

# THE GIFT GIVER

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LENT PASCHA 2010

## THE PASTOR'S REFLECTIONS

### THE DESCENT INTO HADES

*Life, how can you perish,  
or how dwell in a tomb?  
Yet the royal hall of Death you now bring to nought,  
and from Hades' realm you raise the dead again.  
(First Stasis—Lamentations Service)*

The icon most Orthodox identify with the Resurrection of Christ is actually an image of His descent into Hades—the place of the dead. Unlike the Western tradition, Orthodox iconography does not generally portray Christ emerging from the tomb. There is a profound theological reason for this; we are being reminded that, though truly dead in the flesh and laid in a tomb, the Lord continued to **actively** carry out His saving mission.

The key here is activity—something not normally associated with death! In Christ, death itself is upended and reversed—this is precisely what is meant when we sing, “Christ is risen from the dead, **trampling down death by death**”. Death is trampled down—destroyed—by means of death. The immensity of this paradox can only be expressed poetically.

*Though a corpse we see you,  
yet alive as our God  
you gave life again to mortals who once were slain,  
put to death the one who brought me to my death.  
(First Stasis—Lamentations Service)*

Death is more than reversed—it is enslaved to serve the Lord of Life; it is voided and, in the deepest sense, deprived of its power over us and forced to serve the Lord's purpose of bringing us to everlasting life.

*Life itself, Christ Savior,  
having tasted of death,  
freed all mortal kind from death, liberated us,  
and the gift of life he now bestows on all.  
(First Stasis—Lamentations Service)*

The Church's poetic hymns of Holy Week and Pascha provide us with verbal



*In the tomb they laid you,  
you, O Christ, who are Life;  
death itself you brought to  
nothing by your own death,  
and became the fount of life  
for all the world.*

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icons of a reality that is actually more real than the one we experience in this life—a great and awesome paradox. Somehow, the ‘dead’ are made more alive than the living! C.S. Lewis expressed this same paradox in his little gem of book, *The Great Divorce*, in which the reality of heaven—the coming Kingdom—is so solid that it makes everything else seem ghostly. Again, our understanding is turned inside out. We are accustomed to thinking of the world of the dead as being “ghostly” while our world is solid and real. And, in fact, the Hebrew understanding of Hades, or, Sheol, was of a gray and dismal place where the departed led a gloomy, half sleeping existence. With the death of Christ and His descent into Hell-Hades-Sheol the land of the dead is filled with light and translated into Paradise! This is experienced as joy for the departed who love the Lord and as terror and destruction to the devil and all who hate God.

*It is right indeed  
we should magnify the one who grants life,  
you, that stretched your hands wide upon the Cross,  
broke and smashed the might and power of the foe.  
(Second Stasis—Lamentations Service)*

The victory of the dead Lord of Life over the one who lorded it over the dead becomes the supreme paradox—and the absolute center of the Orthodox Christian faith. The whole point of the incarnation of Christ is made clear in this singular event; it is not about paying a debt, it is about destroying an enemy. Christianity in the west went astray with its overemphasis on an incomplete understanding of “atonement”. In the western reading of the death of Christ the focus was on paying the Father a ransom for the offense of human sin. St. Gregory Nazianzus rejected this, saying that it would be unjust.

*Now we are to examine another fact and dogma, neglected by most people, but in my judgment well worth enquiring into. To whom was that Blood offered that was shed for us, and why was it shed? I mean the precious and famous Blood of our God and High priest and Sacrifice.... If to the Father, I ask first, how? For it was not by Him that we were being oppressed; and next, on what principle did the Blood of His Only begotten Son delight the Father, Who would not receive even Isaac, when he was being offered by his Father, but changed the sacrifice, putting a ram in the place of the human victim? Is it not evident that the Father accepts Him, but neither asked for Him nor demanded Him; but on account of the Incarnation, and because Humanity must be sanctified by the Humanity of God, that He might deliver us Himself, and overcome the tyrant, and draw us to Himself by the mediation of His Son, Who also arranged this to the honor of the Father, Whom it is manifest that He obeys in all things?*

The early Fathers of the Church (many of them western) saw Christ’s descent into Hades as a victorious campaign against death and the devil; there was a clear and powerful military imagery—hell suffers a humiliating defeat, death literally being trampled underfoot by the one who was dead, yet living still (see Revelation 2:8).

Christ’s suffering and death was entirely pointed at destroying the power of suffering and death—the sense of meaninglessness and emptiness that marked the predominant understanding of death in the ancient world, pagan and Jewish. For those who accepted Him, for those who were baptized and made members of His Body (the Church), physical death became a momentary and passing phenomenon, not a permanent state. It is hard to convey just how radical a change in understanding this was for the people of the early Christian centuries.

