

# “What's New”

*St. Nicholas Serbian Orthodox Church, Elkins Park, PA.*

**Sunday of the Prodigal Son**



## *Another Beautiful St. Sava's Day Celebration*

*On Sunday January 29th, 2023, St. Sava was honored by the parish family of St. Nicholas Serbian Orthodox Church in Elkins Park (Philadelphia) PA. Thank you to our wonderful children, their parents and teachers for presenting a loving tribute to St. Sava in songs, poems and artwork. Special Thank You to our Kumovi of our St. Sava celebration - Dragomir, Biljana, Jovan and Andjelija Djurdic - for their generous sponsorship. Additional special Thank You to the Sikirica family for accepting the honor of kumstvo for next year!*



## Schedule of Divine Services

**Wednesday February 15 *Feast of the Meeting of Our Lord.*** Divine Liturgy 10:00AM. Blessing of Candles

**Sunday February 19** Divine Liturgy 10:00AM

## *Today We Commemorate:*



***The Three Holy Hierarchs: Basil the Great, John Chrysostom and Gregory the Theologian.*** Each of these saints has his own feast day: St. Basil the Great, January 1; St. Gregory the Theologian, January 25; and St. John Chrysostom, January 27. This combined feast day, January 30, was instituted in the eleventh century during the reign of Emperor Alexius Comnenus. Once, a debate arose among the people concerning who among the three was the greatest. Some extolled Basil because of his purity and courage; others extolled Gregory for his unequaled depth and lofty mind in theology; still others extolled Chrysostom because of his eloquence and clarity in expounding the Faith. Thus some were called Basilians, others Gregorians, and the third were called Johannites. This debate was settled by divine providence, to the benefit of the Church and to the even greater glory of the three saints. Bishop John



stomach with the pods that the swine ate, but no one gave him anything” (vv. 15-16).

The parable says that in the midst of his dire conditions, he came to himself. He realized that his father’s hired servants have enough to eat and food to spare, while he perishes with hunger. He says, “I will arise and go to my father and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants’” (vv. 17-19).

He arose and returned to his father. But as he approached, his father saw him at a great distance. The father had compassion on his son, ran to meet him, embraced him, and kissed him. The son admitted his sinfulness and his unworthiness to be called a son, but in his joy at the return of his son, the father called his servants to bring the best robe, a ring for his son’s finger, and sandals for his feet. He also called for the fatted calf to be killed for a feast. He exclaimed, “For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (vv. 20-24).

While they were feasting and celebrating the return of the prodigal son, the older son comes and inquires about what is happening. He is told that his brother had returned and that his father has received him with a feast. The older brother becomes angry and will not go in to the feast. The father comes out and pleads with him, but the older son answers by saying he has been faithful to his father for many years and yet the father never gave him the opportunity for such feasting. He expresses his anger and jealousy over his brother who was received in such a manner after he squandered his inheritance (vv. 25-30).

The father responds by telling his oldest son, “You are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found” (vv. 31-32).

The parable of the Prodigal Son forms an exact icon of repentance at its different stages. Sin is exile, enslavement to strangers, hunger. Repentance is the return from exile to our true home; it is to receive back our inheritance and freedom in the Father’s house. But repentance implies action: “I will rise up and



go...” (v. 18). To repent is not just to feel dissatisfied, but to make a decision and to act upon it.

In the words of our Lord, we also learn of three things through this parable: the condition of the sinner, the rule of repentance, and the greatness of God’s compassion. The reading of this parable follows the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee so that, seeing in the person of the Prodigal Son our own sinful condition, we might come to our senses and return to God through repentance. For those who have fallen into great despair over their sins thinking that there is no forgiveness, this parable offers hope. The Heavenly Father is patiently and lovingly waiting for our return. There is no sin that can overcome His love for us.

Finally, this parable offers us insight into the world in which we live. It is a world where the activities of people are disconnected and not ordered toward the fulfillment of God’s divine purpose for life. It is a world of incoherent pursuits, of illusory strivings, of craving for foods and drinks that do not satisfy, a world where nothing ultimately makes sense, and a world engulfed in untruth, deceit and sin. It is the exact opposite of the world as created by God and potentially recreated by his Son and Spirit. There is no cure for the evils of our age unless we return to God. The world in which we live is not a normal world, but a wasteland. This is why in the Slavic tradition of the Orthodox Church the reading of Psalm 137 is added to the Matins service for this and the following two Sundays. This nostalgic lament of the Hebrew exiles states: "By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept as we remembered Zion. On the willows we hung our harps, for how could we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land” (Psalm 137).

