and apply that to our lives. Most of our jobs are required to do some continuing education. The sermon offered at the Divine Liturgy is continuing education in our Christianity.

We know that the Holy Spirit imparts grace to us through the sacraments of the Church. Grace is the intangible gift that strengthens what is lacking in each of us. It fills the empty spaces that we cannot fill ourselves. Whether it is the words we lack, or the thoughts we lack, or the courage we lack, or the forgiveness we either need to give or receive, grace is the gift of the Holy Spirit that allows these things to happen for each of us. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down on illiterate fishermen, who not only lacked words but lacked organization and courage, and enabled them to spread the Gospel to the whole world in every language known to man. That's a pretty powerful infusion of grace. When we consecrate the Holy Gifts at the Divine Liturgy, we call down the Holy Spirit "upon us and upon the Gifts here presented." So, even if we are not receiving Holy Communion, and even if we are worshipping online, we are "present" to receive again the grace of the Holy Spirit that comes down on every person who is worshipping at the Divine Liturgy.

Forty Liturgies in Tampa Bay

There is a tradition of celebrating forty liturgies during the forty days of the Nativity Fast (November 15-December 24). It is called the "Saranta Leitougon", literally, "The Forty Liturgies." This is done in some large parishes around the world that have multiple priests and large congregations and is a beautiful tradition. It is not practical to do in most parishes, including ours. A couple months ago, I suggested to the clergy of the Tampa Bay area that we should do the Forty Liturgies in the Tampa Bay area, so that for forty days, we are calling the Holy Spirit down on our area. They liked the idea and so we set up a schedule to that the Divine Liturgy is being celebrated in at

least one parish in this area for forty days. Everyone celebrates on Sundays and on some major feastdays. For the month of November, November 23, 24 and 28 were celebrated only at St. John, as our part of the Forty Liturgies. In December, our unique days will be December 5, 7, 19 and 22. (Additionally, we will be the only parish in the Tampa Bay area celebrating two of the Liturgies of Nativity Feast—December 28 and December 30.)

Thankfully, "what can I do" is a question I hear frequently. For those who are looking for what you can do this December, the answer is "carry the ball for our area" in attending, either in person, or virtually, the Divine Liturgies celebrated uniquely in our parish. As I said, every church will be open for services every Sunday and on the feastdays of December. But there will be 6 days in December when the only Divine Liturgy served on behalf of this area will be in our parish. And if, in the Divine Liturgy, we are praying for peace in the world, for those who are sick and suffering, and so many other things that are important to all of us, what a great gift it would be if on these days, we came and worshipped, on behalf of those in our area.

Record Charitable Giving

Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all you produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.

Proverbs 3: 9-10

It is a big leap of faith to offer the first and best of what one has, when they are not sure how much they will have. That's why stewardship is an act of faith. It isn't an act of faith to give God the left-overs, when we've been satiated with money, or food, and are giving to God from that of which we have no need. One of the things that is very satisfying in our parish, is that for many years, we pledged 10% of our festival profits to charity, even though we didn't know how the festival was going to do. Each time we did this, our festival made more money than the previous year. In 2020, we made the decision, before the we knew the pandemic was going to happen, to give 5% of our stewardship plus festival to charitable causes. We did this because we had hoped to not rely on the festival for our operations. It was a fortunate thing we didn't do that, because the pandemic ended up curtailing our festival plans

The total amount we pledged to charity this year was \$29,400, which itself was a record. We've never given that much to charity in a given year. Additionally, back in June, as the pandemic was really heating up, we decided to ask each family to give \$5 so that we could donate it to get food for the hungry. We had hoped to raise \$2,000. We ended up raising \$5,000 for Matthew 25, which they used to find food for those who don't have any in our area. This amount was added to the \$29,400 we are giving to charity for this year. So our total charitable giving for 2020 will be nearly \$35,000.

At a time when many people started pulling back on charitable giving, for fear they might not have enough financial resources, our parish exceeded our budget and broke a record for charitable giving.

FORTY LITURGIES FOR THE NATIVITY FAST in the Tampa Bay Area Churches

Sundays - Every Church

Nov. 16 - Tampa
 Nov. 17 - Sarasota
 Nov. 18 - Tarpon Springs
 Nov. 19 - Tarpon Springs
 Nov. 20 - Palm Harbor
 Nov. 21 - Multiple Churches
 Nov. 23 - Tampa
 Nov. 24 - Tampa
 Nov. 25 - Multiple Churches
 Nov. 26 - Tarpon Springs
 Nov. 27 - Sarasota
 Nov. 30 - Multiple Churches
 Dec. 1 - New Port Richey
 Dec. 2 - Tampa
 Dec. 3 - Palm Harbor
 Dec. 4 - Sarasota

Saturdays - Tampa

Dec. 7 - Tampa
 Dec. 8 - Sarasota
 Dec. 9 - Multiple Churches
 Dec. 10 - Tarpon Springs
 Dec. 11 - Palm Harbor
 Dec. 12 - Multiple Churches
 Dec. 14 - New Port Richey
 Dec. 15 - Multiple Churches
 Dec. 16 - Clearwater
 Dec. 17 - Multiple Churches
 Dec. 18 - Clearwater
 Dec. 21 - Sarasota
 Dec. 22 - Tampa
 Dec. 23 - Tarpon Springs
 Dec. 24 - All Churches
 Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

Details at tampabayconference.org

What charities are we supporting?

LifePath Hospice gives help and support to people in the last days of their lives, helping people to die with dignity and without pain and when possible to pass away at home. MANY of our parishioners have used LifePath over the years.

Love Inc. is a local organization which helps people get off the streets and get job training and job placement, affordable living situations, and education on how to stay off the streets.

Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC) supports the spread of Orthodoxy around the world as well as providing humanitarian aid in many third world countries.

Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry (OCPM) supports Orthodox inmates, as well as other inmates who are interested in Orthodoxy, to repent of their past and to prepare for a future after prison. There is an article later in the *Messenger* with a testimony from an inmate of how this charity is helpful in turning lives of prisoners around.

FOCUS North America- is an organization similar to Love Inc., but it run by Orthodox Christians, primarily in the steel belt (Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia) but expanding to other states including California. They help people get off the streets, job training and placement, affordable living, and productive lives.

International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) provides disaster relief both in America and abroad. We give a general donation to them every year, and then we send specific donations every time there is a disaster, such as hurricanes, flood, fires, tornadoes, etc.

Matthew 25 Outreach is the name of the organization where we do our Community Outreach each month. We provide the labor every third Saturday of the month, but we also provide a yearly donation to help subsidize the cost of the food that is provided each Saturday to the homeless population of our city.

Diakonia Retreat Center (DRC) is the retreat center for the Metropolis of Atlanta, where our teens go for summer camp each year, and where other programs and ministries are held year-round. These donations go to help their year-round expenses of the DRC as well as repairs and capital improvements.

Holy Cross School of Theology is the only seminary of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. This money goes towards training the priests and church workers of tomorrow.

Clergy Education Fund is money earmarked for our seminary students to help defray the cost of education.

Discretionary Contributions is money that is given to various charitable opportunities the come up unexpectedly, such as feeding children everywhere, which we did earlier this year with Christ the King Roman Catholic Church. We will send additional monies to our other charities at the end of the year, so that our goal of \$29,400 in charitable contributions will be met.

Recovering the Original Church

In Acts 6:1-4, we read the following:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not

right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.

We learn a VERY important fact from these few, and seemingly innocuous verses of Scripture. The work of the early church was two-fold, and two-fold only. Preaching the Word of God and feeding the hungry. In other words, everything had to do with worship and service. One of the positive things to come out of the pandemic is that it has forced us to return to the state of the original church. We didn't have a lot of social things this year. We didn't have the Greek Festival. We didn't hold the Junior Olympics. However, what we did do, better than in any year in the history of our parish, was that we worshipped more, and we gave more to charity.

And going forward, when this pandemic is in our rearview mirror and we resume the other activities that bring joy and fullness to our parish, I pray that we will not forget the two things that bring purpose to our existence as a Greek Orthodox Church Community—worship and charity.

A Note for Those Who Are Still Not Comfortable Coming in Person

As I write this message in mid-November, coronavirus cases are on the rise. It's anyone's guess if we are headed towards another lockdown (gosh, I hope not) or if we will keep trending, at least in our community, in a direction where more and more people are getting comfortable coming. For those who have not come, two thoughts. First, keep worshipping online. We will continue to livestream all of our services as a way to keep everyone engaged. Second, many people who have come back for the first time realized how much they missed church and how actually safe they feel here. On Saturdays, we have about 30-40 people who come for Divine Liturgies. On weekdays, there are usually 5-10. If you want to venture back to church on a day when very few people are here, may I suggest December 2, 4, 7, 9, 15, 22, 28 and 30. These are days that few people attend even in years when we don't have the pandemic. I do not think many people will attend these services this year. There are 8 Divine Liturgies in December where we expect sparse attendance. Perhaps consider attending one of these. Finally, if there is anyone who wishes to receive Holy Communion but doesn't feel comfortable being around anyone, we can figure out a time for you to stop by the church absolutely no one is here, in order to receive Holy Communion. For those who have not received the Eucharist in months, I encourage you to come and receive Christ in Holy Communion and we'll figure it out in a way that you'll feel the most comfortable and safe.

A Note for Those Who Won't Come Because We Have to Wear Masks

I don't like wearing a mask any more than you do. I don't know anyone who likes wearing these things. I understand there is a feeling of "I'm not going to let the government dictate how I'm going to worship." And I totally get that. I'm not sure whether the masks are necessary or not. I'm not sure if the media hyped up the coronavirus more than they should have. I'm not sure if we as a society have overreacted or underreacted to the coronavirus. What I am sure of is that no one is going to

keep me from receiving Holy Communion. The government will not prevent me from receiving. Wearing a mask will not prevent me from receiving. Social distancing will not keep me from receiving. I believe that when we locked down the church last March and didn't let anyone receive Holy Communion for over two months, in hindsight, that was wrong. But hindsight is 20/20. Even if we were forced to lock-down again and only have a few people in church, I would figure out a way to get the Eucharist to everyone, even if it meant more services and more opportunities to worship. Let's pray it doesn't come to that. I encourage those who stay away from church because of the mask mandate to come despite your objections, in order to receive Christ.

A Note for Those Who Have Gotten Out of the Habit of Worship

This is the group I'm most concerned about. There are people who have stayed away from church because they are nervous. There are people who have stayed away from church because they are annoyed. However, there are many people who used to come to church every Sunday, and who are now coming occasionally. And this is a concern. Weekly worship is a tradition that goes back to the commandment to "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy." In other words, since 1,500 years before Christ, God has told His people to set one day aside on which to worship. And it's not only to worship God and to receive Christ, but in order to recharge ourselves. So, for those who have gotten out of the habit of weekly worship, don't wait for the New Year to restart and old habit. Start in December!

The Gift Is You

Adding to the stress of the holiday season is the pressure to buy the right gift for everyone we know. I saw a video last year, entitled "The Gift is You." It was an experiment done by a pastor to send letters to parishioners telling them how much they were appreciated and valued. This outpouring of gratitude and encouragement, as you'll see in the video, made people filled with happiness. As the video says, "This time of year, we often prioritize possessions. So we wanted to celebrate with a better kind of gift—YOU." So if you are wondering what to give someone for Christmas, write them a letter and tell them what they mean to you. Here is the link to the video:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2878943925491599>

A simple, yet profound idea.

O Come, Let Us Adore Him

Now, many pages into this article, I didn't even get to the title of the Message, so I will conclude with this. The theme of our Nativity journey this year is "O Come Let Us Adore Him." This theme is the basis of the guidebook you received in the Nativity Fast bag. This theme will be reinforced in all the Sunday sermons of December. This theme can be summed up as follows:

O Come—This is an invitation for everyone to come:
Read the book "Let All Creation Rejoice"

Write down thoughts in the Nativity guidebook each day or each week

Meditate on the daily and weekly verses of Scripture

Do the things on the Nativity Fast calendar

And **MOST IMPORTANTLY**, take part in worship either virtually or in person throughout this Nativity season. There is an opportunity to attend the Divine Liturgy in Tampa 17 times during December. Additionally, the Divine Liturgy will be celebrated somewhere in the Tampa Bay area on the first 25 days of December. So, please come, in person or virtually, often to the Divine Liturgy in December.

Let Us—This journey we are taking—to the manger this year, through the pandemic, through life, and in this community—this is a journey that we are taking together. So let us encourage one another, support one another, help one another and pray for one another as we make this journey together.

Adore—Adore doesn't include money or material things. Adore does not mean cheer on. Adore means to offer ourselves, our admiration and our worship, to God. Adoration occurs quietly and consistently. It occurs with humility, with praise, with witness, and with worship. As we come together and adore, we must come to the manger with humility, praise, witness and worship, and we must come without fanfare and with consistency.

HIM—At the center of our lives, of the storm, and of this season is HIM, Christ the Lord. Let's not forget that Christ is supposed to be the center of our lives, regardless of how busy or stressful they may become. It doesn't do us any good to build a kingdom of material goods, fame, fortune, and fun, and not have Christ. Let's not forget that Christ is at the center of the storm, even this pandemic that has brought so much anxiety to this year. Christ is in the strength that we muster to survive this time, in the efforts of all those who are contributing positively to the challenges of this year, and even in the tragedies that have been associated with the pandemic, Christ still provides a path for salvation to all. Let's not forget that Christ is the reason for this Christmas season. As we go through this December and this Christmas season, as our celebrations are perhaps toned down from how they usually are, let us not forget that at the center of this season is Jesus in the manger, the Creator coming to be part of the Creation, God becoming a man, so that man (us) can become like God, the Creator coming from heaven to be with His creation, to open the path for the creation to return to Him.

O Come, Let Us Adore Him!

On behalf of Presbyteria Lisa and Nicholas, I wish each of you a Blessed Nativity and a Happy and Healthy New Year 2021!

With love in the Incarnate Lord,

+Fr. Stavros

Merry Christmas and a Happy and
Healthy New Year!

Who Were the Magi?

by Charlie Hambos

On Christmas Day, our church reads the story of the magi (wise men) who travel to Jerusalem to find Christ and worship him. Found in Matthew 2:1-12, the text comes after the genealogy of Christ which places emphasis on Christ as a descendent of King David. The emphasis is placed on King David because Matthew's audience was primarily Jewish and he hoped to connect Christ with the very famous King of Israel. First, let's return to the Greek text and see who the Magi were. The Magi we refer to in the English translation comes from the original Greek word, *magoi* which is the plural form of *magos* which is certain type of Persian priest who can interpret dreams. The only other times that *magoi* is used can be found in Daniel 4:7 and 5:15 in reference to those who were called in order to interpret dreams. These specific Magi are the ones who have a special knowledge of the stars and their connection with world events. The passage says that the Magi were from the east. Based on their study of astrology they could be from Babylon and based on the gifts they brought Christ they could also be from Arabia or Syria. We know this from looking back into the Old Testament where there are several references to the gifts and their place of origin. The first is found in Psalm 72:10, 11 which says "The kings of Tharsis, and the isles, shall bring presents: the kings of the Arabians and Saba [Sheba] shall offer gifts. And all kings shall worship him; all the Gentiles shall serve him."

This is probably the origin of the wise men being referred to kings. And the other which complements the first is found in 1 Kings 10:10 which says, "And she gave to Solomon a hundred and twenty talents of gold, and very many spices, and precious stones: there had not come any other spices so abundant as those which the queen of Saba [Sheba] gave to king Solomon." And then in Isaiah 60:6 it says, "the camels of Madian and Gaepha shall cover thee: all from Saba [Sheba] shall come bearing gold, and shall bring frankincense, and they shall publish the salvation of the Lord." Again, not to shatter our preconceived knowledge of the magi, nowhere do we see that there were only three. Some say that the number came from the three different gifts that they brought which were gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now, let's talk about the star. In the Old Testament there is a similar story about a star signifying the birth of Christ found in Numbers 24:17-19 which says, "I see him -- but not in the present. I perceive him -- but not close at hand: a star is emerging from Jacob, a sceptre is rising from Israel, to strike the brow of Moab, the skulls of all the children of Seth." That prophecy speaks of the star but the specific location of the birth of Christ can be found in the prophecy that Matthew actually used in this passage. The prophecy from Micah 5:1,2 says, "And thou, Bethlehem, house of Ephratha, art few in number to be reck-



oned among the thousands of Judah; yet out of thee shall one come forth to me, to be a ruler of Israel; and his goings forth were from the beginning, even from eternity." We know that Bethlehem was a very small town and probably insignificant for the most part. Some modern commentary says that Christ was to be born in Bethlehem to show that Christ was not born within the grandeur of a royal family but rather had humble beginnings in that small city.

