



The Evangelion

"Go into the world and preach the good news to all of creation." (Mark 16:15)

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WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES!

by Fr. Steven Ritter

It has been too long since our last newsletter, but there has certainly been a lot going on this year at St. James! A little over a year ago, Metropolitan Philip of blessed memory established us formally as a mission in the Antiochian Archdiocese, one of the last, if not the last, blessings that he imparted to a new church community. Once we reached that status, things began to move quickly in our development as a parish. After realizing our need for a new facility in order to ensure future growth and viability, and after an extensive (and rather tiring!) search for a new place, we decided to relocate to our present location in the city of Buford.

Of course, anytime a move like this is undertaken, there are a few people who drift away for various reasons, only to be replaced by newcomers – our good Lord watches after the needs of everyone! Lots of people have chipped in helping to set up our new location, which many of us, when we first gazed at the concrete floor and four tall warehouse-style walls, wondered if it could ever look like a “real” Orthodox Church, something that would attract others in the community and serve as a fitting environment for the worship of the God of the Universe. Remember then?

With much fervent prayer and a host of ideas and revisions, I think we can all agree that what we have arrived at far exceeded the expectations any of us had

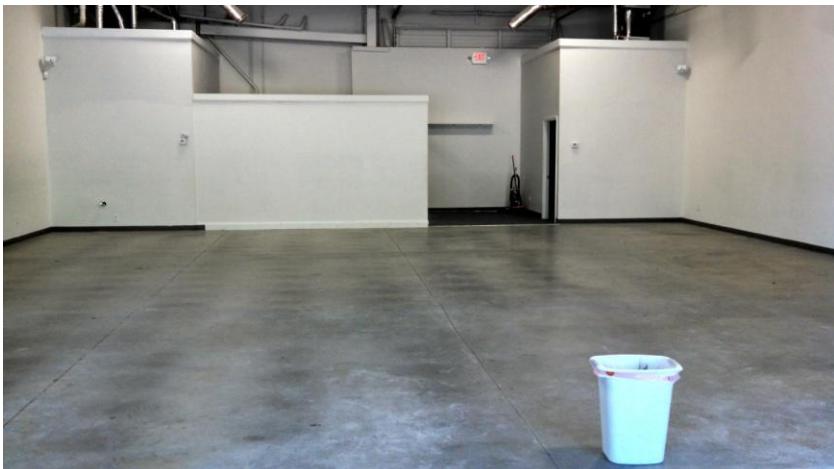
at the time. There are too many people to thank publicly – you know who you are, and the Lord certainly does! To think that the Lord has blessed us with such a plethora of His grace in so short of a time should put to shame the most hardened of doubters. But the story is not over, not by a long shot!

And now ...

Now is no time to sit back and enjoy what has been accomplished. In the spiritual life there is nothing known as rest – that comes much later, and lasts quite a while. During our earthly sojourn, the Lord expects unceasing activity, a constant moving forward; or rather, if we are acting according to His will, hopefully upward. ***“For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away”*** (***James 4:14***). We had much discussion about whether our move to this new location was premature, whether we should wait. Yet the task is always at hand and the time is short as we do not know the day of our Lord’s appearing once again; we trusted in the Lord’s plans for our church. ***“It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; but now you must also complete the doing of it”*** (***2 Corinthians 8:2***). The results are in, and they are encouraging: we have had a significant increase in overall attendance and in new members since our move.

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Through the grace of God, great things can come from humble beginnings!

Our transition was not painless, however! A mid-course correction was due when the City of Buford decided to throw a disruptive wrench into our plans by unexpectedly requiring us to not only apply for an expensive “Special Usage” permit, but even denying our right to continue meeting for two months until two public hearings were held. A decision was made to continue meeting anyway as we had followed all the rules to the letter of law and were kept in the dark about this new ordinance, which no new business in Buford seemed to be aware of. It was risky, and many thanks for the prayers of lots of people – and especially the unqualified support of the other Orthodox clergy in town. We stayed quietly open, and applied for the permit. In the end, the Lord was with us, and after some fortuitous events and more than one angel getting involved, we are now fully established at our new location and ready to continue our work!



and able we are in trying to proclaim our faith, without each of us first getting to know our Lord Jesus Christ intimately, personally, and to treat our brethren and fellow human beings with respect, dignity, and love, our efforts will not bear fruit. This starts with controlling our passions, acting in a non-judgmental manner, and cultivating godly and wise virtues. As our wise patron and protector tells us, **“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless”** (**James 1:26**). But we lack the tools to do this without first and foremost learning, studying, and doing the things of our faith.