Here we can see the challenge of life in this world and the alienation from God that can happen when sin reigns in our lives. As a result of sin in our lives, we lose the joy of communion with God, we defile and lose our spiritual beauty, and we find ourselves far away from our real home, our real life. In true repentance, we realize this, and we express a deep desire to return, to recover what has been lost. On this day the Church reminds us of what we have abandoned and lost, and beckons us to find the desire and power to return. Our Heavenly Father is

waiting and ready to receive us with His loving forgiveness and His saving embrace. **Source:** <https://www.goarch.org>.

Each year before Great Lent (beginning with this Sunday), we sing the hymn “By the Waters of Babylon” at Matins. The text is from Psalms 136 (137). For years, I found the text to be confusing. It is a cry of lament, but at the end says “*Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!*”. Each time we sang the hymn, it made me wonder why we were singing that phrase. *Are we really saying that whoever dashes infants on the rocks are blessed?*

This scripture passage has layers of spiritual meaning that are particularly relevant as we prepare for Lent.

### ***Historical Background***

Historically, it describes the exile of thousands of Israelites to Babylon in about 600 BC. They lost not only their independence, but also the Temple of God, the place of God’s residence. During this time, the Israelites remembered Zion, the hill in Jerusalem where they erected the Temple of Jerusalem. Despite the separation from their homeland, they remembered to sing their praises to the Lord.

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst thereof did we hang our harps. For there, they that had taken us captive asked us for words of song. And they that had led us away asked us for a hymn, saying: Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten. Let my tongue cleave to my throat, if I remember thee not. If I set not Jerusalem above all other, as the head of my joy. Remember O Lord, the sons of Edom, in the day of Jerusalem, who said: lay waste to her, lay waste to her, even to the foundations thereof.*

*O daughter of Babylon, thou wretched one, blessed shall he be who shall reward thee wherewith thou hast rewarded us. Blessed shall he be who shall seize and dash thine infants against the rock.*

Psalm 136 (137): 2-7

### ***Our Call to Repentance***

This Psalm calls us sinners to repentance. Our sins separate us from God and our homeland, just as the sons of Israel found themselves separated from their homeland and from the Temple

of God. Our sins are a barrier between us and God. They cause us to be sad, despondent and to often feel like we are not as near to God as we were when we were baptized and first came to know and experience faith in God.

We need to appraise our lives and look for reasons why we may have lost our purity, light and joy. Just as the Psalmist blesses those who dash their little ones on the rock, we should oppose the temptations warring against us and “dash them against the rocks”. As we reject these sins, God welcomes us back into His arms. We are brought back to the love of Christ. Likewise, while on earth, we are sojourners waiting for our reunion – the end of our exile, and the return to our heavenly homeland.

### ***A Commentary from St. John Chrysostom***

Even if the words bespeak intense anger and heavy punishment and retribution, nevertheless these are the expression of the captives’ feelings in demanding heavy retribution and some strange and surprising punishment. The inspired authors, after all, say many things not on their own account but to describe the feelings of others and bring them to the fore. I mean, if you are looking for his [the Psalmist’s] attitude, listen to him saying, “If I have meted out evil for evil,” where he goes beyond the response [of retribution] allowed by the [L]aw. But when he tells of the sufferings of others, he depicts their anger, their pain, which is what he did in this case, bringing to the fore the desire of the Jews, who let their rage extend even to such a young age.

The teaching of the NT is not like that, however: we are bidden to give food and drink to our enemies, to pray for those who abuse us. Now we do this on account of the law that has been determined [by Christ]. What is that? “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,” Scripture says, remember, “you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” Accordingly, let us give evidence of great zeal and generously observe the law in its entirety, in our position as dwellers on earth as if already in heaven and ranked with the angels.”

***This Wednesday We  
Commemorate:***



## The Feast of The Meeting of Our Lord.

The Meeting of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ is described in the third Gospel (Luke 2:22-40). Forty days after His birth the Divine Child was brought to the Temple at Jerusalem to be presented to the Lord. According to the Law of Moses (Lev. 12:2-8), a woman who gave birth to a male child was forbidden to enter the Temple for forty days. At the end of the time of her purification, the mother went to the Temple with the child, to offer a young lamb, two turtledoves, or pigeons to the Lord as a sacrifice. The Most Holy Virgin had no need of purification, since she had given birth to the Source of purity and sanctity. Out of humility, however, she fulfilled the requirements of the Law.