So the Magi knew the importance of the birth of Christ because of the star which they followed. They were not Jewish and only they came to worship Christ according to the passage in Matthew. I believe that within the context of Matthew, it is interesting to see that Christ, "the Messiah" whom the Jews were waiting for was only recognized by the Magi who were more than likely pagan. If the Magi from the east who did not have the Messianic prophecies from the Old Testament came to worship Christ, then what excuse do we have to not realize that Christ needs to be the center of our life? After all, Christ came to save us from death which is the result of our sin. Now we are no longer separated from God, Christ is that bridge between us and God. If there is no Christ in Christmas then we have nothing to look forward to in the future. We should be like the Magi and pay attention to the blessings in our life and thank God for all of them.

Merry Christmas!

What Am I Supposed To Get You For Christmas?

By Alex Limberatos

My wife and I recently spoke about a topic we both dread every year: what are we getting _____ for Christmas?

For those who feel the anxiety related to gift-receiving/giving and struggle with finding joy in Christmas, I don't blame you. While there are many factors why the holidays are stressful—for those suffering grief, for those not looking forward to the big family gatherings, etc—I'd like to hone especially in on the financial and giving aspect of this anxiety. It's as though every year we are forced to get creative and stretch our wallets, pressured to spend money on others in order to reflect our love and appreciation, while also finding a clever gift that won't go unappreciated. Even writing up a Christmas list by the mandate of family can feel a bit contrived for me, especially when truly I find there's not a whole lot of "wishes" or "needs" I have that can be bought.

The custom of gift-giving actually comes from a real event in the life of St. Nicholas. Saint Nicholas was a bishop living in modern day Turkey and well attuned to the needs of his people. He came to find out about one family especially struggling: of a father so afraid of not being able to

provide a dowry for his three daughters that he was contemplating selling them into servitude. The custom of "stuffing our stockings" actually comes from St. Nicholas secretly going into the house of this family and stuffing the stockings of the three daughters with money for their dowries. This custom of gift-giving has since lost a bit of its context as we don't always keep our gifts anonymous, and the gifts we do give aren't always given to address a real need.

I don't know how many of you might feel the same way, but gifts sometimes are an uncomfortable thing to receive. Sometimes receiving a gift feels like a transaction, a buying of respect, a substitute for something lacking in an incomplete relationship. Sometimes the generosity of the gift is overwhelming in its grandiosity, the value or nature of it missing a real need we might have. I say all this not to tear down the custom of gift-giving this Christmas, but to pose an alternative in our generosity, to point out other needs we could be addressing for one another, other opportunities of Christian love and generosity that

do not involve a merely material exchange.

There is popular literature on giving and how we show our love or appreciation for one another: *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman. Maybe you've heard of it, maybe you are as skeptical as I am of it, but I think there's some useful concepts within the book that we can draw from. This pop-psychology, self-help book postulates that there are five ways in which we convey love to one another; this way we convey love is not merely in romantic contexts, but is perhaps rooted in how you and I were brought up in how love was expressed in our families. Gary Chapman proposes these as the five love-languages: gift-giving, physical touch, acts of service, words of affirmation, and quality time. The theory holds that we all have our preferred means of giving and receiving love through one of the five aforementioned methods.

Though I find limitations with gift-giving and physical touch as love languages, I can appreciate what each love language attempts to do: address a need, and identify in what ways we convey our care for one another. Though physical touch is a love language reserved to our spouse,



we might be able to expand the term to include our physical and mental presence, our ability to "be with" someone using not merely our bodies and face, but our ears and eyes in listening. Despite my initial critique of gift-giving, I believe if the gift is genuine in its intention to address a financial need out of Christian love, or perhaps is a gift that is created that required thought and intention to produce, then this love language might be better received by those who are leery to receive gifts.

But as we consider "what we are going to give" to one another this year, can we not consider the other love languages as a possibility, as something sufficient in of itself? Can we do some act of service for someone who requires a bit of help, a donation of our time to someone who has a busy schedule or plate full of chores? Can we be intentional about our thoughts and feelings for those we care about, putting them down in a letter and giving a gift of our words that will "affirm" or "encourage" another? Or—my personal favorite—can we donate our quality time, our very presence and listening ear, enjoy the com-

pany of another, listen to the highs and lows of their life, and transcend a small-talk dialog into a deep and meaningful conversation?

I'll be clear again: I'm not advocating we do away with gift-giving. But in the spirit of St. Nicholas where this custom comes from, I wonder if we can save gift-giving for addressing the needs of others. Or perhaps we could give towards an organization that our loved one cares about (ie Facebook Birthday Fundraisers, Heifer International, the Church, etc).

In the meantime, as we rethink our own financial anxieties about this time of year, we could contemplate other means of giving to those we care about, other love languages that might be far more appreciated. Could we give the gift of our presence to someone who is lonely or missing us, a heart-felt letter or e-mail to someone who had gone unappreciated, our service towards another who could benefit from our labor or talents, or our precious time and attention. In order to do any of these four other expressions of love, I think we need to make an effort to let each other know that there's other ways of showing our appreciation, love, and care for one another.

In addition to all this, as we rethink ways we can give our love and charity to one another, we cannot forget

to put the Lord on our Christmas list. Not only can we be gracious to Christ like the Magi, but we can embody these other four love languages to Christ as well. We can give our physical presence to God by making an effort to make more church services during this season—especially as the Tampa Bay Churches band together for “40 Liturgies” this year leading up to Christmas. We can give our quality time and words to God by setting aside and budgeting our time towards prayer. We can labor for the Lord, finding a charity/shelter/soup kitchen to volunteer at this season. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but rather a springboard of ideas in what ways we can make sure to include Christ in our Christmas lists, in our Christmas charity.

This Christmas, let us be gracious like St. Nicholas. But let us also show the expression of the Shepherds who simply “showed up” giving their time and presence to be with Jesus Christ and His Family. Let us be generous with our words like the angels who sang a chorus glorifying God, a song of encouragement and affirmation to humanity of the Savior's birth. Let us give our labor like the honorable Joseph who led the Lord and His Mother to safety.

May we all look towards new ways of being gracious, loving, and caring this Christmas.

A Note on “Re-Baptism” and Speaking with Your Parish Priest

By Fr. Stavros

It has come to my attention that a few of our parishioners have encouraged people of this community, specifically those who have converted to Orthodoxy through the sacrament of Chrismation, to go to a monastery and be “rebaptized”. There is no such thing as “re-baptism.” A person is either baptized or they are not. If a person has been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, (The Holy Trinity is defined as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, though there are churches that define it as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer or in some other way. In the Orthodox Church, the Holy Trinity is defined as Father, Son and Holy Spirit) they are baptized. We recognize baptisms that are done in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, in other words baptisms done in the Roman Catholic Church, and many mainline Protestant Churches. A baptism in the Unitarian church, in other words a baptism that was not done in the name of the Holy Trinity, is not considered a baptism. A person “baptized” in the Unitarian Church is considered not baptized. A person “baptized” in the Mormon church is not considered baptized. So, people in these churches would need to be baptized, not re-baptized. As for people who were not baptized by immersion, i.e. they were baptized by sprinkling water on them, if this was done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it is considered a valid baptism. Because it is not immersion that makes one baptized, but the invocation of the Holy Trinity that makes it a valid baptism. Several times in my ministry, I have baptized babies in the hospital with an eyedropper, who we didn't think were going to live. Some of those babies did not survive. They died as baptized Christians. Some of those babies lived, and were later Chrismated Orthodox. They were not re-baptized. There is no such thing as rebaptism.

If anyone (a priest, a monk, or a parishioner) suggests a person



who is baptized be baptized again, they are wrong. Plain and simple. If someone has suggested to you that you should be rebaptized, please let me know. I'd like to speak with you about this. If someone is reading this message and is suggesting people go to the monastery so they can be rebaptized, please stop. You are creating confusion, and what you are doing is wrong according to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, the jurisdiction to which St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church and its parishioners belong.

Liturgical Schedule for December 2020

Wednesday, December 2	St. Porphyrios Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Paraklesis Service of Supplication 5:00 p.m. (Please note earlier starting time)
Friday, December 4	St. Barbara/St. John of Damascus Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Saturday, December 5	St. Savas the Sanctified Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Sunday, December 6	St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Monday, December 7	St. Ambrosios Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Wednesday, December 9	St. Anna, Mother of the Theotokos Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Paraklesis Service of Supplication 6:00 p.m.
Saturday, December 12	St. Spyridon the Hierarch Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Sunday, December 13	11th Sunday of Luke Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Tuesday, December 15	St. Eleftherios Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Wednesday, December 16	Christmas Candlelight Service 6:00 p.m.
Saturday, December 19	St. Sabbas the Sanctified Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Sunday, December 20	10th Sunday of Luke Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Tuesday, December 22	St. Anastasia Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Day of Prayer 11:00 a.m. - 9:00 p.m.
Wednesday, December 23	Royal Hours of Nativity 6:00 p.m.
Thursday, December 24	Great Vespers 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great 9:30-11:00 a.m. The Nativity of Christ Orthros 5:30 p.m. Doxology 6:45 p.m. Divine Liturgy 7:00 p.m.
Sunday, December 27	St. Stephen the First Martyr Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Monday, December 28	20,000 Martyrs of Nicomedia Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Wednesday, December 30	St. Anysia Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Paraklesis Service of Supplication 6:00 p.m.

Friday, January 1, 2021	St. Basil the Great/New Year's Day Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Sunday, January 3	Sunday before Epiphany Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Monday, January 4	Royal Hours of Epiphany 9:30-11:00 a.m.
Tuesday, January 5	Eve of Epiphany Vespers Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great 9:00 a.m. Blessing of the Waters 10:15 a.m.
Wednesday, January 6	Epiphany Divine Liturgy at St. Nicholas Cathedral in Tarpon Springs Great Vespers for Parish Feastday of St. John the Baptist 6:30 p.m.
Thursday, January 7	St. John the Baptist Orthros 8:30 a.m. Divine Liturgy 9:30 a.m.

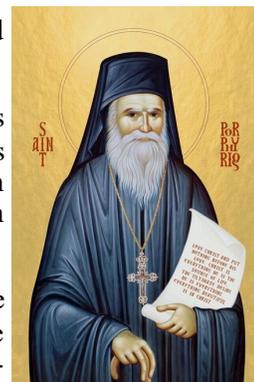
Liturgical Notes for December 2020

Divine Liturgy on Saturdays of December - In order to facilitate people being able to worship on a weekly basis, we will celebrate Divine Liturgy on all the Saturdays of December, with the exception of December 26. We will also not have Divine Liturgy on Saturday, January 2

Paraklesis to be celebrated every Week - We will continue to celebrate Paraklesis every week until the end of this crisis, at which point a Holy Unction service will be offered to mark the end of this crisis. In December, Paraklesis will be offered as follows: Wednesday, December 2 at 5:00 p.m.; Wednesday, December 9 at 6:00 p.m. and Wednesday, December 30 at 6:00 p.m. The Christmas Candelight Service will be Wednesday, December 16 at 6:00 p.m. The Royal Hours of the Nativity will be Wednesday, December 23 at 9:30 a.m.

**Should the restrictions change in December and allow for all of us to worship together, the Saturday and Wednesday services will be discontinued.

Wednesday, December 2 – St. Porphyrios of Kafsokalivia St. Porphyrios was a monk on Mount Athos known for his gifts of spiritual discernment. He lived from 1906-1991, and was canonized in 2013. He was alive in most of our lifetimes. There have been several saints that have been canonized in recent years. As a new practice at St. John, we will celebrate one of these modern saints each year on his or her feastday, and for this year, it will be St. Porphyrios.



Friday, December 4 - St. Barbara and St. John of Damascus We celebrate the feastday of St. Barbara, a martyr for Christ who was martyred by her own father. On the same day, we celebrate the feastday of St. John of Damascus, a hymnographer of the church who also was a strong defender of iconography.

Saturday, December 5 – St. Savas the Sanctified Saint Savas lived from 439-532 and was one of the leading monastics of his era. He founded monasteries, worked miracles, had great discernment, and did extensive writing on monastic rules of life.



Sunday, December 6 - St. Nicholas We celebrate the feast of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of travelers. The tradition of Santa Claus is derived from St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, who was giving gifts to those less fortunate.

Monday, December 7 – St. Ambrosios St. Ambrosios lived from 340-397. He was the Bishop of Milan and one of the most influential figures of the fourth century.

Wednesday, December 9 - St. Anna This feastday commemorates the mother of the Theotokos, and also the conception of the Theotokos, as it falls 9 months before the feast of her Nativity (September 8).

Saturday, December 12 - St. Spyridon

St. Spyridon was Bishop of Trimythous. Tradition is that each year, the remains of St. Spyridon are opened to reveal that his shoes have been worn out. They are changed each year. St. Spyridon continues to intercede for the souls of the faithful, wandering over the earth to do so.

Tuesday, December 15 - St. Eleftherios St. Eleftherios was a priest-martyr in the 2nd century of the church.

Wednesday, December 16—Candlelight Service in Preparation for the Nativity 6:00

-7:30 p.m. There is a “canon” (a set of hymns) in preparation for the Nativity. It is very similar in order to the Paraklesis Service that we celebrate in August, except that the hymns are dedicated to the Feast of the Nativity and not to the Virgin Mary, though she is still mentioned prominently in many of them. The service includes the opportunity to pray for people by name, so bring your names and the names of anyone you know who needs prayer to this service. Also, included in this service will be an opportunity to pray for those who have passed away this year. At the end of the service, a Trisagion service will be chanted for all those who have passed away this year. If you know someone who can use some prayer this Nativity, or someone who has lost a loved one, or someone who is sad, please invite them to this service. Allow us to pray for them and their loved ones. The service will be done entirely in English. It will last an hour. It will be done only by candlelight. There will be no Communion at the service. So the challenges of a normal Sunday liturgy—length, no intercommunion, use of Greek—that challenge non-Orthodox visitors to our church will not be present. This is a wonderful opportunity there is in the year to invite non-Orthodox friends to our church.

Tuesday, December 22 – St. Anastasia St. Anastasia lived in the late third century and was martyred on December 25, 304. She is the patron saint of pharmacists, as she was gifted in making medicines, which she distributed to those who were ill.

Tuesday, December 22 - Day of Prayer We’re going to have a “Day of Prayer” in our church on Tuesday, December 22, from 11:00 a.m. (after the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy) until 9:00 p.m. for people to stop in and pray. Fr. Stavros, Charlie and Alex (at least one of them at all times) will be in the church if you need someone to pray for you. If you haven’t been to church in a while and would like to stop in during the Christmas week, or if life is moving too fast and you just want to slow down for a few hours and come sit in the church, this day is for you.

Wednesday, December 23 - Royal Hours of Christmas 9:30-11:00 a.m.

The service of the Royal Hours consists of Prayers, Hymns, Psalms and Old Testament prophecies that foretell the coming of Christ on Christmas. Also read are the Gospel passages of the feast of Christmas. There is no Holy Communion at this service. Rather, it is a service of quiet meditation in anticipation of the Nativity. We will hold this service from 9:30-11:00 a.m. on Wednesday, December 23. We will celebrate the entire service by candlelight. This will be a wonderful and peaceful way to usher in the Feast of the Nativity. The service will be conducted in English.