So what now? What exactly is our work? Truthfully, it all starts within each of us. One of the axioms of spiritual life is that no matter how enthusiastic

Recently another Antiochian priest came up with a number of New Year’s resolutions for Orthodox Christians. Let me modify and offer a few of these as something we need to do in order to increase our faith, understanding, and spiritual growth, thereby making the life of our parish and ability to spread the truth of our Holy Church in the community truly exceptional:

1. Get serious about coming to church (more). If you’re not serious about coming to church weekly, it’s time to get serious about eternal life. And if you’re already coming to church weekly, consider adding

at least one service per week (we regularly have four services per week here at St. James.)

2. Set an example by coming to church on time.

What you show up on time for is what you find indispensable. Don’t let visitors wonder why no one is at church when it starts!

3. Tithe. Tithing is about worship. **“Your heart is where your treasure is”** (**Matthew 6:21**). Where’s your treasure? Follow the money, find the heart. If you’re not up for 10% yet, then try 8%. Or 6%. But go on record by turning in a pledge card, and get disciplined about giving. Give until it feels good.

Christians have always been known by their love for each other – may we continue to cultivate this love and to share it with the world!

4. Pray at home. Even if all you do is say the “Our Father” when you wake up (saying it three times a day is the most ancient known prayer rule), you will notice a change in how you think and feel about your faith. Disciplined prayer opens the door to heaven.

5. Go to Confession. There are lots of Orthodox Christians who go to Confession only rarely. Like people who never go to the doctor, what that means is that they think everything is perfectly fine and that they need no help. We sinners need to confront our sins directly in Confession. Everyone should go *at least* once during each of the four fasts.

6. Read, read, read, READ! A good spiritual book can help to retrain your mind to become like the mind of Christ. Most of us do not have the mind of Christ. Even if reading is generally not your “bag,” pick a time daily to at least read a few selections from the Holy Scriptures, as well as another spiritual book. Orthodox Christians gave the world the Scriptures – we have no excuse not to know them better than anyone else!

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These are just starting points – the life and love of our Lord is so vast and deep that we can never exhaust it, and we will spend eternity basking in each. But in this specific time and place, He has tasked us with the honor of establishing another spiritual outpost in our battle against “***the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places***” (**Ephesians 6:12**). The devil does not sleep in his adversarial activity, especially in the establishment of a holy church community – and neither can we. We must



It is a joy to celebrate my second Nativity as a convert to the Orthodox faith with my church family here at St. James Orthodox Church. Finding the little mission group that eventually became our church was a great blessing and gift in my life. Since then, I have come to think of our church as my lifeboat and my refuge in a world that so often values the wrong things and overlooks great spiritual treasures.

When I experienced my first Nativity fast, I was struck by the incongruity of observing a period of fasting and quiet prayer during a time when many people were caught up in overindulgence and busyness, a fussiness that distracts us from that miraculous moment when Christ left the womb of Mary, the blessed Theotokos, and entered into a world so desperately in need of His redemption.

Sometimes it seems like we are swimming upstream during this time of the year, doesn't it? We attend church services when others are shopping or entertaining themselves. We fast instead of having rich

**Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.
(Luke 2:19)**

meals, and we look forward to the spiritual feast of Holy Communion more than we do the next dinner party. We are encouraged to meditate upon the humble circumstances of Our Lord's birth in a cave while others are anxious and preoccupied with finding the perfect material gift to give their loved ones. We take the time to repent of our sins in Confession instead of taking the blessings of this life for granted. And we look for moments of quiet reflection and calm anticipation of the glory of Christ becoming human,

strive to become a real community in Christ, a gathering of brethren whose assembly becomes the most important thing in our lives. Christians have always been known by their love for each other – may we continue to cultivate this love and to share it with the world!

With pastoral love in Christ,

Fr. Steven

GIVE THE GIFT THAT IS TRULY PERFECT

becoming one of us, at a time when so many people are overwhelmed by the stress and depression that the holidays so often bring.

