

HOLY CROSS OF VARAK



On the second Sunday after the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross Armenian Apostolic Church celebrated the discovery of the piece of our Lord's Cross on Mount Varak near Lake Van. The piece of the real Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ was hid several centuries ago by St. Hripsime the nun who at the time was hiding from her persecutors.

Tradition has it that a hermit by the name of Thodik saw a vision of a church with 12 pillars on the top of Mount Varak. He saw in the center of the pillars a cross radiating light all around it. This luminous vision descended and stood over the altar of the monastery of Varak accordingly the name the Cross of Varak. It was discovered about 660 A.D.

Catholicos Nerses "The Builder" came to Varak and verified the authenticity and historical details of the relic and proclaimed a special feast day which we celebrate until today.

Unit Two: Sacred Time –The Church Year

Lesson 4

Feasts of the Cross



Pray Together

Hanoon Hor, yev Vortvo, yev Hokvooyñ Surpo, Amen.

Jesus, you taught us so much.

You taught us how to love through our sacrifice.

You showed us the straightest path to the Father

Through the love for him and our neighbor.

May we have the strength to follow your example and your path,

So that we may be worthy to be chosen by you,

When you return as our king and our judge.

My Lenten Journal

Quick Quiz

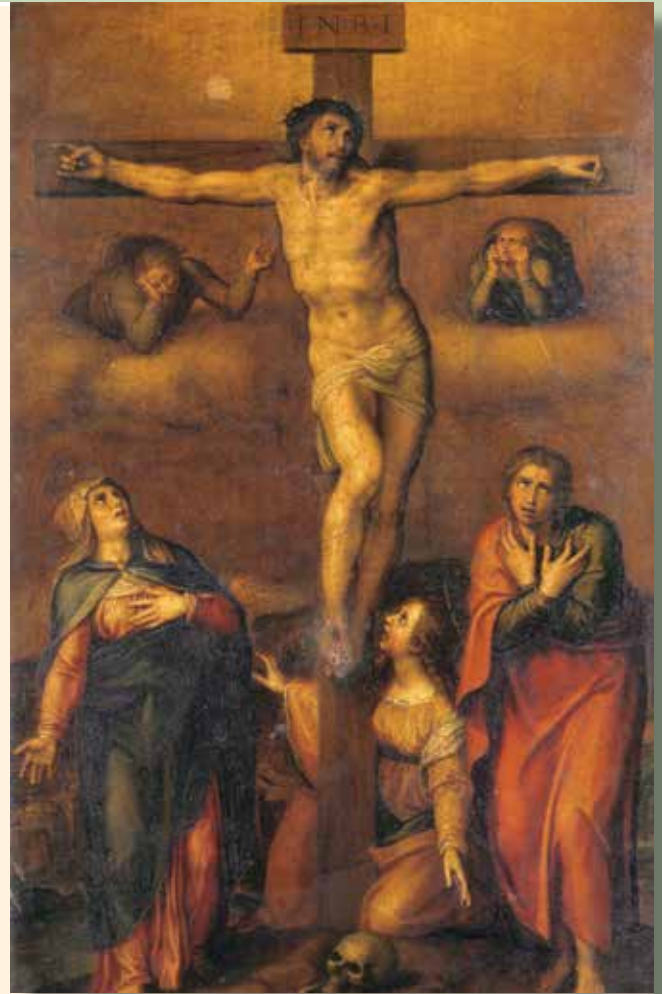
True or False

- The Virgin Mary was the first person to notice the empty tomb on Easter morning.
- The disciples began to understand that Jesus was the Son of God after he defeated death at his Resurrection.
- Christmas, Pentecost, and all other church feasts would not be meaningful without the Resurrection.
- Daniel, whose experiences prefigured those of Jesus, was also a famous poet.
- Some Armenians tie knots in a string during the Vigil Service on Palm Sunday.

Our Symbol of Victory

Execution on a cross was something to be avoided at all costs. It was an extremely barbaric way to put someone to death. In addition, crucifixions were public, so all who passed by could ridicule the victim. It was considered the most shameful way to die.