*Human-kind you formed,  
with your own hand fashioned us, O Savior,  
now, O Sun, you set underneath the earth,  
raising companies of mortals from the fall.  
(Second Stasis—Lamentations Service)*

(continued on page 4)

## PARISH NEWS

### LENTEN SERVICES

**SATURDAY FEBRUARY 6, 2010** Memorial Saturday  
Liturgy 10 AM

**SUNDAY FEBRUARY 21, 2010** THE SUNDAY OF OR-  
THODOXY (First Sunday in Great Lent) Divine Lit-  
urgy and Procession of Icons 10 AM

#### WEDNESDAY PRESANCTIFIED SERVICES

##### AT ST NICHOLAS

**6:30 PM FEBRUARY 17; MARCH 10, MARCH 17**

##### AT ST. MICHAEL'S

**6:30 PM FEBRUARY 24, MARCH 3, MARCH 24**

*\*\*\*Please note the change in order of Pre-Sanctified  
Liturgies...Weeks 1, 4, and 5 at St. Nicholas Weeks 2, 3,  
and 6 at St. Michael*

**FRIDAY MARCH 5 -- 7 PM AKATHIST SERVICE**

### HOLY WEEK AND PASCHA SERVICES

**PALM SUNDAY MARCH 28, 2010 10 AM DI-  
VINE LITURGY**

**WEDNESDAY MARCH 31, 2010 6:30 PM  
HOLY UNCTION SERVICE (FOLLOWED BY THE  
DIVINE LITURGY OF ST. BASIL FOR HOLY  
THURSDAY—ABOUT 8 AM)**

**GREAT & HOLY THURSDAY APRIL 1, 2010  
6:30 PM THE PASSION GOSPELS**

**GREAT & HOLY FRIDAY APRIL 2, 2010 3 PM  
VESPERS (THE TAKING DOWN FROM THE  
CROSS)**

**GREAT & HOLY FRIDAY APRIL 2, 2010 6:30  
PM THE LAMENTATIONS SERVICE**

**SATURDAY APRIL 3, 2010 9:00 PM NOC-  
TURNES, MATINS & DIVINE LITURGY OF PAS-  
CHA (FOLLOWED BY THE AGAPE DINNER IN  
THE PARISH HALL)**

### LOOKING AHEAD

**ASCENSION LITURGY—Wednesday May 12 6:30  
PM**

**PENTECOST SATURDAY OF SOULS: May 22—  
Divine Liturgy 10 AM**

**ALBANIAN PICNIC—Sunday June 27 (following  
the Divine Liturgy)**

### IN OTHER NEWS

“ICON AUCTION”—The traditional icon auction  
just after Theophany was very successful this year  
and contributed well over \$3000 to the church gen-  
eral fund.

CHRISMATIONS AND BAPTISMS: On January 24,  
2010 we welcomed Audrey (Anne), James, Sarah,  
and Julia Blash into the Orthodox faith and as mem-  
bers of St. Nicholas Parish. It is a great joy to have  
them join our community. We also look forward to  
two baptisms on Lazarus Saturday (more about this  
later). The wonderful news is that, in spite of losing  
some dear members last year, God is providing us  
with growth. Lets all keep praying (and working)  
for new members.



The other great theme of the descent into Hades is God's solidarity with us in death. Though it is the consequence of the great cosmic disaster of original sin—the calamity that has warped and perverted the whole universe with its effects—God has not left us to suffer alone. He is with us in it.

*'The depth of your compassion,  
I glorify my dear Son,  
which makes you suffer these things.'  
(Third Stasis—Lamentations Service)*

As the Communion Prayer of St. Basil states, "being God before all ages, He appeared on earth and lived with humankind. Becoming incarnate from a holy Virgin, He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, conforming to the body of our lowliness, that He might change us in the likeness of the image of His glory". He becomes one of us—taking on all that we are, except for sin, and bearing it from the moment of conception to and **through** death. He became our ransom, not to the Father or to the Devil, but to the power of death; it was a ransom that killed the perpetrator. We were ransomed from death by the death of Christ and death died as a result (hence, "trampling down death by death"). The mind bends to comprehend this and can't—only the language of poetry and the imagery of icons can convey something beyond and above rational categories.

*Lord, my God, I will sing a song for your departure, a funeral hymn for you who by your burial opened up for me the entrances to life, and by your death put Death and Hell to death.*

*All things above the world and all below the earth quaked with fear at your death, as they saw you on the throne above and below in a tomb; for beyond understanding you appeared as a one dead, you the source of life.*

*That you might fill all things with your glory, you went down into the lowest parts of the earth; for my substance, which is in Adam was not hidden from you, and by being buried you make me, who had been corrupted, new, O Lover of humankind.*

When Christ descends into Hades He turns our corruption into Life! The means of our destruction has become the means of our healing, renewal, and resurrection. In our icons of the Resurrection we portray Christ's descent into Hades as the Lord and Liberator of the human race from its last and greatest enemy (see I Corinthians 15:26).

### LENTEN RECIPE

#### STRING BEAN AND PEPPER STEW

1 lb. string beans  
4 large peppers, chopped  
1 onion, chopped  
2 celery stalks, chopped  
1 can (8 oz.) tomato sauce

#### MASHURKA ME PIPERKA

¼ tsp. oregano  
½ tsp. pepper  
1 tsp. salt  
½ c. oil

Clean and cut string beans in half. Sauté onion and celery in oil until tender. Add seasonings, tomato sauce and 1 c. water. Add string beans and peppers to tomato sauce mixture. Add enough water to cover vegetables. Cook over low heat until vegetables are tender. (taken from our cookbook, "From Albanian Kitchens", 2007 edition)