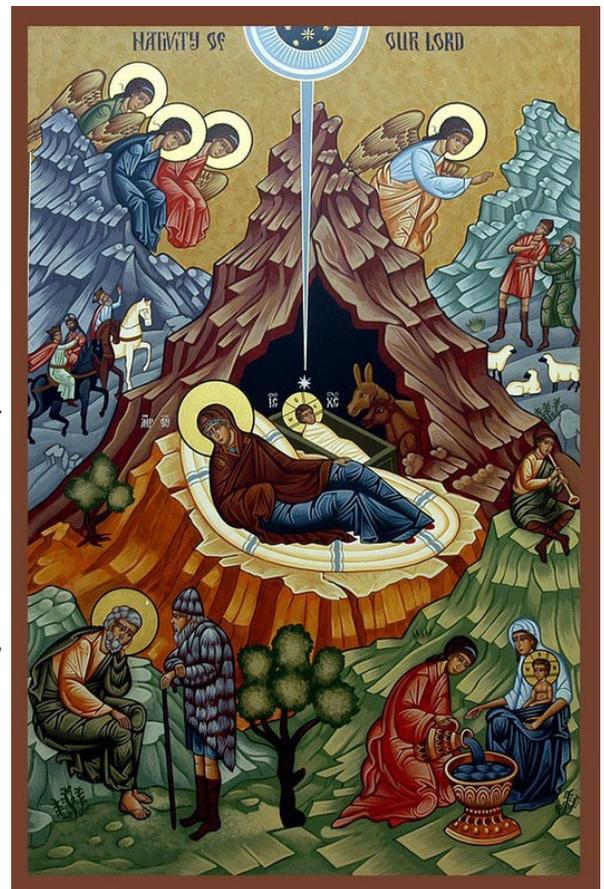
Services for the Nativity - December 24 There are traditionally two Divine Liturgies celebrated in connection with the feasts of Christmas, Epiphany, and Pascha. On December 24, in the morning, we will celebrate the Great Vespers of Christmas followed by the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great. The Vespers of Christmas includes Old Testament Prophecy Readings. It is hoped that those with young children and those who do not drive at night will take advantage of this morning Liturgy, which will be celebrated on December 24 with Vespers at 8:45 a.m. and Divine Liturgy from 9:30-11:00 a.m.

On the evening of the 24th, the church will be open for a time of silent prayer beginning at 5:00 p.m. Orthros will be celebrated at 5:30 p.m., followed by the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom at 7:00 p.m. From 5:00-6:45 p.m., the church will be illumined only by candlelight. The Feast of the Nativity marks the only time in human history that the night became brighter than day with the appearance of the multitude of angels. If you wish, come to church at 5:00 p.m. and you’ll be here for sunset, when day becomes night. However, be here at 6:45 p.m., to hear the Doxology, the hymn the angels sang that first Christmas, as night becomes day. Many of you have made a tradition of coming to church for this vigil of prayer and the Orthros and Liturgy and many people who have done so have commented to me how powerful the celebration of Christmas was for them.

Monday, December 28 – 20,000 Martyrs of Nicomedia

20,000 Martyrs of Nicomedia refers to victims of persecution of Christians in Turkey by the Roman Emperors Diocletian and Maximian in the early 4th Century, including a church that was burned down on Christmas Day while filled with hundreds of Christians.

Wednesday, December 30 - St. Anysia St. Anysia was martyred in Thessaloniki in the year 304. Her relics are interred in the altar table of our church.



O Come Let Us Adore Him!



We hope you are enjoying your O Come Let Us Adore Him! gift bag, filled with items to help prepare you for the upcoming celebration of the Birth of Christ! Included are some resources to help guide your spiritual path during this season – the daily reflection book, Let All Creation Rejoice, a guidebook of prayers and daily scriptures and journaling space, a CD of our choir singing hymns and carols. There are seasonal items for you to use in your home – an ornament, a votive candle, a special letter to read on Christmas morning. And there are some useful, fun promotional items for you to proudly show off and use year round, too – a magnet, sticker, reusable tote bag – all with our updated St. John logo!

Our Welcome Ministry is so thankful for the many volunteers and efforts of all our ministry heads to offer this gift from our parish family.

Please let the office know if you did not receive a bag, or you'd like an extra one to share with a family member, friend neighbor, coworker!

During this season of the Nativity Fast, may we grow in Christ's love, both individually and as a community! O Come Let Us Adore Him!



Thank you to Basileios and Anna Roussos for this amazing photo of all the contents of the O Come Let Us Adore Him! Gift Bag. Please send your photos, as well as any thoughts you have about this project and how it's affecting your spiritual life to the church office by December 10 at office@stjohntpa.org.

St. John the Baptist Community News

Parish Registry

Baptism—Anastasia Limberatos, daughter of Alex and Alexandra Limberatos, was baptized on Sunday, October 11. Nicholas and Kelsey Birbilis were the Godparents. Na Sas Zisi!

Baptism—Maximus Wolf Harvie, son of Evan Harvie and Britany Wolf, was baptized on Sunday, October 25. Andres and Krista Harvie were the Godparents. Na Sas Zisi!

Baptism—Lula Kathryn Scott, daughter of John and Jennifer (Klimis) Scott, was baptized on Saturday, November 7. Christina Klimis was the Godmother. Na Sas Zisi!

Chrismation—Anthony Heilman was Chrismated on Sunday, October 18. Alex Limberatos was the sponsor. Congratulations!

Chrismation—Trevor (Vladimir) Wahler was Chrismated on Sunday, November 1. Charlie Hambos was the sponsor. Congratulations!

Family of Four Received into the Church—The Kent Family was brought into the church on Saturday, October 31. Thomas, his wife Jennifer (Anastasia) and their daughter Allison (Mary), were Chrismated. Chris Kyros was the sponsor for Thomas, Anastasia Stonestreet was the sponsor for Jennifer, and Sophia Stonestreet was the sponsor for Allison. The Kent's daughter Miriam was baptized. Katherine Kyros was the Godparent for Miriam. Welcome to our church!

Funeral - Marwan Farah passed away on Sunday, November 1. His funeral service took place on Wednesday, November 4. May his memory be eternal!

Condolences to John Catsikopoulos on the passing of his grandmother, Mary Poniros, on Thursday, November 12. May her memory be eternal!

Funeral - Michael Zak passed away on Wednesday, November 11. His funeral service took place on Saturday, November 21. May his memory be eternal!

Orthodoxy 101 to be held in February 2021 – The tentative plan is to hold Orthodoxy 101 beginning on February 9 for four consecutive Mondays in person. More information to follow.

GOYA – The GOYA Meeting for December will be Sunday, December 6. We will meet from 5:00-7:30 p.m. in the Kourmolis Center. Dinner will be served. Parents are welcome to join us.

Altar Boys - Until the end of the pandemic, we will not be having altar boy groups. We will reconstitute all the groups at the end of the pandemic.

Looking for Ushers - We are looking for more ushers to help at the Divine Services of our church. If you are interested, please email Fr. Stavros at frstav@gmail.com.

Men's Group - The Men's Group will meet on Sunday December 13 at the church at 5:00 p.m. We will walk to a nearby restaurant, eat dinner, then return to the church for discussion, concluding by 7:30 p.m.

Sunday School - We will not be having in person Sunday school classes during December. Instead, we encourage all of our students to participate in the Youth Sunday sermon on Sunday, December 6, go to the HOPE/JOY Movie night on Saturday, December 12, and do the virtual lessons which will be sent each week. We will resume in person Sunday school either on Saturday or Sunday in January. We will be determining that mid-December.

Youth Sunday - Youth Sunday will be Sunday, December 6. Following the Divine Liturgy Fr. Stavros will be offering a sermon to our youth, and any adults who would like to stay. Please stay in church after antithoron, or join via livestream.

College Student Night - We will be having our annual College Student Night on Thursday, December 17, beginning at 6:00 p.m. It will be in person. We will have dinner and discussion. All college students are welcome and encouraged to attend. Please RSVP to Fr. Stavros by December 12 if you plan to attend.

Women's Bible Study will meet in December on Tuesday, December 1, Tuesday, December 8 and MONDAY, December 14 (please note the Monday change for the last week). We are studying the Epistle of St. James. We meet via ZOOM. Fr. Stavros leads this group. If you would like to join our women's Bible study group, please contact Fr. Stavros at frstav@gmail.com and he will add you to the Zoom link. At some point, we will be resuming in person, however when we do, there will continue to be a zoom option. Women's Bible Study will resume in 2021 on Tuesday, January 12.

Monday Night Bible Study with Charlie will be held December 7 and 14 from 6:30-8:30 p.m. If you are not currently part of the Monday night Bible study and would like to join in, please contact Charlie at chambos@stjohntpa.org and he will add you.

12 Disciples Program - In August, we started a program called "The 12 Disciples." There are twelve pages of names that comprise all the members of our parish. Father Stavros prays for all twelve pages of names each week at Paraklesis. The idea for this program is for each "disciple" to take one page of names and pray for that group of people every day. For every twelve "disciples" who sign up, every page of people will be prayed for. We currently have over 60 "disciples" meaning that each person in this community is being prayed for by at least five people every day. If you'd like to join this program and receive a page of people to pray for, please contact either Charlie or Alex.

GriefShare to Host Surviving the Holidays Seminar



Grieving?

Know someone who is?

SURVIVING THE HOLIDAYS

Saturday, December 12 at 12:30 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.

When you are grieving a loved one's death, the holiday season can be especially painful. Our **Surviving the Holidays** seminar helps participants prepare for the holidays and even discover hope for the future.

In person and Zoom. Light refreshments will be available.



www.griefshare.org/holidays

Call or email Donna Hambos today for more information at 813-843-8471 or dhambos@msn.com

Sponsored by St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church

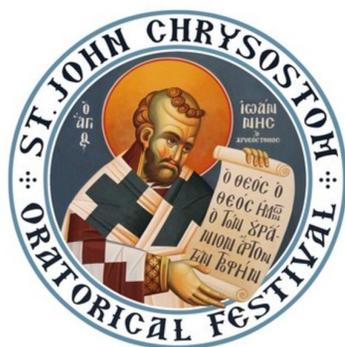
GriefShare meets every Thursday via zoom at 6:30 p.m. - It may be hard for you to feel optimistic about the future right now. If you've lost a spouse, child, family member, or friend, you've probably found there are not many people who understand the deep hurt you feel. This can be a confusing time when you feel isolated and have many questions. "Going to GriefShare feels like having warm arms wrapped around you when you're shivering." GriefShare groups meet weekly to help you face these challenges and move toward rebuilding your life. Each GriefShare session has three distinct elements: Video seminar with experts, support group discussion with focus and personal study and reflection. We will meet from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. initially via zoom on Thursdays in December—December 3 and 10. For more information please contact Donna Hambos at 813-843-8412 or dhambos@msn.com. Books for the program will be provided. Donation for the book suggested but not required. Open to all family and friends. Griefshare remains open enrollment with support towards healing and hope. You can begin at any time. If you attended last semester and missed a day or two, you can come for those days or repeat the whole thing.

Kolyva during the Time of the Pandemic

The Philoptochos will resume making Kolyva for those who wish to have Kolyva at memorial services. Here are the new guidelines:

1. The Kolyva will be made on a small tray that will be given to the family at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy. The Kolyva will not be mixed or handed out in the hall until further notice.
2. Kolyva will be made as requested for 40 day memorials and 1 year memorials only.
3. The cost of the Kolyva will be \$50, with checks made payable to Philoptochos.
4. Kolyva is not necessary for a memorial to be done.
5. Once the pandemic is over, we will again resume making the larger Kolyva for distribution to the community at a cost of \$100.
6. If you wish to have Kolyva offered, please contact the office at least TWO weeks prior to the Memorial service you wish to request.

Participate in the Oratorical Festival



Learning about our Orthodox Christian Faith is one thing. Practicing it is another. Getting up in front of a group of people and teaching them about it is one of the greatest ways to make it real in our life. This is the opportunity that the Oratorical Festival provides for every single participant. Our parish will be participating this year. The 2021 topics are available online. Although we are not having in-person Sunday School classes at the moment, we believe through Zoom and other socially distanced in-person meetings we can make the most of this season and get more people involved than ever. If you or your student is in the 7th thru 12th Grade and are interested in participating, please email Peggy Bradshaw at peggykbradshaw@icloud.com or call her at 727-244-1374 or email Charlie Hambos at chambos@stjohntpa.org or call him at 813-843-8471. We are planning some General Interest Zoom meetings for January 2021.



Hope & Joy

CHRISTMAS MOVIE NIGHT

Please Join Us for an Outdoor Movie Night

The Polar Express

Sat, Dec 12th

5-8p

We will meet in church for a prayer and discussion

Afterward head out side for pizza and goodies

Once dark we will start our movie

Bring your chairs, blankets and your Boxes of Hope

Donations for Metropolitan Ministries

We can't wait to see you!

Please R.S.V.P. by 12/4 to
Zackie Ameres at 813-245-3813 or at
zackiec@yahoo.com

Fifty-Two Verses in Fifty-Two Weeks: The Bible Project

By Fr. Stavros

In January 2019, we began the “Fifty-Two Verses in Fifty-Two Weeks” Bible Challenge, to memorize one Bible verse per week for fifty two weeks. I will provide a verse per week (four or five per month in The Messenger and then repeated weekly in the bulletin). I will choose verses that are meaningful to me. You are welcome to submit verses via email to me as well, as many of you have.

Most of us don’t spend enough time in the Bible. Sadly, some of us don’t spend any time. If you want a challenge, do the following:

- Memorize the verse of the week.
- For a greater challenge, read the entire chapter of the book that the verse comes from.
- For a greater challenge, read the entire book where the verse comes from.

Another challenge to consider is to keep a journal and contemplate the verse each week. Read it, memorize it, and then contemplate it. Allow the Holy Spirit to move your mind and your thoughts and then write down those thoughts and keep them in a journal. If you do one reflection on Scripture each week, you will have the best book that could be. A book written by you, for you, guided by the Holy Spirit, who will guide your thoughts as you read the Scriptures.

Below are verses for the month of December. There is one verse for each week. I have written a few comments below each verse to get your mind going. Don’t let my thoughts be your interpretation. Contemplate the Scripture each week and let it speak to you. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you through your reflection on Scripture.

The verses for December are the weekly verses from the Nativity Fast guidebook. They relate to our “word of the week.”(which appears in bold) My comments below represent “sitting with Scripture” and exercise where one reads Scripture and writes whatever comes to mind. This is the exercise I encourage you to do each month, and especially utilizing the Nativity Fast guidebook and the space it provides to journal or write out thoughts.

December 6 - 12

*You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.
II Corinthians 9:11*

Most people think of generosity only in terms of money. And yes, giving of ourselves in a financial way is certainly part of what it means to be generous. There are other ways we can be just as generous, if not more so, things that people are in great need of that each of us, regardless of how much money we make, are very capable of giving. We can be generous with our time. Just paying attention to someone when they are talking, instead of looking at our phones, is a great way to show generosity. We can be generous with encouragement. All of us need more encouragement. We can be generous with forgiveness, meaning we can be easy when it comes to forgiving those who have wronged us. We can be generous with our talents, when it

comes to helping others. Generosity is a sign of our thanksgiving to God. We show how grateful we are for what God has given us—whether it is money, or just the fact that we are alive and breathing today—by giving generously to others. Here is another thing about generosity. The truly generous person doesn’t wait to be asked to give. They give without being asked. They see a need and they go and fill it.

December 13-19

Sing for joy, o heavens, and exult o earth; break forth, o mountains, into singing; for the Lord has comforted His people, and will have compassion on His afflicted.

Isaiah 49:13

The year 2020 will probably not go in any of our books as the most joyful of years. However, the year was not without any joy! There are small joys that come every day. It might be something as simple as a good meal. I find joy when I work in the yard—the pandemic didn’t change that at all. I find joy from reading the Bible. I get joy from worship, and even from watching worship. With more time inside this year, I found several other churches that I “watch” on youtube. While I may not be actively worshipping (we worship a lot in Tampa), I still enjoy having liturgy on in the background many days as I am working. There are still plenty of joys in marriage and with our children. The joy of a friend’s voice still brings happiness, even on the phone or via zoom. There is joy in our ability to adjust and be creative. And this Christmas, there should be joy—not just because of presents, food and family, but because we again pause to remember Creation bowing its collective self to worship the Creator in its midst. As we read in Isaiah 49:13, the heavens, the earth, and the mountains sing for joy. For the Lord has comforted His people. Indeed He still comforts us, even in the midst of this stressful year.