So why did Jesus, God and perfect human being, endure such suffering and humiliation? As the Lamb of God, Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice and sin-bearer. He took the punishment for every sin of every one of his people, past, present, and future. Such a huge burden of sin calls for a huge punishment. It required nothing less than God himself suffering death and enduring hell. When Jesus lay still in the tomb, he was not merely resting up for Easter. In those hours his holy nature suffered all that we would face in hell if he didn't take our place. What greater love is there? John 15:13 states "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." When Jesus was raised on the third day, the cross took on a new meaning. It became a sign of the defeat of death and our victory over sin through him. When we see a cross, we feel gratitude. We appreciate what Jesus endured for us, and we celebrate the love that motivated him to offer himself in our place.



Friends of Jesus

After such a demonstration of God's love for us, we realize we can never repay the debt we owe him. We can, however, model his attitude of service and sacrifice. Luke 9:23 states "Then he said to them all: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.'" This doesn't mean we literally walk around carrying a cross. One way is to make it a point to help and serve others in his name.

1. What are some of the things we have that we can share with others?
2. How will God help us with these efforts?
3. How can our words be a reflection of Christ's love?
4. What are some of the issues you think could be helped by Christian action?
5. Read Matthew 6:1-2. When you help others, how does God want you to act about your good works?

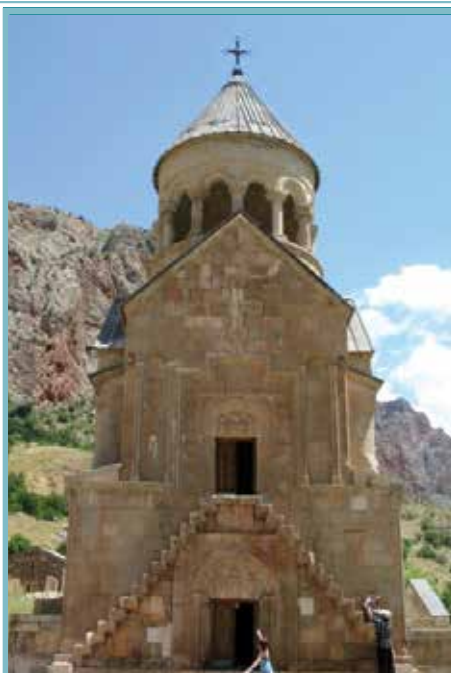
Exaltation of the Cross

The gold, jewel-encrusted crosses we see in church remind us of the glory of Jesus' triumph over sin and the grave. Instead of shame and death, now when we see a cross we think of its role in helping us reach God's kingdom. We rest in the peace of our relationship as members of his family.

Years after the Crucifixion, fragments of the Holy Cross were given to various churches, including ours. The major part of the cross remained in Jerusalem, at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, until wars caused possession to go back and forth. Today, we venerate this holy