At first, this feeling of being at odds with the general Christmas culture around me was disconcerting and uncomfortable, but now it feels right and good because I know that the Church has put into proper perspective a season that was meant to glorify God but which is so often distorted into something not pleasing to Him.

My greatest wish as we celebrate the birth of our Lord is that we remember those for whom this season of great hope and joy brings instead



unhappiness and sorrow. Perhaps they are separated from loved ones through estrangement or death, or perhaps they are suffering the anxieties of not being able to pay their bills or are trying to do too much with too little time. Perhaps they are struggling against great darkness and temptation in their lives. Whatever the reason, there are many people around us every day who have lost sight of what really matters.

That is what church is for, to remind us about what really matters. Our Orthodox faith is a “goodly heritage” and a sure foundation beneath our feet, and our church is a great treasure from which we all partake and which we should never take for granted. We are called upon by Our Lord to share this spiritual wealth with those outside of the faith, especially the spiritually homeless who do not call any church their own. The wonderful thing about the treasure that Jesus gave us when He became incarnate is that this treasure does not diminish when it is shared with others but rather increases. Please remember in this season of giving to share with those in need the perfect gift of this church that God in His infinite mercy and grace has given to you.

– by Paul Edenfield

St. James Orthodox Church is a mission of the Self-Ruled Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America.

*If you have any questions or comments, or if you would like more information about the Orthodox Faith,
please contact Fr. Steven (priest@gwinnettorthodox.com).*

The Nativity Icon Explained

"The icon is also a theology, a theology in color, expressing the experience of God with lines and paints rather than with discursive language. The goal of the icon and that of written theology are the same – to lead others to the mystical experience of God. The icon artistically depicts the experience so that others may approach the mystery and be invited to share in it."

– Anton Vrame, *The Educating Icon*

The **star** which is shown in upper center of this icon, represents the heavens and the Trinity rejoicing the glorious birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Shining brighter than any other star, it is what guided the magi (wise men) to the new-born King. Some icons are written with three lines coming from the heavens which represent the Trinity.

The **angels** brought the "good news of great joy" to shepherds tending their flocks. "And the angel said to them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men'" (Luke 2:10-14).

Due to sin, many of us struggle with doubt or disbelief. This **cave** represents our struggle. The cave represents the world, dark with sin through man's fault. It is now illuminated by the Light of the Incarnation. Within this cave, Christ, "the Sun of Truth," enters into the world He created for us, clothed in the flesh of Mary's body through natural birth, the same way all of His children are born.

The main focus of this icon is the **Christ-child** and His **mother Mary, the Theotokos** and Mother of Light. Archangel Gabriel told her that she will bear the Son of God. He then led her to Bethlehem. The Virgin is seen looking at her beloved husband St. Joseph. She is

praying to the Lord so His struggles of disbelief and temptation will pass. She relies on the Lord, her Son, through prayer that her husband will overcome her doubt and the temptations of Satan. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is seen wrapped in swaddling clothing. This not only represents His total submission to the human flesh but also foreshadows His death and resurrection.

The Jewish **shepherds** were among the first to worship the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. They symbolize that Christ is the Good Shepherd.

Bringing gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the **three magi** (wise men) were led by the heavenly star to the manger in which our Lord resided. "Where is He that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship him" (Matthew 2:2).

A widower before he wed Mary, **St. Joseph the Betrothed** is seen as an elderly man. With gray hair and hunched over, he is in doubt of this miraculous birth. Struggling within himself, he wonders if this was by another man or if it was indeed true.

To the right of St. Joseph is **Satan**. Satan appears in the form of an elderly man as well, yet he is shown in rags and with a cane. St. Joseph is being tempted by Satan with doubt. St. Joseph loves his wife, and through her prayers he overcomes this struggle. He is the protector of the Virgin Mary and guardian of Jesus Christ the Savior.

The scene of the midwives

Salome and Zelemi bathing the infant Christ is based on apocryphal gospel passages in which Joseph calls upon them to attend to the Virgin birth. Our Lord Christ does not need to be bathed but rather agrees to follow a human custom, as He will later when he is circumcised and baptized. The bathing scene foreshadows His baptism in the Jordan River.

*This article is adapted from the following multimedia presentation on the Antiochian Archdiocese website:
<http://www.antiochian.org/icons-explained-nativity>*