December 20 - 26

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1

Many times we speak of faith as believing in what we can’t see. Let’s talk about the things we can see. Even though we may see well, what we see is confusing. I can see problems, but I am still confused as to why God allows them. Faith is not just about what we can’t see, but what we can see but can’t understand. Many times I have used the image of the puzzle, that life is like a huge puzzle that covers, for example, our whole church property. If I’m in the church sanctuary, I can’t see that part of the puzzle that is on the soccer field or in the gym. I can only see a very small piece of the puzzle. God has given me (and each of us) a piece of the puzzle to place into the tapestry of humanity, into His plan for salvation for all of us. For some of us, that piece is plain looking. For some of us, it has many colors. But for all of us, our piece is worth something, because without each piece, the puzzle can’t be complete. Faith is when we show up and put our piece in the puzzle, even when we can’t understand why our piece looks the way it does, or when we don’t fully comprehend what the puzzle looks like.

Fifty-Two Verses in Fifty-Two Weeks continued...

December 27 - January 2

I have said this to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. John 16:33

Normally, we think of peace as the absence of conflict. In other words, peace and conflict cannot co-exist. The peace of God is peace that can exist in the midst of conflict. In this verse, which Jesus said shortly before His betrayal and Crucifixion, He told His disciples that “in ME, you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation.” If we reverse these two sentences, it reads “in the world you have tribulation, in Me, you may have peace.” In the world, there will always be tribulation—politics, bad weather (I’m writing this in the middle of Tropical

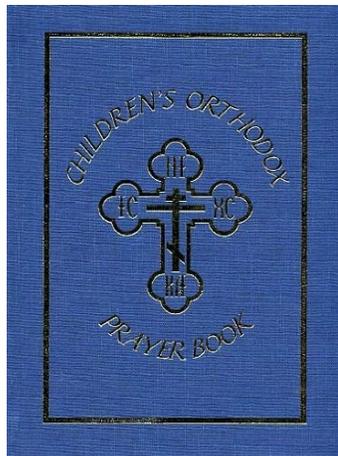
Storm Eta), crime, stress—these are tribulations that come upon us no matter what. Whether we are the greatest saint or the greatest sinner, we are not immune to these kind of tribulations. Add things like illness, job loss, financial struggle, problems in marriage, problems with kids, and the list goes on and on, there is a lot of tribulation in life. In Christ, we can find peace in the midst of conflict. There is a peace that transcends conflict—it doesn’t end conflict but it allows us to rise above conflict. I can’t tell you how many times prayer has brought calm into a situation, when in the midst of stress, the Divine Liturgy has brought relief, or in the midst of a crisis a verse or two from the Bible has brought encouragement. Christ is the peace that comes in the midst of the storm.

Prayer List: *Lord Jesus Christ, Physician of our Souls and Bodies, visit and heal your servants: Andrew Mellon Lynn, Jamie Segrest, Kathy & Andrew Bouzinekis; Anastasia; Amanda, Andrew, Colton, Miranda, Charlotte Elizabeth, Nuha, Nabeel, Michael, Amal, John, Elaine, Olga, Virginia Georgiou, Ron Myer, Toulia Tsaros, Fr. Pat Legato, Nellie Pringle, Yolanda Webb, Angela Bougas, Tony Ekonomou, Ron, Jason Vickers, Rex Garrison, Tina Chakonas, Ann Demas, Alex Martinez, Adriana Martinez, Aaron Martinez, Christina Noel Kouzes Houck, Evangeline Xeroteris, Nichole Ross, Daniel Ross, Daniella Ross, Ashley Henderson, Natalie Henderson, Chris, Debbie, James, Avery, Lily, Jacob, Jesse, Ann, Rosario, Antonia Caffentzis, Alissa, John, Angela, Joey, Christine Scourtes, Steven, Matthew & Family, Phyllis, John Zelatis, Reagan, Peter Zaharis, Alexandra Ferrarolis, Leon & Despina Botham, Cindy Xenick, Mary Ellen Evdemon, Marie Sofia Panagopoulos, Maria Hursey, Chris Vamvakias, John Myer, Mike Trimis, Robert and Alice Stoccardo, John Alexander, Michael Romero, George Hambos, Dean Kondilis and Family, Bill and Nancy Manikas, Patricia Costello, Anastasia Smyrnakis, Ekaterina & Anna Shushaalykova, Dora Koudouna, Ana Mourer, Debbie Phelps, Mary Voykin, David Voykin, Anne Sakellaris, Denise Badrane, Sia Blankenship, Don Payne, Zhana Temelkova, Stanislava Terzieva, James, Jude and all victims of war, terrorism, crime, natural disaster, and all of whom we are unaware.*

Featured Book of the St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church Bookstore:

“Children’s Orthodox Prayer Book”

by All Saints of Russia Orthodox Church



This wonderful little book contains morning prayers including the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, a prayer of St. Macarius the Great, a song to the Most Holy Theotokos, a prayer to your Guardian Angel; prayers during the day including a prayer before lessons, a prayer before eating, a prayer before work; prayers before sleep including a prayer of intercession to the Most Holy Theotokos, a prayer to your Guardian Angel and a prayer asking forgiveness; prayers before Holy Communion; and prayers after Holy Communion.

This color-coordinated book (blue for boys and pink for girls) is beautifully illustrated and would be a perfect gift for a child, grandchild or godchild.

This book is available in the bookstore. We would love to hear from you, particularly what you think of this book after reading it.

P.S. If there is an Orthodox Christian religious item that you would like the bookstore to order, please contact us. We are often able to get a discount as a bookstore.

Brett and Ana Mourer

Stewardship - My Gift to Christ

December is Stewardship Month

"You are the light of the world!" Matthew 5:14

By Fr. Stavros

You should have received Stewardship Materials in the mail in mid-November. We are not going to have a stewardship Sunday this year, since we do not have a full church on Sundays and have used Stewardship Sunday as a way for ALL of us to make our offering on the same day. Rather, we are going to have Stewardship Month, and encourage everyone to send in your stewardship pledge by the end of December.

Please remember a few things when you pledge this year:

1. Your pledge is to Christ, not the church. This is why we don't set a stewardship goal, or have a thermometer which tracks the progress of our stewardship campaign. Because we don't pledge to a goal or a thermometer. We pledge to Christ.
2. Our goal is to make our budget on stewardship, so that we don't have to rely on fundraisers like the Greek Festival (which we couldn't have in 2020) and so that we don't have to nickel-and-dime parishioners, which we don't do, as we no longer pass trays, charge for candles, or ask for special appeals. So, please give as much as you can on stewardship, and know that there aren't going to be other appeals or nickel-and-dime things during the year. We encourage everyone to give as much as they can to stewardship.
3. Don't worry if you have to give less in 2021. We understand the economy has caused loss of income and loss of jobs for many of us. So, give what you can. Some will have to give less. Some, however, can probably give more. Please offer what you can.
4. Stewardship is about giving the first fruits to God, not the leftovers. Faith is giving and when we don't know the outcome, especially when the outcome is uncertain. Unlike other years, your stewardship offering this year will be an act of faith.
5. We are committed to charitable giving. Our charity goal for this coming year is \$36,120, which will set another record. We are committed to being the church, and remember that the top two things a church does are worship and charitable giving.
6. If you are looking for a mantra as you make your stewardship offering, consider this one: "I WILL MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE." It is important that our church community not only make a positive difference in the lives of our parishioners, but in the lives of the greater community that surrounds us. Charitable giving makes a difference. Ministries make a difference. Our pastoral staff, the fact that there are now three full time pastoral staff members—priest and two pastoral assistants—assures that we can now not only hold more services, but that we can offer more pastoral care. Pledge to Christ, and with a spirit that says "I will make a difference."
7. The most important pledge you can make is your pledge of time. This means time to pray daily, time to meditate on Scripture, and time to worship (either in person or online) each week. When you make your pledge, consider how much time you want to devote to your growth in Christ this coming year. Time leads, talent and resources follow the lead of how much time we invest on our salvation.

Year to Year Comparison ~	2020*	2019*
Pledged Year to Date	\$520,330	\$497,796
Received Year to Date	\$480,311	\$427,092
Average Pledge	\$1,417	\$1,438
Median Pledge	\$700	\$800
# of Individual/Families Pledged/Giving	392	372
*YTD as of 11/17/20 & 11/12/19		

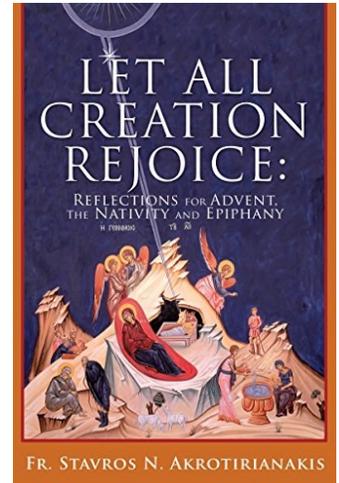
Thank you to all the 2020 Stewards who fulfilled their pledge. Your support is greatly appreciated and is a great blessing. We certainly could not be the CHURCH and Spread the Gospel of Christ without you. May St. John's continue to be a bigger Light of the World in 2021.

“Let All Creation Rejoice” Book Discussion - December 9

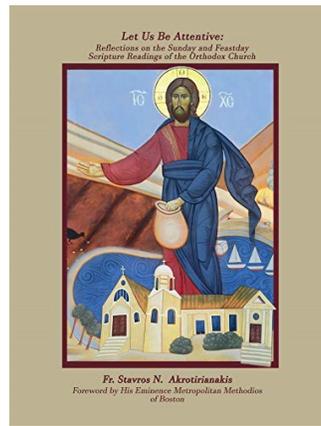
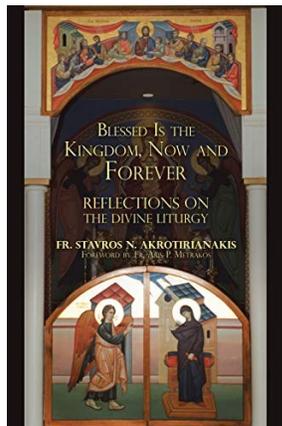
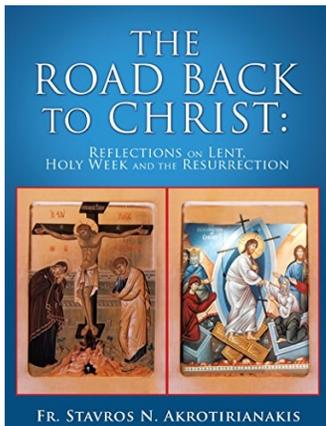
Advent every year begins on November 15 and goes until January 7

Every member of our parish will be receiving a copy of the book “Let All Creation Rejoice.” We encourage you to read this during the 40 days of the Nativity Fast. We will be having a few book discussions on this book for those who care to offer comments or questions.

Our December discussion night will be Wednesday, December 9 at 7:30 p.m. after Paraklesis. You may attend in person if you wish by remaining at church, or you may participate via Zoom. The zoom link will be mailed to everyone.



Father Stavros has also authored three other books that are available both in the bookstore and on-line. They are entitled:



The Road Back to Christ: Reflections on Lent, Holy Week and the Resurrection

Blessed is the Kingdom, Now and Forever: Reflections on the Divine Liturgy

Let us Be Attentive: Reflections on the Sunday and Feastday Scripture Readings of the Orthodox Church

Attention All Youth Workers and Ministry Leaders

Please be aware that the 2021 renewal registration will begin in November of 2020. Many of you already complied with the new GOA guidelines this past fall 2019 and will only have to complete online training and reregister. Others will need to register, undergo a background check and complete the online training. In November, the Youth Protection Committee will e-mail all existing youth workers of their current status and requirements, including the registration form. Within a week or so afterwards, you will receive emails from Praesidium (aka: Armatus Learn to Protect) with links to complete the requirements. Please do so within ten days or the links expire.

Thank you, Catherine Mitseas & Charlie Hambos



December Sunday School Update

The Sunday School staff wishes all of you the best during the 40 days of our Nativity Fast. We hope you appreciate and are using your Nativity Wreath that was created just for our Sunday School families. We pray that this wreath will be used year after year and become a family tradition. Thank you Debbie Nicklow, Maria Xenick, and Vickie Peckham for putting these wreaths together.

It has been a crazy year and at this point our VIRTUAL SUNDAY SCHOOL will continue!!! Of course we wish that we were together in person, but we are trying to provide the best program possible under the circumstances. We truly have missed all of our Sunday School families. Let's all pray that this pandemic will end and we will be together again in church and in Sunday School.

In the meantime we have had IN PERSON SUNDAY SCHOOL in October and November following the Divine Liturgy. Thank you Charlie and Alex for providing these valuable lessons to these smaller groups of Sunday School students. The dates in November were the following:

SATURDAY, November 7: Toddler 2's - Kindergarten

SATURDAY, November 14: 1st - 3rd Graders

SATURDAY, November 21: 4th - 6th Graders

The topics of our Virtual Sunday School for November were SERVING WITH LOVE, ORDER OF THE ANGELS, THE NATIVITY FAST, and CHARITY AND THANKSGIVING. As part of our Serving with Love lesson, we asked our Sunday School students to show their love to our Young at Heart parishioners again, by sending cards and notes to them. They were so grateful to receive these cards about five months ago and it was wonderful to hear that many students received a card in return.

Our virtual lessons include a video, a written lesson, a craft, and a project for families to complete. We have asked our parents to send in photos and/or videos of their children doing this project. We share these photos and videos with our families the following week in a montage format.

We can't thank Jenivieve Elly enough for putting our lessons, videos, and family montage videos together and also the many teachers who have offered to videotape a visual lesson. Thank you Charlie for your lesson on The Order of the Angels and to both you and Alex for recording these videos.

We would like to thank Father Stavros for continuing to create several discussion questions each week geared more for our teens and adults. These thought provoking questions relate to the Holy Gospel lesson each week.

We will continue to have a YOUTH SUNDAY once a month. Alex Limberatos, one of our Pastoral Assistants, presented a lesson after the Divine Liturgy on November 6 for our students who were present as well as for our live-stream watchers.



Above: Pastoral Assistant Alex Limberatos teaching about the roles of the Angels. Bottom left: Kali Skourellos working on her Virtual Sunday School crafts.



Sunday School Calendar

Sunday, December 6

TOPIC: STEWARDSHIP

Video by Heidi Borgeas

Family Project: Talk about or show us the talents God has given YOU.

Sunday, December 13

TOPIC: THE NATIVITY and THE ICON OF THE NATIVITY

Video by Maria Xenick

Family Project: Explain your Nativity set to us from your home.

Sunday, December 20

Watch the Video of last years Christmas Pageant

Family Project: Send Greetings saying, "Christ is Born! Glorify Him! Merry Christmas!"

Sunday, December 27

No Virtual Sunday School – Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

St. John Greek Orthodox Church's Young-At-Heart Ministry

MEETING DATE AND TIME: Our will try to meet on Saturday, December 5 at 11:30 AM instead of the 1st Thursday of December. The Saturday special pandemic liturgy from 10 to 11:30 should be over by then.

Please look for an announcement.

LOCATION: St John Greek Church in the **Kourmolis Hall** and we will also be on a **ZOOM Video Conference for those whom cannot attend.**

Everyone is welcome.

We welcome people of all ages to join our email list as a member or a friend of YAH.

We will continue our YAH Meetings with discussions on the **CHURCHES THAT TOUCHED OUR LIVES**. We were asked to prepare a list of Churches where we; 1) Grew up, 2) Married in, 3) Raised Children, 4) Moved to, 5) Vacationed and 6) visited. In addition, we asked people to share any blessing or miracles that had occurred. It has been indeed a moving experience.

- Last month we were blessed to have Bill and Nancy Manikas share their life's experiences with the Church.
- We will continue with the theme how the "CHURCHES THAT TOUCHED OUR LIVES"

We continue to learn more about our Church Family from the Churches and we attended during our lives.