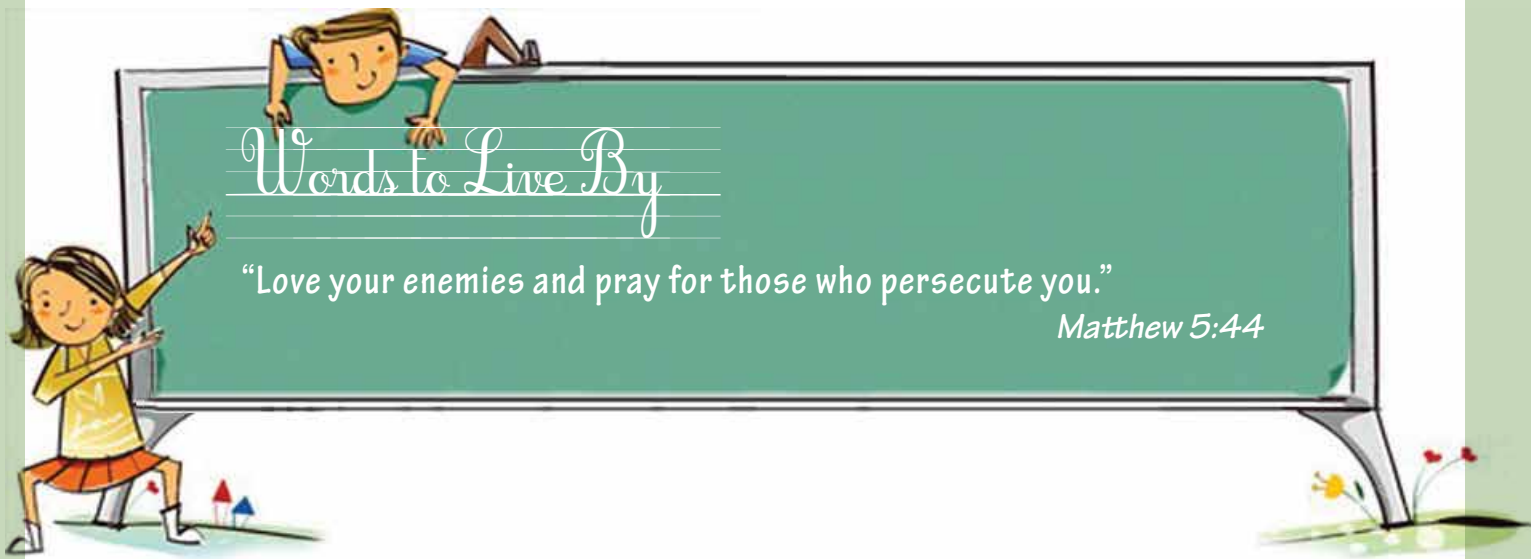
object and all its meaning with the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, or "Khachveratz." This feast occurs on the Sunday nearest September 14, and recalls an interesting historical event. The Persians had captured the cross of Christ when they conquered Jerusalem. In the 7th century, a coalition of forces (which included Armenians) led by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius marched on Jerusalem, seized the cross, and passed through Armenia where it was lifted up and venerated by the crowds that gathered on the way. An extraordinary moment! The feast day takes place at the same time as the harvest and Armenians take this opportunity to give God the credit for a bountiful harvest. We thank him for blessing our fields and farms.

During Khachveratz there is a procession with the cross in the church. We decorate the cross with sweet basil, which has a wonderful fragrance and is used in many foods. The faithful bring home a piece of the basil, which is said to relieve pain, as Christ's death on the cross and his Resurrection relieve us of the pain and sorrow of sin.



Did You Know?

The Armenian people's love of Jesus has led to many traditions and legends about the cross. One of these happened long ago, when villagers would wash the cross of the local monastery and save the water they used. They would then feed the water to their animals or pour it on them to keep them healthy.



Words to Live By

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Matthew 5:44



Our Armenian Way

There are other famous feasts of the cross. One that is specific to the Armenian Church is called “The Holy Cross of Varak.”

In the seventh century, Armenia had suffered terribly in the wars between Persia and Byzantium. Many Armenians had died in the conflicts, and homes, fields, and livestock had been destroyed.

One night during this trying time, in about 660 AD, a hermit named Todik noticed a light in the shape of a cross in the night sky. Bright as the sun, the light graced the Varak Mountains of Van. Todik and his student Hovel followed the

miraculous light, which eventually rested over the monastery at Varak. Entering the chapel there, Todik and Hovel discovered a fragment of a cross that had been left there long ago by St. Hripsime.

The light stayed for twelve days. This gave thousands of the faithful an opportunity to see the miracle. Catholicos Nersess III was so overcome with joy at the sight that he proclaimed a week of prayer and fasting, and he composed the hymn “Through the Sign of Your All-Conquering Cross.” The cross-shaped light lifted the spirits of the people of the battered Armenian nation and encouraged them in their difficult times. They knew God was thinking of them and would not desert them, as we know he will never leave us, either.