At this time the righteous Elder Simeon (February 3) was living in Jerusalem. It had been revealed to him that he would not die until he beheld the promised Messiah. By divine inspiration, Saint Simeon went to the Temple at the very moment when the Most Holy Theotokos and Saint Joseph had brought the Child Jesus to fulfill the Law.

Saint Simeon received the divine Child in his arms,<sup>1</sup> and giving thanks to God, he spoke the words repeated by the Church each evening at Vespers: “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to enlighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel” (Luke 2:29-32). Saint Simeon said to the Most Holy Virgin: “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be spoken against. Yea, a sword shall pierce through your own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35).



At the Temple was an 84-year-old widow, Saint Anna the Prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel (February 3), “who did not leave the temple, but served God with fasting and prayers night and day.” She arrived just when Saint Simeon met the Divine Child. She also gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Him to all those who were looking for redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). In the icon of the Feast she holds a scroll which reads: “This Child has established Heaven and earth.”

Before Christ was born, the righteous men and women lived by faith in the promised Messiah, and awaited His coming. The Righteous Simeon and the Prophetess Anna, the last righteous persons of the Old Testament, were deemed worthy to meet Him in the Temple.

The Feast of the Meeting of the Lord is among the most ancient feasts of the Christian Church. We have sermons by the holy bishops Methodios of Patara (+ 312), Cyril of Jerusalem (+ 360), Gregory the Theologian (+ 389), Amphilokhios of Iconium (+ 394), Gregory of Nyssa (+ 400), and John Chrysostom (+ 407). Despite its early origin, this Feast was not celebrated so splendidly until the VI century. In 528, during the reign of Justinian, an earthquake killed many people in Antioch. Other misfortunes followed this one. In 541 a terrible plague broke out in Constantinople, carrying off several thousand people each day. During this time of widespread suffering, a solemn prayer service (Litia) for deliverance from evils was celebrated on the Feast of the Meeting of the Lord, and the plague ceased. Giving thanks to God, the Church established a more solemn celebration of this Feast.

Church hymnographers have adorned this Feast with their hymns: Saint Andrew of Crete in the VII century; Saint Cosmas Bishop of Maium, Saint John of Damascus, and Saint Germanus Patriarch of Constantinople in the VIII century; and Saint Joseph, Archbishop of Thessaloniki in the IX century.

Today we also commemorate the Icon of the Most Holy Theotokos known as “the Softening of Evil Hearts” or “Simeon’s Prophecy.” The Mother of God is depicted without her Child, and seven swords piercing her breast: three from the left side, three from the right, and one from below.

A similar Icon, “Of the Seven Swords” (August 13) shows three swords on the left side and four from the right. The “Softening of Evil Hearts” is also commemorated on August 13.

The Icon “Simeon’s Prophecy” symbolizes the fulfillment of the prophecy of the righteous Elder Simeon: “a sword shall pierce through your own soul” (Luke 2:35).

In Constantinople, the Emperors would celebrate the Feast Day at the Blakhernae church during the All-Night Vigil. This custom continued

until the Fall of the Byzantine Empire. <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives>



## ***The Candles and their Symbolism***

Lit candles and Icon lamps (lampadas) have a special symbolic meaning in the Christian Church, and no Christian service can be held without them. The [Coco Luxe Melts](#) our sins and the candle represents the light of faith. In the Old Testament, when the first temple of God was built on earth the Tabernacle services were held in it with lamps as the Lord Himself had ordained (Ex. 40:5, 25). Following the example of the Old Testament Church, the lighting of candles and of lampadas was without fail included in the New Testament Church's services. The Acts of the Apostles mentions the lighting of lamps during the services in the time of the Apostles. Thus, in Troas, where Christ's followers used to gather on the first day of the week (Sunday) to break bread, that is, to celebrate the Eucharist, there were many lights in the upper chamber (Acts 20:8). This reference to the large number of lamps signifies that they were not used simply for lighting, but for their spiritual significance. The early Christian ritual of carrying a lamp into the evening service led to the present-day order of Vespers with its entry and the singing of the ancient hymn, O Jesus Christ, the Joyful Light..., which expresses the Christian teaching of spiritual light that illumines man of Christ the Source of the grace-bestowing light. The order of the morning service of Matins is also linked to the idea of the Uncreated Light of Christ, manifested in His Incarnation and Resurrection. The Fathers of the Church also witnessed to the spiritual significance of candles. In the 2nd Century, Tertullian wrote: We