OUR COMING EVENTS

- We will shift our next YAH meeting to Saturday Dec. 5 at 11:30 a.m.
- We encourage everyone to attend Liturgy Saturday Dec. 5 at 10:00 a.m. in Church
- We will then follow with our YAH meeting sitting socially separated with masks in the Church Hall and continue to use Zoon for those who cannot attend our Meeting starting after 11:30 am on SATURDAY.
- For those whom had not spoken, we encourage you to bring your thoughts and blessing on how "CHURCHES TOUCHED OUR LIVES".

PASSED ACTIVITIES

- Nov. 7 – We held socially distant IN PERSON and Zoom meeting in the Kourmolis Center.
- Aug. 5th, Sept. 3rd & Oct 1st. Our discussions were on the CHURCHES THAT TOUCHED OUR LIVES.
- July 2nd, 2020 – Revisited 60 years ago in the years 1960 to 1969
- March 5th, 2020 - Visited St Michael Greek Orthodox Shrine in Tarpon Springs
- January 2, 2020 – Lunch at the new Psomi Bakery and Restaurant
- December 7, 2019 - Trip to the Show Palace Dinner Theatre featuring Elf the Musical
- October 5, 2019 - Ybor City Museum State Park and lunch at the Soup Stone Grill



For more information,
contact
Michael Trimis, President,
813-784-4872 (vm/t)
TrimisM@gmail.com

Mary Nenos, Vice President
813-508-5553
MaryNenos@gmail.com

Funny Church Signs

Sponsored by the Young at Heart



Prayers of Protection from the Coronavirus

www.goarch.org

A Prayer To Be Offered in the Morning

Lord our God, You who are rich in mercy, and with careful wisdom direct our lives, listen to our prayer, receive our repentance for our sins, bring an end to this new infectious disease, this new epidemic, just as you averted the punishment of your people in the time of David the King. You who are the Physician of our souls and bodies, grant restored health to those who have been seized by this illness, raising them from their bed of suffering, so that they might glorify You, O merciful Savior, and preserve in health those who have not been infected. By your grace, Lord, bless, strengthen, and preserve, all those who out of love and sacrifice care for the sick, either in their homes or in the hospitals. Remove all sickness and suffering from your people, and teach us to value life and health as gifts from You. Give us Your peace, O God, and fill our hearts with unflinching faith in Your protection, hope in Your help, and love for You and our neighbor. For Yours it is to have mercy on us and save us, O our God, and to You we ascribe glory: to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever, to the ages of ages. Amen.

A Prayer To Be Offered in the Evening

Lord Jesus Christ our God, You traveled through towns and villages “curing every disease and illness.” At Your command, the sick were made well. Come to our aid now, in the midst of the global spread of this virus, that we may experience Your healing love. Heal those O Lord who are suffering with this pandemic's illness. May they regain their strength and health through medical care. Heal us from our fears, which prevent nations from working together and neighbors from helping one another. Heal us from our pride, which can make us claim invulnerability to a disease that knows no borders. Lord Jesus Christ, healer of all and physician of our souls and bodies, stay by our side in this time of uncertainty and sorrow. Be with those who have died from the virus. May they be at rest with You in Your eternal peace. Be with the families of those who are sick or have died. As they worry and grieve, defend them from illness and despair. May they know Your peace. Be with the doctors, nurses, researchers and all medical professionals who seek to heal and help those affected and who put themselves at risk in the process. May they know Your protection and peace. Be with the leaders of all nations. Give them the foresight to act with charity and true concern for the well-being of the people they are meant to serve. Give them the wisdom to choose long-term solutions that will help prepare for or prevent future outbreaks. May they know Your peace, as they work together to achieve it on earth. Whether we are home or abroad, surrounded by many people suffering from this illness or only a few, Lord Jesus Christ, stay with us as we endure and mourn, persist and prepare. In place of our anxiety, give us your peace. For You are the Physician of our souls and bodies Christ our God and to You do we offer glory, thanksgiving and worship together with Your eternal Father and Your all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Another Prayer, To Be Offered At Any Time

O Holy Father, God of unknown, uncreated depth, You are beyond all description and expectation. You are the Creator of all worlds, physical and metaphysical. As You are only love, in love You created everything that truly is. Through Your Son, everything has form and purpose, and through Your Spirit, everything lives and moves back toward You. O Father, we are troubled by this scourge that is infecting Your people around the world. From the ancient Fall away from You, there are many consequences that we cannot begin to understand. As traces of this pestilence are being studied in labs, we shiver at its demonic malevolence for destruction, especially of the frail and the elderly. Our hearts are open to You, loving Father; we come to You as children, meek and lowly. We beg You to help the doctors who work to find a cure. We beg You to help our leaders to put away childish things, to forget political advantage, and to be good stewards of their people. We beg You to help us to be wise ourselves and to care for human life in the least of those around us. We cry out to You as One Who did not send this plague. We cry out to You as One Who only heals and redeems. You did not send this, but we know You can destroy it. So Father, cease this plague, and turn it back to the abyss from which it came. Heal Your people, the humanity of this earth, cleanse us and strengthen us toward You. We are weak, but You are strong, and in our weakness Your strength is revealed. Help us, we beg You, in the Name of Your Son, the Great Physician, Who, together with You and our Comforter, the Holy Spirit, Are due all glory and honor, to the ages of ages. Amen.

Philoptochos Spanakopita and Tiropita Sale

Available for purchase after Liturgy on
December 6, 13 and 20

Spanakopita or Tiropita 28 piece tray
(Appetizer size)
\$30.00

Spanakopita 2 pound tray
\$20.00

There will be a limited number of pitas ordered because of the pandemic and our inability to gauge the demand.

**We will also be selling Vasilopita on
Dec. 20 & 27 for \$10**

For questions and concerns please contact: **Jeanie Nenos @ (813) 451-9116** or **Lisa Alsina @ (813) 728-1094.**

Have questions?

Just need to talk?

Worried? Sad? Happy?

We are here for you.

Fr. Stavros

813-394-1038

Charlie

813-843-8471

Alex

262-370-0586

We love you and we
thank you for all of
your support.

Happy Birthday!

Terri Syros – December 1
Kyleen Papadakis – December 2
Athena Smith – December 2
Barbara Schad – December 4
Christina Matassini – December 6
Jason Owens – December 6
Nicholas Tsongranis – December 6
Athan Owens – December 7
Alexander Roy - December 8
Evangelina Chandler December 9
Ashley Korakis – December 9
Nicholas Akrotirianakis – December 10
Jeffery Edwards – December 10
Andrew Fellios – December 10
John Krinos – December 11
Maryann Rose – December 11
Kenny Kane – December 12
Leonidas Shah – December 13

Zoe Skourellos - December 14
Antonia Costas - December 15
Dorian Setzer-Torres - December 16
Dawn Cyhan - December 18
Helena Karoutsos - December 18
George Soteriou - December 19
Kyra Frey - December 22
Christos Tsetsekas - December 23
Gregory Dimas - December 24
Lacey Richardson - December 25
Melanie Axelrod - December 28
Philip Kane - December 28
Constantine Ameres - December 30
Lucia Yohai - December 31

If we missed someone or if we need to know about a birthday,
please call or email the office to let us know at
office@stjohntpa.org.

Opt-in on *The Messenger* - In an effort to be more environmentally conscious, we will be mailing *The Messenger* **ONLY** to those who ask. If you wish to receive *The Messenger* by mail, you certainly may. We just ask that you indicate on your stewardship form, or let the office know, that you wish to receive *The Messenger* by mail. We will no longer be mailing *The Messenger* unless you ask us to.

Please do your best to support local businesses in general, and of our parishioners in particular.

Below, please find a list of small business owned and/or operated by our parishioners.

ABC PIZZA

(Owned by Anthony and Carole Fotopoulos)
1242 WEST HILLSBOROUGH AVE. TAMPA
(813) 237-3324 Take Out Only

Accustar Accounting Inc.

Fran Prokos, Founder and CEO
Tax Preparation, Business and Personal
Accounting, CFO services, Business Consulting, Business Start Ups.
Working from Home Office during Covid 19
Direct: 727-510-7378
Office: 813-886-4644
Fax: 813-888-8097
AccustarTax@gmail.com/AccustarTax@aol.com

AlexRoyEvents Music Entertainment.

Email alexroyevents@gmail.com
Ph. 813-455-2461 Website:www.djalexroy.com
Facebook: Alexandros Roy
Instagram : @djalexroy
Live Streams on Facebook and Instagram daily.

Bavaros

514 N Franklin St Downtown Tampa
813-868-4440 Bavarospizza.com
Tues-Sat 11-9pm
We offer Uber and Bitesquad for delivery and curbside pickup with call ahead ordering/payment.

Bradenton Flower Shop

(Owned by Maria Geis)
5262 East St Rd 64
Bradenton FL, 34208
941-727-4111 www.bradentonflowershop.com
bradentonflowers@gmail.com
We are taking online and phone orders for curb side pickup and no contact delivery.

Peggy Bradshaw

https://peggybradshaw.floify.com/
(727) 244-1374
Branch Manager of Van Dyk Mortgage South Tampa
3502 Henderson Blvd. Tampa, FL

George S. Chagaris, CPA, P.A.

2901 W. Busch Blvd., Ste. 405
Tampa, FL 33618-4582
(p): (813) 282-1990 e-mail: GChagarisCPA@aol.com

Homeschool Educational Resources & Usborne Books Consultant

Jenivieve Elly Jenivieve@homeschooleducationalresources.com
https://www.homeschooleducationalresources.com/
https://n10680.myubam.com/1753738
My homeschool advocacy website provides encouragement, materials, free lessons plans, and research to empower current and potential homeschooling families. As a former teacher, it's my mission to support those interested in the journey. I also offer homeschool consulting and mentoring services. Usborne Books are quality, engaging, and educational books. They are a favorite in our home and pair well with homeschool education.

John Demas - Classical Guitarist - Greek Bouzouki

813.240.5199
https://sites.google.com/site/livemusicintampa/
Instagram:https://www.instagram.com/john.demas.music/
https://sites.google.com/site/johndemasthemeoproject/

EVOS South Tampa

For other locations near you visit evos.com
Open 7 days for lunch and dinner
Order Delivery: UberEats-EVOS or evos.com

Order Takeout: EVOS/Toast app or evos.com
Text/email an EVOS gift card: EVOS eGift Cards
EVOS is locally owned and operated by the Crassas family.

Alexandra Fitos

Weichert Yates and Associates
Cell phone 813-943-6464
I am a realtor specializing in residential and commercial sales in Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco counties. I am currently working remotely Via virtual consulting and appointments.

JoAnn Hartung

Realtor with Fazzini Group at REMAX Realtec
Residential agent specializing in Pinellas County
727-432-0228

Markissia Touliatos Portraits and Other Fine Art

www.markissia.com
markissiat@gmail.com
727-560-8161
I am a freelance artist working from home in my own studio. I specialize in corporate and private original oil painted portraits. I do art restoration as well. I work from photographs that can be emailed to me.

Qvita Health and Wellness

Primary Care and Cosmetic Services
Peggy Demetriou, FNP, APRN-BC
2734 Windguard Circle, suite 101
Wesley Chapel, FL 33544
813-501-4130 www.qvitahealthandwellness.com

Retina Vitreous Associates of Florida

(Dr. Karina Findlay)
multiple offices throughout Tampa Bay
retinavitreous.com
(813)987-2000
Open 8:00-5:00 M-F with on call physicians nights and week-ends Retinal care and urgent ocular needs

Robinson Essentials -Young Living Essential Oils

text: 813-278-7450
www.TanyaRobinsonEssentials.com
Products for immune support, emotional support, and various other things

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John P. Zelatis
Accounting, Bookkeeping, Payroll, Taxes Back Office Support
15459 Martinmeadow Drive. Lithia, FL 33547
P: (813) 654-5144 F: (813) 433-2516 C:(813) 727-2271
jzelatis@zomesa.com www.zomesa.com

Take Advantage of the Parish Assistance Program

St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church is excited to share that, beginning May 1st, we will be offering a Parish Assistance Program, PAP, with BayCare Behavioral Health. The PAP program will provide our parishioners access to free and confidential counseling services - offering additional support when life's challenges become overwhelming. The PAP utilizes a network of faith-based providers and are sensitive to the values and beliefs of those they serve and provide compassionate care to children, adults, parents, and seniors.

Parishioners can contact BayCare to request up to three free and confidential counseling sessions from a licensed mental health professional. The BayCare helpline, 800-878-5470, is answered 24/7 by mental health professionals. Many BayCare therapists are also offering telephonic and virtual counseling sessions to help parishioners maintain their emotional wellbeing during these trying times.

Through BayCare Behavioral Health, parishes enrolled in this program allow access to services for their parishioners who are suffering from emotional turmoil that results from the challenges of everyday life which span a lifetime. The BayCare network of providers understand the importance of compassionate care and are sensitive to the values and beliefs of those they serve.

You can get more information on the BayCare Behavioral Health Community Services Program on their website at: <https://baycare.org/services/behavioral-health/our-specialties/community-health-services>

Help is available for life issues including:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Family discord
- Marital problems
- Substance abuse issues
- Behavioral issues



BayCare
Behavioral Health

Thank You to all of Our Friends!

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Friends of St. John the Baptist - Some of you who receive *The Messenger* do not live in the Tampa Bay area or are members of other Greek Orthodox parishes. We would like to ask for your support of our parish by being a "Friend of St. John the Baptist." Your contribution as a "Friend" will help offset the cost of mailing *The Messenger*, among other things. Being a "friend" does not make one a steward of St. John the Baptist or afford membership rights and responsibilities, but gives one who is a member elsewhere, an opportunity to make a gesture of financial support to our parish.

Thank you for your consideration of our parish.

Friend of St. John the Baptist:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

I wish to become a Friend of St. John the Baptist. I am enclosing a contribution in the amount of:

_____ \$50 _____ \$100 _____ \$200 _____ Other

Please mail this form and check to: St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church
2418 W. Swann Ave Tampa, FL 33609.

Our Charity Dollars at Work

As discussed in Father's Message, one of the charities we support is Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry (OCPM). Below is a testimony of someone who is receiving help from OCPM, our charity dollars at work.

Susan is a sister in Christ who is serving time in a state prison in Texas.

She shares, *"I used to dream about getting paroled— what I would eat first and finally getting a good night's sleep. Now I dream of finally hearing the Divine Liturgy, experiencing the Mystery of the Eucharist...I pray for my Baptism and Chrismation."*

Susan faced a serious reality check when she came to prison. She wondered what had been missing in her life that brought her there and she began searching for deeper meaning and truth.

"Through the nightmare of coming to prison I held firm to my faith. There are many believers here, but prison is not God's house; it's His battlefield. Every day I cried out in hopelessness and despair. I did not yet know how to pray but God was guiding me," Susan wrote.

Susan saw emptiness in Protestant ministry programs and was desperate to find her path. She learned Biblical Greek in order to study the original New Testament text. While she could now read the scriptures in two languages, she realized she still needed help understanding them.

"I remember well the prayers to the Lord, in need of someone to help guide me. God loved me enough to answer my prayers by sending me the Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry. They helped unfold the layers of the true and ancient Faith. In doing so, they unfolded all the hurt and broken layers of my spirit in order for me to truly be healed by God."

"This journey gave me the confidence and faith in myself to go back to college; I will graduate and be a certified Paralegal this year, a career I plan to pursue when I make parole, if that is where God leads me."



As an agency of the Assembly of Orthodox Bishops, we put into action Christ's commandment to 'visit Him' in prison (Matthew 25:36) through the direct support of individuals like you.

We ask that you please keep people such as Susan in your prayers. Life-transforming events like this occur every day as Christ is always there for those souls incarcerated in the darkness of prisons and jails.

Impact of OCPM in 2020

In the midst of this crisis, from January - October 2020, OCPM can report:

- Mail & Letters Sent: **11,245**
- Packages of Spiritual Materials Sent: **655**
- Catechism Study Guides Sent: **291**
- Icons Sent: **9,743**
- Postcards/Weekly Lectures Sent: **10,424**
- Bibles & Books Sent: **897**

Interested in Joining the Prayer Team?