3. Have the students read the Scripture passages in **Celebrations of the Life of Our Lord** and complete the accompanying matching exercise. The answers are: Palm Sunday, Naming of the Lord, Easter, Ascension, Theophany/Nativity/Christmas, Transfiguration, Presentation of our Lord at the Temple, Baptism of Jesus, Pentecost. 15 min.
4. Have the students read John 20:1-18, 24-29, and John 21:1-14 in **Breaking News from Jerusalem..** Assign each student a character from these readings and one student as the reporter. Have the reporter interview each of them about what they saw when Jesus rose. For fun: Record the exercise and show it to a younger group at a later date. 20 min.
5. Teach **Hints of Jesus: Daniel**. As you teach, have students underline or highlight key phrases. 5 min.
6. Teach **Our Armenian Way** and ask students to complete the following when you've finished: "I learned that...." (they can refer to their text as they do this). Dismiss the class with a prayer. 5 min.

Unit Two: Sacred Time – The Church Year

Lesson 4

Feasts of the Cross

Key Concepts

1. Our debt of sin is so great it required nothing less than the punishment of Jesus to redeem it.
2. After the Resurrection, the cross – once a symbol of shame and death - became a sign of Christ's victory over death and our forgiveness.
3. We are instructed that if we are to belong to Jesus, we must emulate his example of service and sacrifice.
4. The Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross is one way the Armenian Church celebrates the power of God to cleanse us of our sins.

Objectives

During the session the students will

1. Explore the meaning of the cross and its message of service and sacrifice to us.
2. Participate in a class discussion about how we can serve the Lord.
3. Review the history of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.
4. Set up and decorate a food collection box.
5. Read about the Holy Cross of Varak and recall two facts about the reading.

Materials Needed

A large cardboard box
 Cross form from back of this manual
 Basil
 Miscellaneous pieces of gift wrapping paper
 Scissors
 A few sheets of plain white paper
 Markers

Note to the Teacher

This lesson is best taught in September, on the Exaltation (or as soon after as possible if your Sunday School opens later). In advance of the session, obtain permission to set up a box to collect non-perishable food for the needy, as well as to put up a few signs in the building about the food collection. It's a *great* way to start the school year!

Procedure

1. Welcome the students and stand to say the opening prayer together. Have them take the **Quick Quiz**.
Answers: F (the Virgin Mary did not accompany the women when they went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body; Mary Magdalene and others went), T, T, F (Daniel was a famous prophet), F (the Vigil Service is not on Palm Sunday. It is the Thursday evening service, a "vigil" recalling the agonizing hours leading to Jesus' crucifixion) 5 min.
2. Read **Our Symbol of Victory** and **Friends of Jesus**. Discuss questions as a class. Guidelines:
1. Answers might include time, possessions, loving company, our talents and skills (which can be further discussed). 2. By granting us strength, patience, understanding, a desire to help and serve. 3. Words of encouragement and support, kindness, etc. are all echoes of Christ's love for us. 4. Many: problems between friends or family members, world issues of poverty, war, human rights. 5. Humbly and quietly – God is the only important witness! 20 min.
3. Review the information in **Exaltation of the Cross**. Tell the students that they are going to collect food as a way of serving Jesus and answering the true call of the cross. Have the class decorate the box with the wrapping paper or other materials. Post a sign on the box: "The Exaltation of the Holy Cross – Khachveratz. Jesus Calls Us to Share Our Abundance!" Have them tape on crosses adorned with basil. Have the students make and put up a few signs telling where the box is and what foods should be deposited (no glass, perishables, etc.). When the box is filled, arrange for its delivery to a homeless shelter or soup kitchen. 30 min.
4. Read or teach **Our Armenian Way**, calling on students to provide two facts from memory before concluding with a prayer: "Lord, thank you for the saving power of your holy cross. Let it be more than an empty symbol for us. Help us serve as you did, Lord, selflessly and with great love." Dismiss the class. 5 min.

Unit Two: Sacred Time – The Church Year

Lesson 5

The Feasts of Mary

Key Concepts

1. Mary and Joseph were wonderful examples of faithfulness and obedience.
2. Mary is revered as the first saint and Mother of God.
3. Mary's body went to heaven through a miracle called the Assumption.
4. We recall Mary's bearing of the first fruit of God, the Lord Jesus, by blessing grapes, which had an important part in the harvest from Old Testament times.