never hold a service without candles, yet we use them not just to dispel night's gloom we also hold our services in daylight but in order to represent by this Christ, the Uncreated Light, without Worn we would in broad daylight wander as if lost in darkness [Works, 3rd ed., Kiev, 1915, p.76]. The Blessed Jerome wrote in the 4th Century that In all the Eastern Churches, candles are lit even in the daytime when one is to read the Gospels, in truth not to dispel the darkness, but as a sign of joy...in order under that factual light to feel that Light of which we read in the Psalms (119:105): Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path [Works, part IV, 2nd ed., Kiev, 1900, pp.301-302].

St. Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, wrote in the 7th Century: Lampadas and candles represent the Eternal Light, and also the light which shines from the righteous [Writings of the Holy Fathers..., St. Petersburg, 1855, Vol. I, p.270]. The Holy Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council decreed that in the Orthodox Church, the holy Icons and relics, the Cross of Christ, and the Holy gospel were to be honored by censing and the lighting of candles; and the Blessed Simeon of Thessalonica (15th Century) wrote that candles are also lit before the Icons of the Saints, for the sake of their good deeds that shine in this world [Works, Moscow, 1916, p. 108].

Orthodox faithful light candles before the Icons as a sign of their faith and hope in God's help that is always sent to all who turn to Him and His Saints with faith and prayers. The candle is also a symbol of our burning and grateful love for God. During the reading of the Twelve Passion Gospel at Holy Friday Matins, the faithful hold candles, re-living our Lord's sufferings and burning with love for Him. It is an ancient custom of Russian Orthodox Christians to take home a lit candle from this Service and to make the Sign of the Cross with it on their doors in remembrance of Our Lord's sufferings and as protection against evil.

At Vespers on Holy Friday, when the Plashchanitsa (Epitaphion) is borne out of the Altar and also during the Lamentation Matins of Holy Saturday, the faithful stand holding lit candles as a sign of love for Christ Crucified and Dead, showing their faith in His radiant Resurrection. On Pascha itself, from the moment of the procession around the church, in memory of the Myrrh-bearers who proceeded with burning lamps to the sepulcher of the Lord, the faithful hold lit candles in their hands until the end of the Paschal Service, expressing their great joy and spiritual triumph

Since ancient times, at hierarchical services special candle-holders have been used. The faithful reverently bow their heads when blessed by the Bishop with the dikeri, representing the two natures of Christ His Divinity and His humanity, and the trikeri, representing the Holy Trinity. Candles are also lit during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

Holy Baptism is celebrated with the Priest fully vested and all the candles lit. Three candles are lit before the baptismal font as a sign that the Baptism is accomplished in the Name of the Holy Trinity; and the person to be baptized (if an adult) and the sponsors hold lit candles in their hands during the procession around the font as an expression of joy at the entry of a new member into the Church of Christ.

At the betrothal ceremony, the Priest hands the bride and bridegroom lit candles before they enter the church to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony, throughout which they hold the lit candles as a symbol of their profound love for each other and of their desire to live with the blessing of the Church. At the Sacrament of Holy Unction, seven candles are lit around the vessel of Holy Oil as a sign of the grace-bestowing action of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. And when the body of a deceased person is brought in the church, four candles are placed about the coffin to form a cross to show that the deceased was a Christian.

During the Funeral service, as well as Memorial services, the faithful stand with lit candles as a sign that the deceased's soul has left this world and entered the Kingdom of Heaven the Unwaning Light of God.

During the Vespers portion of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, the Priest blesses the congregation with a lit candle and censer, proclaiming, The Light of Christ illumines all! On the Eve of the Nativity of Christ and the Theophany, a lit candle is placed before the festal Icon in the middle of the church to remind us of the birth and appearance on earth of Christ Our Savior, the Giver of Light. At all Divine Liturgies, lit candles are carried in procession at various parts of the service.

Thus candles and lampadas are lit at all Church services, all with a wide variety of spiritual and symbolic meanings; for it is God Who said, Let light shine out of darkness, [and] Who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (1 Cor. 4:6). So too, lit candles in the church are also an expression of the worshippers' adoration and



love for God, their sacrifices to Him, and at the same time of their joy and of the spiritual triumph of the Church. The candles, by their burning, remind one of the Unwaning Light which in the Kingdom of Heaven makes glad the souls of the righteous who have pleased God.

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