Over **2799** people have! The Prayer Team is a daily message that Father Stavros has been writing for more than 5.5 years! Each day, a scripture verse, a reflection written by Father, and a prayer are emailed to the Prayer Team via Constant Contact. If you would like to join the Prayer Team, please email Alex at alex@stjohntpa.org and ask him to add you. If you receive the daily emails already and want to add a friend, please email Charlie or follow the link at the bottom of the daily emails to do so. If you want to forward to a friend, please use the "forward to a friend" option. Also, make sure prayerteam365@gmail.com has been added to your contacts so that these emails stay in your Inbox rather than going to the Junk or Spam folders.

**The Prayer Team has a new dedicated website: PrayerTeam365.com
Check it out! Search by topic and grow in your faith today!**

Has Your Family Returned to Church Yet?

By Brittany Ann (from Equipping Godly Women)

Yesterday, our family went back to church for the first time since the quarantine started.

Honestly, I had no idea what to expect.

What would be different? What would be the same? Would we even be able to go, or would we be turned away at the door? Would the church be empty or packed? Would people be super cautious about social distancing, or would they all throw caution to the wind and not even bother wearing masks?

I don't like going into uncomfortable situations where I don't know what to expect.

And staying home and watching church in our pjs was so easy!

We could all snuggle up on the couch together, laugh when the priest went off on one of his crazy antics, pause and rewind as needed...

We didn't have to get all dressed up and rush out the door, find a parking spot, and find a seat. We just gathered around the TV whenever we were all ready -- whether that was at 10am or 3pm.

Yet, when our family started thinking it might be time to head back, I kept thinking of Hebrews 10:24-25: "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit**

of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Yes, we absolutely can encourage our friends and family outside of church. I hope you find a ton of encouragement here as well. And if you're older, or you or anyone in your family has health concerns, please do stay home and keep yourself safe. Yet, I want to challenge anyone who is in the same boat we were in...

- If you don't have any real "reason" to not go to church (other than the fact that watching it at home is easier or more convenient)
- If your family is low-risk
- If you're going out and about to other places like stores, restaurants, or your kids are in school...

Let's not give up meeting together, okay?

If you need to stay home, stay home. There is NO guilt or shame here.

But when it's time to go back, let's go back. Let's not let our love of ease, convenience, or comfort or our fear of the unknown keep us from being the powerful, Holy-Spirit filled church God has called us to be.

During this month of Christmas, we should be more concerned about His presence than our presents.

CUT OUT THE BELOW CHRISTMAS PRAYER REQUEST AND RETURN IT TO FR. STAVROS.

Christmas Prayer Request

Please write down below names of people you'd like Fr. Stavros to pray for, and any specific needs that these people or you have. Fr. Stavros will pray over these names and needs on December 24. Please place this card in the basket by the baptismal font or mail it to the church office.

IS THIS THE GREATEST CHRISTMAS PAINTING OF ALL TIME?

By Michael Frost

It's called *Scène du massacre des Innocents* ("Scene of the massacre of the Innocents"), and it was painted by the largely overlooked Parisian painter, Léon Cogniet in 1824. Today it hangs in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes.

If it's not the greatest of Christmas paintings, it must be one of the most haunting and affecting.

A terrified mother cowers in a darkened corner, muffling the cries of her small infant, while around her the chaos and horror of Herod's slaughter of the children of Bethlehem rages.

Most painters of this scene turn it into a huge biblical spectacle, making it a revolting tableaux of death and mayhem. But Cogniet focuses our attention on one petrified woman, a mother who knows she is about to lose her child. She envelopes her doomed child, her bare feet revealing how vulnerable they are. There's no way to run. She is cornered.

Wisely, Cogniet doesn't show us the carnage. It is hinted at in the rushing figures in the background. Another mother is seen carrying her own children down the stairs to the left, running for their lives. But Cogniet shows a level of artistic restraint not seen in many depictions of this story. He forces everything to the background in order to draw our attention to the woman's terrified face.

That face!

Staring at... *us!*

It's as if we are one of Herod's agents of death, and we have found her. She glares at us in horror.

Cogniet is making us a party to the massacre of the innocents.

Hear the words of Matthew 2:18, taken, in turn, from the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

At the birth of Jesus, the heavenly host of angels had promised peace on earth and goodwill to all. But in Herod's slaughter of the infant boys of Bethlehem, we see not peace, but evil being unleashed.

At Christmas we celebrate our belief that the king of the universe has come into the world, to wage peace and justice, to bring love and kindness to all. But we forget that the birth of Christ also released a malignant force, the unbridled power of empire, the jealous strength of a threatened monarch, meted out upon the most vulnerable of all people.

Cogniet's Scène du massacre des Innocents asks us to examine ourselves, to consider why this woman would be so scared of us, to examine the ways we have been coopted by the forces of



empire, and sided with the powerful over the weak and the poor.

On September 1, 2004, more than 30 armed Chechen militants stormed a school in Beslan, Russia, barricading 1100 children, teachers and parents in the gymnasium and wiring the room with explosives. What followed was a living hell for those caught in the three-day maelstrom. Denied food and water and forced to stand for hours in the stiflingly hot room, the children began fainting. Their parents and teachers feared they would die.

By the time the Russians stormed the school and the Chechens started setting off explosives, many of the hostages were too weak to flee the carnage. Over 385 people died.

Can you picture the woman in this painting in that gymnasium?

Hers could also be the face of a mother in Aleppo or Homs or Yemen or South Sudan.

Empires continue to clash. The powerful continue to victimize children to secure their political goals. Mothers still cradled doomed children in their arms all around the world.

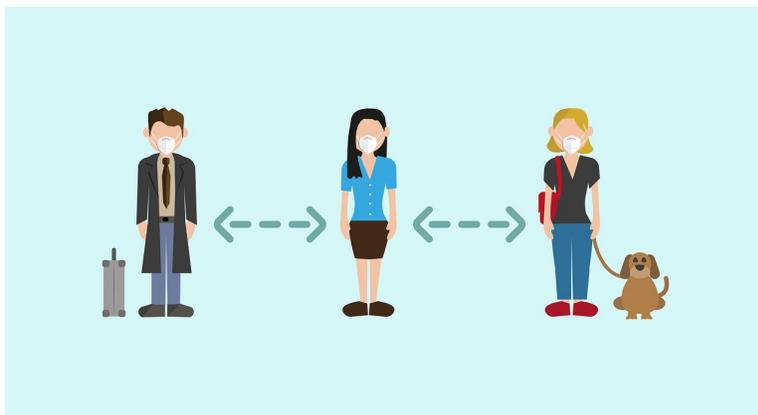
This Christmas, by all means remember the angels and the shepherds and the magi and the little boy-child Jesus in his manger. But also remember this mother and her child on the streets of Bethlehem. And remember that the coming of the Christ was to set in train a revolution of love and justice that would eventually sweep away all tyrants and free all victims and end all wars.

This Christmas, remember that the followers of the Christ are called not to side with empire, but to sit with the terrified, to comfort those who mourn, to join the meek and merciful and pure in heart. And to hunger and thirst for the righteousness only Jesus can bring.

Considerations to Reduce the Risks of Viruses Spreading at Christmas and Holiday Celebrations

As many of us begin to plan for fall and Christmas holiday celebrations, the CDC offers us many suggestions to help protect individuals and their families, friends, and communities from COVID-19. These considerations are meant to supplement—**not replace**—any state of local health and safety laws, rules, and regulations with which holiday gatherings must comply. Please, if you do not feel well do not attend a celebration. Celebrating virtually or with members of your own household poses low risk for spread. In-person gatherings pose varying levels of risk. Event organizers and attendees should consider the risk of virus spread based on event size and use of infection control strategies. There are many factors that contribute to the risk of getting infected or infecting others with the virus that causes COVID-19 at a holiday celebration. In combination, these factors will create various amounts of risk, so it is important to consider them individually and together:

- **The location of the gathering** – Indoor gatherings generally pose more risk than outdoor gatherings. Indoor gatherings with poor ventilation pose more risk than those with good ventilation, such as those with open windows or doors.
- **The duration of the gathering** – Gatherings that last longer pose more risk than shorter gatherings.
- **The number of people at the gathering** – Gatherings with more people pose more risk than gatherings with fewer people. CDC does not have a limit or recommend a specific number of attendees for gatherings. The size of a holiday gathering should be determined based on the ability to reduce or limit contact between attendees, the risk of spread between attendees, and state of local health and safety laws, rules, and regulations.
- **The locations attendees are traveling from** – Gatherings with attendees who are traveling from different places pose a higher risk than gatherings with attendees who live in the same area. Higher levels of COVID-19 cases and community spread in the gathering location, or where attendees are coming from, increase the risk of infection and spread among attendees.
- **The behaviors of attendees prior to the gathering** – Gatherings with attendees who are not adhering to social distancing (staying at least 6 feet apart), mask wearing, hand washing, and other prevention behaviors pose more risk than



gatherings with attendees who are engaging in these preventative behaviors.

- **The behaviors of attendees during the gathering** – Gatherings with more preventive measures in place, such as mask wearing, social distancing, and hand washing, pose less risk than gatherings where fewer or no preventive measures are being implemented.
- **People who are not feeling well, with or exposed to COVID-19** Do not host or participate in any in-person festivities if you or anyone in your household

Has been diagnosed with COVID-19 and has not met their medical professional's criteria to be safe around others

Has symptoms – cough, fever, loss of taste, or any general not feeling well symptoms or is awaiting COVID-19 test results

May have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 within the last 14 days or is at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19

Get your flu vaccine

Gatherings can contribute to the spread of other infectious diseases. Getting your flu shot is an essential part of protecting you and your family's health.

For more information about this topic view the CDC webpage at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/> or contact your healthcare professional.

Diver Applications for Epiphany

All young men of our parish who will be age 16-18 on January 6, 2021, are welcome to apply to dive for the cross at the Epiphany celebration in Tarpon Springs. Applications are available on the website of St. Nicholas Cathedral in Tarpon Springs. Applications are due by 4:00 p.m. on Monday, December 4, no exceptions. They need to be signed by Fr. Stavros so please plan accordingly.



Christmas IQ Quiz

By Dr. Ray Pritchard (Author, Speaker, President of Keep Believing Ministries)

(If you don't do well on this quiz, don't worry, Fr. Stavros got 17 out of 21)

How well do you know the Christmas story?

Most of us know the general outline because we've heard or sung it or watched it being enacted in the Christmas programs that most churches offer during December. We know about the shepherds, the angels, the "Wise Men," the star, the innkeeper, the long journey of Mary and Joseph, the baby in the manger, and we know about the gold, frankincense and myrrh. But how much of what we know is tradition and how much comes from the Bible?

For the last several years David Langerfeld, associate pastor of Harrisburg Baptist Church in Tupelo, has given a Christmas IQ test to his Sunday School class. I should warn you that this is a tough quiz. When I took it, I missed several questions. Try taking it first without checking the Bible to see how well you know the real Christmas story.

Scroll to the end to read the answers (along with a few additional comments from me).

1. Joseph was originally from... (Luke 2:3)

- A. Bethlehem
- B. Nazareth
- C. Hebron
- D. Jerusalem
- E. None of the above

2. What does the Bible say that the innkeeper said to Mary and Joseph? (Luke 2:7)

- A. "There is no room in the inn."
- B. "I have a stable you can use."
- C. "Come back later and I should have some vacancies."
- D. Both A and B
- E. None of the above

3. A manger is a...

- A. Stable for domestic animals
- B. Wooden hay storage bin
- C. Feeding trough
- D. Barn

4. Which animals does the Bible say were present at Jesus' birth?

- A. Cows, sheep, goats
- B. Cows, donkeys, goats
- C. Sheep and goats only
- D. Miscellaneous barnyard animals
- E. None of the above

5. Who saw the star in the east?

- A. Shepherds
- B. Mary and Joseph
- C. Three kings
- D. Both A and C
- E. None of the above

6. According to the Bible, how did Mary and Joseph get to Bethlehem?

- A. Camel
- B. Donkey
- C. Walked
- D. Joseph walked, Mary rode a donkey
- E. Horse-drawn chariot
- F. Who knows?

7. How many angels spoke to the shepherds? (Luke 2:10)

- A. One
- B. Three
- C. Multitude
- D. None of the above

8. What did the angels say/sing? (Luke 2:14)

- A. "Glory to God in the highest, etc."
- B. "Alleluia"
- C. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given"
- D. "Joy the world, the Lord is come"
- E. "Glory to the newborn King"

9. What is a heavenly host?

- A. The angel at the gate of heaven
- B. The angel who serves refreshments in heaven
- C. An angel choir
- D. An angel army
- E. None of the above

10. There was snow that first Christmas...

- A. Only in Bethlehem
- B. All over Israel
- C. Nowhere in Israel
- D. Somewhere in Israel

11. What is frankincense?

- A. A precious metal
- B. A precious fabric
- C. A precious perfume
- D. None of the above

12. In Matthew, what does "wise men" or "Magi" refer to?

- A. Men of the educated class
- B. Eastern kings
- C. Men who studied the stars
- D. Sages

13. What is myrrh?

- A. Middle Eastern money
- B. A drink
- C. An easily shaped metal
- D. A spice used for burying people
- E. None of the above

14. How many wise men came to see Jesus?

- A. 3
- B. 6
- C. 9
- D. 12
- E. We don't know.

15. Where did the wise men find Jesus? (Matthew 2:11)

- A. In a manger
- B. In a stable
- C. In Nazareth
- D. In Saudi Arabia
- E. In a house
- F. None of the above

16. When the wise men found Jesus he was... (Matthew 2:11)
 A. A babe wrapped in swaddling clothes
 B. A young child
 C. A boy in the temple
 D. A grown man
17. The "star in the east" that the wise men followed... (Matthew 2:9)
 A. Stayed in the same place their entire journey
 B. Disappeared and reappeared
 C. Moved ahead of them and stopped over the place where Jesus was
 D. Was just a mirage
 E. None of the above
18. The wise men stopped in Jerusalem... (Matthew 2:2)
 A. To inform Herod about Jesus
 B. To find out where Jesus was
 C. To ask about the star
 D. To buy presents
 E. None of the above
19. Where do we find the Christmas story?
 A. Matthew
 B. Mark
- C. Luke
 D. John
 E. All of the above
 F. Only A and B
 G. Only A and C
 H. Only A, B and C
20. When Joseph found Mary was pregnant, what happened?
 A. They got married
 B. Joseph wanted to break the engagement
 C. Mary left town for three months
 D. A and B
 E. B and C
21. Who told (made) Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem? (Luke 2:1-5)
 A. The angel chorus
 B. Mary's mother
 C. Herod
 D. The shepherds
 E. Caesar Augustus

Here are the answers to David Langerfeld's Christmas IQ Quiz.

I have added my comments to a few answers in italics.

1. A. He worked and lived in Nazareth, but he was returning to Bethlehem - "his own city" (See Luke 2:3).
2. E. The innkeeper didn't "say" anything (See Luke 2:7). The Bible doesn't even mention an "innkeeper" because the "inn" was probably more like a guest room in a house.
3. C. Feeding trough - Interestingly enough, most mangers in New Testament times were made of stone. If you visit Israel today, you can see stone mangers used by Solomon to feed his horses at Megiddo.
4. E. The Bible doesn't say, we just assume that since Jesus was born in a stable that there were various barnyard animals present. This is really a double assumption because the Bible doesn't mention a barn or a stable. However, the feeding trough was used by animals so a stable or barn adjoining a home would be a reasonable inference.
5. E. This is a "trick" question. The "magi" saw the star. However, the Bible doesn't say how many there were and they were not kings, but astronomers (see answer 14).
6. F. Although the modern "pictures" in my Children's Bible show Mary on a donkey with Joseph beside her, the Bible doesn't say!
7. A. Luke 2:10. A semi-trick question because verses 13-14 record what the angel company said as they praised God together. However, only one angel spoke directly to the shepherds.
8. A. Luke 2:14.
9. D. The word means "army" - literally thousands. Now, since there was a "multitude" of the heavenly army" (hosts), there could easily have been from 10,000 - 100,000 angels there that night! No wonder the shepherds were "sore afraid"! I missed this one when I took the quiz because I thought the word "host" referred only to a large multitude, but D is correct. It refers to a heavenly army of angels.
10. D. Another trick question. There is always snow on Mt. Hermon. I thought this was a very good question that I missed when I took the quiz.
11. C. Frankincense was used in the temple worship of the Lord. It represents his deity because he is truly God born in human flesh.
12. C. The word "Magi" literally means "star-gazers". Although there is no Biblical record of exactly who they were or their point of origin, I personally believe that they were descendants of the "wise men" of Babylon. I believe that God, in His great providence, used Daniel (while he was in captivity in Babylon), to teach these men about future events - including the birth of the Savior of the world. Read Daniel 5:11 - Daniel was put in charge of these men! David chose "C. Men who studied the stars" so that's the answer we're going with. But A or D would work also. Who were the magi? They were the professors and philosophers of their day. They were trained in history, religion, prophecy and astronomy. They were also trained in what we would call astrology.
13. D. Herod was buried with over 150 lbs. of Myrrh wrapped in his burial clothes. Myrrh was used in embalming in those days. John 19:39 tells us that Jesus' body was bound in linen wrappings along with 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes. The gift of myrrh pictures his suffering and death.
14. E. We don't know. They were magi, not wise men - but the Bible doesn't give the number. Many people assume that there were three because of the three gifts. However, in ancient times these men usually traveled in caravans of ten to twelve, along with a full entourage for protection.
15. E. Read Matthew 2:11 (see next answer)
16. B. Read Matthew 2:11 When the Shepherds found Jesus (Luke 2), he was a "babe" in a manger. The Greek word used in Luke 2 is for a "newborn baby". However, by the time the Magi appeared, Jesus had been moved from the manger to a house (verse 11) and the Greek word used in Matthew is for "toddler or young child". He was probably somewhere between 12-24 months old. David is totally correct on this point. In many of our Christmas programs, we bring the magi and the shepherds to worship Jesus together at the manger. Nice thought and it makes for a beautiful scene, but it didn't happen that way. The shepherds were there the night Jesus was born. The magi came two years later.
17. C. Read Matthew 2:9 Most people miss this question. The star did not stay stationary over the manger or the house. This verse makes it clear that the star moved "in front" of the magi and guided them till it "stood over where the young child was." I missed this one because I chose "B. The star disappeared and reappeared." I think you can infer that from Matthew 2:9, which can be read to say that they saw the star in the east, knew from prior study that the baby was to be born in Bethlehem, and made the journey across the desert. And then the star reappeared when they journeyed to Bethlehem. That's a possible reading of the text. But "A. Stayed in the same place" is clearly

wrong. So here's the deal. We're going with C. because that's what the quiz says. B. is possible but you get no credit, only my sympathy for missing it with me.

18. B. Read Matthew 2:2. They assumed Herod would know. I find it fascinating that although the scribes knew exactly where the Messiah was to be born (according to Micah 5:2), they were not interested enough to travel the four or five miles to Bethlehem to see for themselves. (Several commenters note that the Magi wouldn't have known Jesus' name. Very true, which is part of what makes this quiz tricky—and so much fun. They were looking for the one born "King of the Jews." They would have found out later that his name was Jesus. But that aside, B is still the only possible answer.)

19. G. Isn't it amazing how God divinely inspired these two gospel writers to write His exact words, but he used their interests and professions to recall different aspects of Jesus' birth. Matthew, a tax collector, records the genealogy of Jesus (used for taxation) and the "magi" - men of means from a foreign country. Luke, a physician, records the pregnancy and birth.

20. E. Joseph wants to "put her away" secretly and Mary left town to see her cousin. Matthew 1:19 and Luke 1:39, 56 The phrasing here is ambiguous. This question is really asking what happened first because A, B and C all happened eventually. D would be correct if you reversed the order. The correct order is probably C, B, A. David's answer is E so that's what I'm going with, but if you prefer C, that works too.

21. E. "There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus... everyone into his own city... " (Luke 2:1-5). This is a tricky question because Caesar Augustus never met Mary and Joseph and almost certainly never even heard of them. He "made" them return to Bethlehem only in the sense that he gave the order for the census, forcing Joseph and Mary to make the difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the latter stages of Mary's pregnancy.

Inspirational Sayings

How are you to know if you are living according to the will of God?

Here is a sign: if you are distressed over anything it means that you have not fully surrendered to God's will, although it may seem to you that you live according to his will.

He who lives according to God's will has no material cares. If he has need of something, he offers himself and the thing he wants to God; and if he does not receive it, he remains as unworried as if he had got what he wanted. +St. Silouan the Athonite

Some informal observations I've made over the years. Maybe you might find these helpful. A perspective on stages of growth towards the measure of Christ: 1. "Why me?" Immaturity, victimhood, self-pity, grudges, emphasis on physical and/or psychological self-preservation, self-adoration, God-blaming, pride, spiritual desolation, hedonism, conditional love, misery (however well-masked.) 2. "Why not me?" Contemplation, coming to oneself, awakening, turning point of repentance, confession, curiosity about God, wavering, a foot in both worlds, potential to grow or to revert, zeal that needs guidance. 3. "Take me instead." Fullness of the measure of Christ, maturity, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, emphasis on spiritual self-preservation, self-emptying love, adoration of Christ, accountability, humility, spiritual healthiness, asceticism, unconditional love, joy. I asked God for strength...and God gave me difficulties to make me strong.

I asked God for wisdom...and God gave me problems to solve.

I asked God for prosperity...and God gave me a brain to work.

I asked God for courage...and God gave me danger to overcome.

I asked God for love...and God gave me troubled people to help.

I asked God for favours...and God gave me opportunities.

We receive nothing we "want" but we receive everything we "need".

DO WE PRAY?

By Fr. Ted Toppses

My brothers and sisters, oftentimes we talk about it say we need to do it , claim we are doing it , but spend very little time actually doing it. Pray without ceasing, brothers and sisters, and you will know God firsthand. Pray without ceasing and your life will be transformed. Pray without ceasing and your life will have true purpose. Pray to be with God and out of love for all people and His still small voice will become an orchestra playing in your heart.

Fr. Ted Toppses is the Proistamenos of St. Catherine Greek Orthodox Church in Braintree, Massachusetts

Daughters of Penelope Keeping Up the Good Work

The Daughters of Penelope, Alcmaeon Chapter #167 of Tampa, FL made a \$700.00 donation to Parents and Children Advance Together (PCAT) Literacy Ministry through the generous support of the St. John GOC community, as a result of the "Buy a Book to Give a Book" fundraiser. Additionally, our chapter was awarded a \$250 'The Bridges Incentive Grant' from the Daughters of Penelope Foundation, Inc. (www.dopfoundationinc.com) to benefit PCAT.

This grant program was established by the foundation to recognize and support chapter and district initiatives of the Daughters of Penelope that build a bridge between our organization and the communities in which our members live - while also promoting the ideals of the Daughters of Penelope of community service, civic responsibility, philanthropy and family excellence.

On November 7, the Sisters of Alcmaeon Chapter #167 participated in the Walk to End Alzheimer's at Carrollwood Village Park and raised \$1000 for the cause.

If you would like to know more about the Daughters of Penelope, you may learn more at the international level by going to www.daughtersofpenelope.org and on the state level by looking at www.DOPD2.org. To become a member of the Tampa, Alcmaeon Chapter #167, please reach out to Katherine Sakkis, Vice President and Membership Chair at ksakkis@sakkisgroup.com.

St. John the Baptist is on Social Media!

Do you Like our Facebook page? Like our page and suggest it to your friends. Announcements are posted frequently so you are up to date with everything going on at St. John the Baptist. You can find our page at [StJohnGOCTampa](https://www.facebook.com/StJohnGOCTampa).

Live Streaming

All of our services are being video recorded and are available on our Livestream page.

To access this page

1. Go to our Church's website: stjohntpa.org,
2. Scroll the mouse over the "Multimedia" tab on the menu bar,
3. Click "View Liturgy,"
4. Then click on the link where it says, "Check out our live stream of the Divine Liturgy here <http://new.livestream.com/accounts/2454446>. **All of the services available to watch at anytime.**

Pictures Go to Flickr.com and search "St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church" or go to www.flickr.com/photos/stjohngoctampa



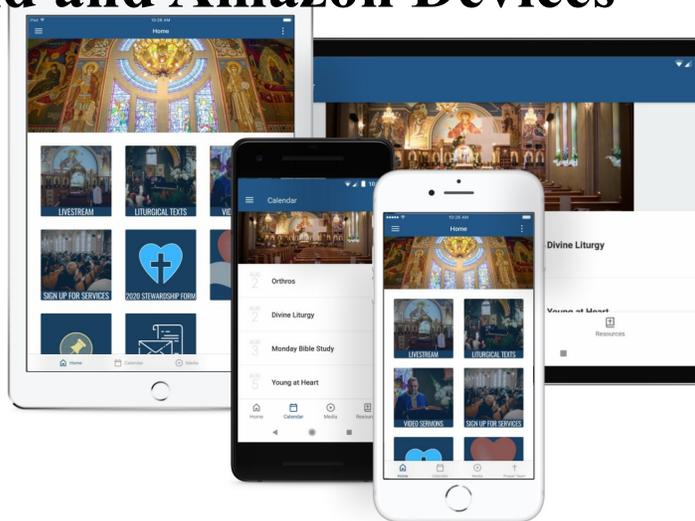
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Χρόνια Πολλά! Happy Nameday!

December 1

ARETI, JACOB, NAOUM,
PHILARETOS, THEOKLITOS

December 2

MEROPI, SOLOMON,

December 3

GLYKERIOS

December 4

BARBARA, DAMASKINOS,
SERAPHIM

December 5

DIOGENES, SAVVAS

December 6

NIKOLETA, NIKOLINA, NIKOLAOS,
NIKOS

December 7

AMVROSIOS

December 8

PATAPIOS

December 9

ANAIS, ANN

December 12

SPIRIDON

December 13

AARON, ABRAHAM, ADAM, ARIS,
DANAE, DAVID, DEBORA, EFSTRATIOS,
ESTHIR, IOUBENALIOS,
IOV, ISAAC, MELHISEDEH, NOAH,
RACHEL, REBECA, RUBEN, SARAH,
SUNDAY OF THE ANCESTORS
OF JESUS CHRIST

December 14

ARRIANOS, LEFKI

December 15

ANTHEA, ELEFThERIOS, SOSSANA,
SYLVIA

December 16

MODESTOS, THEOFANO

December 17

DANIEL, DIONISIS, IAKHOS

December 18

FLOROS, SEBASTIANOS

December 19

AGLAIA, ARIS

December 20

IGNATIOS

December 21

JULIA, THEMISTOKLIS,

December 22

ANASTASIA, NATASA, ZOILOS

December 23

NIFON

December 24

AHMET, EVGENIA

December 25

BALTASAR, BETHLEHEM, CHRISTINA,
CHRISTOS, CHRYSTALLA, EMMANOUELA,
EMMANUEL, GASPARD, HRISAVGI,
HRISOULA, HRYSA, MELHIOR

December 26

CONSTANTIOS, JOSEF, PANAGIOTIS

December 27

MAVRIKIOS, STEPHANOS

December 28

DOMNA, MYGDONIOS, THEOFILI

December 29

BENJAMIN

December 30

ANISIOS, FILETAIROS, GIDEON,
JOSEF

December 31

MELANY

Community Outreach - Holiday Tent

The MetroMin Holiday Tent will be serving 40,000 families this year with an increased need because of Covid-19. This year clients will stay in their car and everyone (clients & volunteers) will follow CDC guidelines (limited occupancy, masks, hand washing stations, etc).

Monday, December 21, 3:30 p.m. - 6:30 p.m. (25 volunteers)

Keep an eye out for an email with more information. [Click here to sign up](#)

Matthew 25 Community Outreach

Saturday, December 19, 8:00 - 10:30 a.m.

We volunteer our time to provide for those of our community in need in downtown Tampa. We partner with Matthew 25 local charity, USF Medical School, and Metropolitan Ministries to serve breakfast, provide clothing, and care for the medical needs for our guests.

To Volunteer: Go to our Sign Up Genius, <https://www.signupgenius.com/go/10c0f48a5a62da3f49-community>

Place: First Presbyterian Church @ 412 Zack Street East, downtown Tampa. The entrance for volunteers is on the Polk Street side of building. **Time:** 8:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.

Volunteer Check-In Process:

- 1) Sign in and choose the job you want on the Duty Sheet
- 2) Prepare and wear your name tag
- 3) Don't be shy...if not sure where to go or what to do to get started, ask someone who looks like they know what they're doing.
- 4) Set up and Preparation 8-9 a.m., Serving 9-10:15 a.m., Cleanup 10:15-10:30 a.m..

Please don't hesitate to ask any questions. Thank you and God Bless!

Greg Melton 813-967-2074

gmelt12@gmail.com

'Twas the Night Before Christmas

By Angie Mosteller

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the earth,
Every creature was stirring, awaiting a birth.
The time for Messiah was certainly near,
The prophets foretold it; the Bible was clear.

From the book of beginnings, the very first sin,
God's word made it clear how His grace entered in.
Born of a virgin, He'd come as a man.
The Creator among us, the time was at hand.

The stars were arranged to show marvelous things,
Setting Wise Men to journey and find the true King.
Shepherds in Bethlehem gazed on the sky,
Longing to see him, their Lord the Most High.

How could they know that the very next night
An angel of God would speak words of delight?
How the Savior was born, it was news of great joy.
In a cloth and a manger they'd find the dear boy.

And a heavenly host would soon join to sing
Of the glory of God and of wonderful things.
He entered creation, set position aside
To show us how deeply his love did abide.

Sin sent us away from our almighty Lord.
He became one of us that we might be restored.
He's the Prince of our Peace; He's the one who makes whole.
He is Wisdom Incarnate, a Shepherd of Souls.

He's the Author of Life; He's the Ruler of All.
He can offer salvation, on His name we call.
The shepherds and Wise Men would bow to adore
Holy God among men, our greatest reward.

All glory and honor is due to this King.
Let all join in worship; let every tongue sing.
Jesus is Lord, all creation proclaims.
He's the first and last, He is always the same.

History turned on the first Christmas day,
When God became man in a humble display.
As we think of the manger in which He was laid,
Let our hearts welcome Him to the world He made!

'Twas the Night Before Christmas by Anonymous

'Twas the night before Christmas
And all through the town
Not a sign of Baby Jesus
Was anywhere to be found.

The people were all busy
With Christmas time chores
Like decorating and baking
And shopping in stores.

No one sang "Away in a Manger
No crib for a bed."
Instead, they sang of Santa
Dressed up in bright red.

Mama watched Martha Stewart,
Papa drank beer from a tap.
As hour upon hour
The presents they'd wrap.

When what from the TV
Did they suddenly hear?
'cept an ad. .which told
Of a big sale at Sears.

So away to the mall
They all flew like a flash
Buying things on credit
And others with cash!

And, as they made their way home
From their trip to the mall,
Did they think about Jesus?
Oh, no. . .Not at all.

Their lives were so busy
With their Christmas time things
No time to remember
Christ Jesus, the King of kings.

There were presents to wrap
And cookies to bake.
How could they stop and remember
Who died for their sake?

To pray to the Savior
They had no time to stop.
Because they needed more time
To "shop til they dropped!"

On Walmart! on K-Mart!
On Target! On Penny's!
On Hallmark! On Zales!
A quick lunch at Denny's.

From the big stores downtown
To the stores at the mall
They would dash away, dash away,
And visit them all!

And up on the roof
There arose such a clatter
As grandpa hung icicle lights
Upon on his brand new step ladder.

He hung lights that would flash
He hung lights that would twirl.
Yet, he never once prayed to Jesus. . .
The Light of the world.

Christ's eyes. . .How they twinkle!
Christ's Spirit. . .How merry!
Christ's love. . .how enormous!
All our burdens. . .He'll carry!

So instead of being busy,
Overworked and uptight
Let's put Christ back in Christmas
And enjoy some good nights!

Christmas Turns the World Upside Down

What does it mean for God's power to be "made perfect in weakness"?

By Peter Wehner, Published in the New York Times, December 24, 2019

If you were wholly unfamiliar with the life of Jesus and listened only to what many Christians in America say today, you could be forgiven for thinking that the most important thing Christianity values is worldly power — the power to control and compel, to impose one's will on others, to vanquish one's enemies. Blessed are the politically powerful and the well connected, you might assume, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The birth and life of Jesus shatter this narrative. Those of us of the Christian faith believe that Christmas Day represents the moment of God's incarnation, when this broken world became his home. But it was not an entrance characterized by privilege, comfort, public celebration or self-glorification; it was marked instead by lowliness, obscurity, humility, fragility.

The circumstances of Jesus' birth "were calculated to establish His detachment from power and authority in human terms," wrote Malcolm Muggeridge, a 20th-century British journalist who converted late in life to Christianity.

That could be said not just about Jesus' birth but also His entire life, which was in many respects an inversion of what the world, including much of the Christian world, prizes.

"Christ was born in a manger to a family for whom there was no room," Craig Barnes, the president of Princeton Theological Seminary, told me. "He was raised by unremarkable parents in an unremarkable part of the world, conducted a ministry that was missed by most people, died as a criminal on a cross, and His ascension was seen only by a small band of disciples who then led a movement that within three centuries changed the world."

The paradox is that Christianity changed the world despite Jesus' declaration that His kingdom was not of this world. His disciples did not have notable worldly status or influence. Jesus' energies and affections were primarily aimed toward social outcasts, the downtrodden and "unclean," strangers and aliens, prostitutes and the powerless. The people Jesus clashed with and who eventually crucified Him were religious authorities and those who wielded political power. The humble will be exalted, Jesus said, and the last shall be first. True greatness is shown through serving others and sacrifice.

All of this calls to mind an account in II Corinthians, one I have been intrigued by for nearly as long as I have been a Christian. In his epistle, Paul is describing a "thorn in my flesh" that was tormenting him. (We don't know specifically what it was.) Three times he beseeched the Lord to remove it, according to the apostle, to which Jesus replied, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul went on to add, "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

What does it mean for God's power to be made perfect in weakness?

It's a statement as much about us as it is about God. Most of us know that we often grow in times of weakness rather than strength, when we face hardship rather than experience success. That isn't always the case; sometimes hardships and suffering simply overwhelm us and no good thing comes from them.



A Nativity painting from the late 15th or early 16th century. Credit...Getty Images

Everyone has a breaking point.

But it's also true that weakness can open the way for greater personal growth, reflection and self-reflection, and focus us on what is essential rather than ephemeral. Last week, a friend who is a counselor told me of a former colleague of his who, because of chronic pain, was bedridden for two years. That pain she's now largely free of. He described his former colleague as one the most cheerful and loving people he's ever met. "She's a better person" for having gone through her ordeal, he said. The point my friend was making isn't that suffering is good but that sometimes it can serve a purpose. This is true for people of different faiths and people of no faith.

But from a Christian standpoint, Craig Barnes told me, "Our weakness finally opens our eyes to the need for a Savior. Nothing prevents that more than our strength. No one has ever said, 'I was so successful I just had to come to Jesus.'"

"We can only love when we are softened," according to Peggy Wehmeyer, a former religion correspondent for ABC. "We are most likely to be softened when we are weakened." Ms. Wehmeyer, who wrote movingly about her husband's suicide,

told me that the aftermath of his death was “the most powerless I’ve ever felt. Trusting in God’s goodness and yielding without being able to nail him down. That’s where peace begins: Surrender, in powerlessness.”

It’s important to point out here that there are sufferings we may experience that make us a more resilient, deeper and more compassionate person, yet if we were asked whether we are glad for having gone through it, we would answer no.

James Forsyth, senior pastor of McLean Presbyterian Church in Virginia, which I attend with my family, was sexually abused as a teenager. “I wish this thing hadn’t have happened to me,” he says. But, he adds, “You can have scars and still be healed. There are some things in life you never move on from, but you do learn to carry them differently.”

Whatever their full effects, human weakness and suffering are not meant to be ends in themselves. For Christians, they are meant to spur us to seek out God from a place of need and provide an opportunity for the display of divine power. And again: Power understood through the prism of Christianity is different from how the world generally understands power. Kerry Dearborn, professor emerita at Seattle Pacific University, described to me the difference between power over others and the power of connecting with others, which she said requires that there be openness and vulnerability.

As I understand the words of Jesus as recorded in II Corinthians, weakness opens us up to a fundamentally new definition of strength — strength that is not coercive, domineering, prideful and self-seeking but rather compassionate, sacrificial, humble and empathetic. God’s power, perfected through our weakness, makes us instruments of mercy, seekers of justice, agents of reconciliation. It helps us see the world in a different way.

Renée Notkin, a pastor at Union Church in Seattle, told me: “I am daily inspired by how Jesus continually turns the world upside down in regards to power, might, world success and achievement. Jesus’ subversive challenges to the human-crafted structures that oppress and bind is what keeps me following Jesus and holding on to hope that there is a third way — the Jesus way that brings healing to individuals, communities and nations.”

The pastor, with whom I attended high school and college, added, “Jesus was most frequently out among the people — engaging and paying attention to the realities of ordinary people’s lives and helping them see that in God’s eyes they are extraordinary — and so often these are the people who are viewed as weak in the world. I am learning how to live well from those who hold very little worldly power but who are some of the most content and real people I’ve ever met.”

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy,” Jesus declared in his most famous sermon. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

This type of power, often arrived at having traveled through what the Psalmist called “the valley of the shadow of death,” wasn’t simply Jesus spouting off abstract teachings; it was his life story. What the incarnation represents is God entering history not as the screenwriter of the drama but as an actor within it. Jesus is the suffering protagonist.

No one thought it would start quite this way, an infant placed in a manger in a troubled corner of a troubled world. You would have thought he would be among the most inconsequential individuals ever.

You would have been wrong.

Send a Video of your Christmas Greeting for a Video Montage Christmas Card by Friday, December 18

Just as we did at Pascha, we want everyone to send in a video of their Christmas Greetings. It could be just you, just your kids or preferable your whole family. Although we are distant from one another, we want to keep our community as close together as possible. Feel free to be creative. The greeting can say, “MERRY CHRISTMAS!,” “KALA CHRISTOUYENNA!,” “CHRIST IS BORN! GLORIFY HIM!” Please send in your video to Jenivieve Elly at jen@stjohntpa.org or Charlie Hambos at chambos@stjohntpa.org by Friday, December 18. This is going to be great and we can’t wait!



Using Amazon Smile to Donate to St. John - If you use Amazon Smiles, make sure to choose our church so a donation will be given to our parish every time a purchase is made. So far, since August 2017, we have made **\$864.59**. Every bit helps!



Need a Mask? We have many!

Through the generous donation of a few parishioners, we have reusable cloth masks available. We are thankful especially to Paula (Sakellaris) Weinburg, who made and mailed many of them from Virginia. If you need a mask, please contact the church office and we can arrange to get you one.

Thank you also to the many parishioners who have made and donated masks to us.

In Order to Reach Us

From the Perspective by Jimmy Pena (December 24, 2019)

I love the smell of my old baseball glove. Every once in a while when I'm looking through boxes of old and cherished things, I'll find it and put it on. I close my eyes, bring it to my face and somehow the old leather just takes me back. Equal parts dirt, oil, victories and defeats, practices and close games are all forever somehow locked inside my old mitt. Yeah, a couple days away from Christmas, and I'm thinking about baseball. For good reason, I think.

Ever notice that the big league managers wear the same uniform as the players? There's not another sport like it. Ever see a pro football coach with a helmet on? Nope. Or a basketball coach on the sidelines in a tank top and shorts? Not a chance. Baseball is the only sport where its managers blend in with the team.

I think Jesus could relate, because *He chose* to relate. Rather than stand out among us, He blended in with us. Though He created the universe, His appearance was universal. He became our up-close-and-personal Savior. Call it divine irony, but in order to reach us, He let us touch Him.

That's important this week. As planes land, cars pull up and curtains are pulled back, it's critical for us to consider two themes of Christmas:

Jesus was human.

Jesus is divine.

ALL MAN. ALL GOD.

Although He was God, and perfect, and timeless, He lived among us. He wore the uniform. He got dirty. After putting the stars in place, He carved wood. After creating the sky and mountains and hummingbird's wings and trees, he swept sawdust from the floor and took out the garbage. Although He was living water, He knew what it was like to be thirsty. Although He formed food and fed thousands, He knew what it was like to be hungry.

He was all man. He was all God. In order to reach us, He let us touch Him.

"For our high priest is able to understand our weaknesses. He was tempted in every way that we are, but he did not sin. Let us, then, feel very sure that we can come before God's throne where there is grace. There we can receive mercy and grace to help us when we need it." (Heb. 4:15-16 NCV)

The Bible says Jesus was tempted in every way, but while He never fell, He suffered the penalty of every sin ever committed. Innocent, He felt the *penalty* of sin and *the guilt* that we feel when we commit it. He didn't do it, but felt the shame as if He did. Chew on that for a second.

Pastor David Jeremiah says, (paraphrase), "On the shoreline after a hurricane, the houses are destroyed but the rocks are unmoved and unchanged. In this scenario, we are the homes. Jesus is the rock."

Max Lucado once wrote, "*Because Jesus is human, he understands you. Because he is divine, he can help you.*"

Because of this truth, we can go to Jesus and declare our weaknesses, failures and faults. He knows our real needs and He's the only one that can meet them. If anyone understands how we struggle, He does. He wore the uniform. The same dirt you feel under your feet, he felt under his.

A few years ago, I waded out into the Jordan River to be baptized. I put on a white robe and stood in line. Standing there, the sun warmed my head and the reflection from the water caused my eyes to squint. To my left and to my right were lines of people duplicating my efforts. Like me, they wanted to be in the water. *The water.*

Eventually I was chest-deep. This was it. Between my toes was dirty, rotten sediment. A moment made possible only because Jesus chose to do the same. *Lord, forgive me, cleanse me, seal me.*

THAT'S CHRISTMAS

The sound from that stable in Bethlehem was a battle cry. Despite what the world will tell us. Despite the self-help revolution and self-esteem declaration. Despite the hyper-individualism and boot-straps motivation that social media will flood us with, Jesus endured a normal birth in a brutal era and was laid in a manger because *we are not enough* on our own.

Christmas declares Jesus was human, because we are.

Christmas declares Jesus was divine, because we are not.

Jesus was born to live a life we could not live and to die a death we could not die. In order to reach us, He let us touch Him.

That's Christmas.

- Jimmy Peña

Beware of Emails Asking for Gift Cards

This is a common and very scary thing that is happening. People who are impersonating as Fr. Stavros have been emailing people and asking them to buy gift cards, scratch off the back to reveal the code, take pictures of the code and email them the pictures. Fr. Stavros would never under any circumstances ask for a gift card via email. If you receive an email like this, please call Fr. Stavros, Charlie or Alex immediately. Many people these days are falling victim to scams like these. Please double check and even triple check any emails or phone calls that ask for money even if it looks real. Any questions? Please contact the office.

Family Calendar for the Nativity Fast 2020

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
November 15 Luke 1:30 First Day of Advent Divine Liturgy Light your red candle on your family wreath LOVE	16 Luke 1:31 St. Matthew Divine Liturgy Pray for your friends	17 Luke 1:32 Purchase items or a gift card to donate for a Box of Hope	18 Luke 1:35 Holy Unction 5:30 pm Smile at everyone you see today	19 Luke 1:37 Send a card to a friend who lives in another state	20 Luke 1:38 Send a thanksgiving card to an elderly person	21 Matthew 1:18 Entrance of the Virgin Mary Divine Liturgy Make and send a get well card
22 Matthew 1:20 Divine Liturgy Light your white candle on your family wreath GRATITUDE	23 Matthew 1:21 St. Amphilocheus Divine Liturgy Pray for your teachers	24 Isaiah 7:14 St. Clement Divine Liturgy Volunteer with a local charity	25 Matthew 1:24-25 Paraklesis am St. Katherine Thanksgiving Divine Liturgy pm Donate to a local food pantry	26 2 Corinthians 9:1 Thanksgiving List five things you are thankful for	27 Luke 2:4 Send a care package to a loved one	28 Luke 2:7 St. Steven the New Divine Liturgy Make a Christmas ornament for your tree
29 Luke 2:8 Divine Liturgy Light your gold candle on your family wreath HOPE	30 Luke 2:9 St. Andrew Divine Liturgy Pray for sick children	December 1 Luke 2:10 December 1 Luke 2:10 Buy a gift off of an angel tree for someone in need	2 Luke 2:11 St. Porphyrios Divine Liturgy am Paraklesis pm Make a donation to a charity you love	3 Luke 2:12 Cut paper snowflakes and hang them in your front windows	4 Luke 2:13 St. Barbara Divine Liturgy Drive around and look at Christmas lights in your PJs	5 Luke 2:14 St. Savas Divine Liturgy Bake and share some Christmas cookies
6 Luke 2:15 St. Nicholas Divine Liturgy Light your green candle on your family wreath GENEROSITY	7 Luke 2:16 St. Ambrose Divine Liturgy Pray for a loved one who has passed away	8 Luke 2:17 Take a photo with your Nativity set	9 Luke 2:18 St. Anna Divine Liturgy am Paraklesis pm Leave a poinsettia on a neighbor's porch secretly	10 Luke 2:19 Learn the words to a new Christmas Carol	11 Luke 2:20 Make a list of three things you love about each person in your family and put it in their stocking	12 Isaiah 9:6 St. Spyridon Divine Liturgy Joy/Hope Christmas movie night
13 Matthew 2:1 Divine Liturgy Light your blue candle on your family wreath JOY	14 Matthew 2:2 Pray for people who are alone	15 Micah 5:2 St. Eleftheros Divine Liturgy Send a secret Santa note to a friend	16 Matthew 2:9 Christmas Candlelight Service Decorate your driveway or sidewalk with Christmas messages with sidewalk chalk	17 Matthew 2:10 Watch a classic Christmas movie or TV special	18 Matthew 2:11 Have a slumber party by your Christmas Tree	19 Matthew 2:11 St. Boniface Divine Liturgy Decorate a gingerbread house
20 Psalm 95:6 Sunday Before Nativity Divine Liturgy Light your purple candle on your family wreath FAITH	21 Psalm 98:4 Pray for your priest	22 John 3:16 St. Anastasia Divine Liturgy Day of Quiet Prayer Take a selfie in front of your Christmas Tree	23 John 1:1 Royal Hours of the Nativity Call your Godparents to wish them a Merry Christmas	24 John 1:14 The Nativity of Christ Vespers Liturgy am Divine Liturgy pm Light your center candle on your family wreath	25 Luke 2:1-20, Matthew 2:1-12 Christ is Born! Glorify Him! Open your envelope and read the Christmas gospel	26 Hebrews 2:17 Write a letter to your parents
27 Galatians 4:4 St Stephen Divine Liturgy Think about your word for 2021 PEACE	28 Matthew 2:13 Martyrs of Nicomedia Divine Liturgy Pray for healthcare workers	29 Matthew 2:23 Clean your room without being asked	30 John 1:5 St. Anysia Divine Liturgy am Paraklesis pm Do a chore in your yard	31 Matthew 5:16 Write down three goals for 2021	January 1 Luke 2:52 St. Basil Divine Liturgy Cut a vasilopita with your family	2 2 Timothy 4:7 Choose a Bible verse on kindness and put it on your refrigerator
3 Matthew 3:5-6 Sunday Before Theophany Divine Liturgy Visit someone who lives alone RENEW	4 Luke 3:4 Royal Hours of Theophany Pray for good things for someone who has been unkind to you	5 Titus 2:13 Eve of Theophany Vespers Liturgy Blessing of the Waters Send an old fashioned post card to your grandparents	6 Matthew 3: 16-17 Theophany Great Vespers for St. John the Baptist Offer a prayer of thanks for clean and fresh water	7 John 3:30 St. John the Baptist Divine Liturgy Draw a picture wishing our parish a Blessed Feast day!		

St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church

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St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church

Timetable of Services

Sundays: Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy: 10:00 a.m.

Weekdays: Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy: 10:00 a.m.

Parish Priest Rev. Fr. Stavros Akrotirianakis

813-876-8830 (Office) 813-394-1038 (Cell)
frstav@gmail.com

Retired Priest in Residence Rev. Fr. Stratton Dorozenski
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“May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father and the Communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.” From the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.