

THE EPISTLE

Saint James' Episcopal Church
Livingston, Alabama

Volume XXXII, Number 3

March 2026



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This Month's Cover

In honor of the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, our cover this month is *The Annunciation* by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937). Completed in 1898, it is oil on canvas, 4'9"x5'11". It is displayed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It depicts the angel Gabriel announcing to the Blessed Virgin that she has been chosen to conceive and bear the Son of God. The painting broke many traditions of paintings on this subject. Mary is in crude earth-colored peasant clothing, rather than in the traditional blue gown and veil with which she is so often associated. Blue was an expensive dye in her time, and it is highly unlikely that she could have afforded anything so fine. Likewise, she is in a simple room with a rough stone floor and a wrinkled rug, crouched in fear on a rumpled bed. Rather than as a beautiful winged angel, Gabriel is depicted as a column of brilliant light. The intersection of the column of light and the shelf forms a cross. The portrait of Mary is remarkable. It is a blend of fear, awe, wonder, humility, obedience, and yet spiritual strength. Anyone seeing this painting and not knowing who and what it portrays would never associate her with the Queen of Heaven.

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born in 1859 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the son of a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. His mother, Sarah, was born a slave in Virginia. The history is unclear as to how she escaped, but nonetheless she did make it to Pennsylvania, a free state. There she met and married the Rev. Benjamin Tucker Tanner, who was just starting on a noteworthy ecclesiastical and literary career, and who was an influential spokesman for abolition. Henry Tanner was the first of nine children, seven of whom survived to adulthood. His sister, Dr. Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson, was the first black woman to be certified to practice medicine in Alabama. His middle name, Ossawa, was given in honor of the 1856 Battle of Ossawatimie, Kansas, when a band of pro-slavery thugs slaughtered the free black population of that town in an

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attempt to make Kansas a slave state.

In 1879, when most white artists refused to accept a black apprentice, Tanner enrolled as the only black student in the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. Although he was shunned by most of the students and professors, he made a few lifetime friends. The American artist Thomas Eakins, who was a professor there, took him under his wing as his protege. Even as a student he began to gain attention for his amazing understanding of human anatomy and his ability to paint the human figure. A serious but unspecified illness forced him to leave the Academy in 1881, and he spent several months recuperating in the Adirondacks.

Overt racism went unchecked in late 19th and early 20th century America. Tanner was frequently the victim of racial “pranks” while he was in the Academy, and he was often openly rejected because of his race in the years following. This took its toll on him, leading to occasional bouts of depression and a constant feeling of being an outsider. In 1891 he decided to go to Rome by way of Liverpool and Paris. When he arrived in Paris, he found it very much to his liking and decided to stay there. Racism was virtually non-existent in France in those days. He attended an art school there and befriended many American literary and visual artists. He began to move a bit from his earlier primary subjects, which were about black life in America, and started doing religious paintings. It was in Paris that he did the “Annunciation.” From then on, his works covered a wide variety of subjects, including several religious paintings. Except for a few visits home, Tanner spent the rest of his life in France. In 1899, he married Jessie Olsson, a famous Swedish-American opera singer. The couple lived happily outside of Paris and raised a son, Jesse. Jessie died in 1925, and Tanner grieved for her for almost five years, producing very few paintings during that time. He sold the house they had lived in so happily and moved back to an apartment in Paris. He died in 1937 and is buried beside his beloved Jessie in France at Sceaux, Hauts-de-Seine.

Richard R. Losch+

A Word from the Editor

In many corners of society today, to call someone a Christian is considered an insult, because many think that to be a Christian is to be a closed-minded, judgmental bigot. When I was a boy, to call

someone a Christian was the highest compliment that could be given. I remember a rabbi in our community who was widely recognized as an extraordinarily wise, kind, and generous man. I remember that it struck me as funny even as a child when a neighbor lady described him as a fine Christian gentleman. In those days, that was not meant as a religious commentary, but simply as a high compliment indicating that he was a truly good man. What happened? It is true that there are many Christians who are closed-minded, judgmental bigots, but that has always been so. There are just as many non-Christians with the same negative qualities. The mission of the Church is to shape the world to be like Christ, not to reshape Christ to be like the world. In seventy-five years we have gone from a deep-seated respect for the Church and all religion to a contempt and, in some quarters, a hatred of it. I do not believe we can blame society alone for this. It is the fault of society and the Church, because the Church has decided to walk hand-in-hand with society instead of taking it by the hand and leading it to Christ. For example, in modern times, we have redefined love. To love someone means to choose consciously to be concerned for that person's well-being, and to do whatever is in our power to help that person rise above himself. In modern times, the Church has redefined love as unconditional affirmation and acceptance. Paul tells us to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort" (2 Tim. 4:2). Instead, we have chosen to preach what we think makes people feel good and want to come back to church next Sunday. Along with that, we have adopted the world's obsession with self. Do your own thing. Follow your own conscience. Believe your own truth. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Also, the Church has failed to preach about sin and judgment. We are so afraid of being accused of being judgmental that we turn our back on what we know to be wrong or immoral. We have struck a deal with the world that we will just keep quiet about sin if the world will just like us. "Friendship with the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4). You cannot embrace the world and Christ at the same time. Years ago, the Church condemned sin even while it was indulging in sin itself. Nonetheless, it affirmed Christ's teaching that He is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through Him. People didn't like that in those days any more than they like it today, but even so they admired and respected the church

for being unafraid to make demands on them. Now the church tells them what they like, and they hold the church in contempt and the pews are empty. As they say, “Do the math.”

Richard R. Losch+

The Dates of Easter

Every year at this time, the question recurs as to why Easter falls over such a wide range of dates, and why the dates of Easter in the West and Easter usually do not coincide.¹ In 325 AD, the Council of Nicaea decreed that Easter would be universally observed on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the Vernal (Spring) Equinox. This worked until the Great Schism of 1054,² which eventually led to several circumstances that caused the East and the West to observe Easter on different dates. To answer why, we need to consider several factors.

In ancient times, almost all cultures in the world calculated the year according to the phases of the moon rather than the position of the sun. About 3000 BC, the Egyptians adopted a solar calendar, and that was what was used by the early Romans. Most of the rest of the world still relied on a lunar calendar. That early solar calendar was inaccurate, however, and over the years would slowly shift out of sync with the seasons. Eventually, winter weather would last into April and hot, sultry days into November. They would adjust the calendar by adding leap months and days to it to bring it back into sync. In 45 BC, Julius Caesar introduced a corrected solar calendar known as the Julian calendar. This solved the problem, but it still contained some small errors. In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII introduced a correction called the Gregorian calendar, which is what we use

¹ In the Western churches, Easter can fall between March 22 to April 25. In the Orthodox churches it is April 3 to May 8. In Judaism, Passover can be March 26 to April 5.

² In 1054, a bitter power struggle between the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Papal Legate resulted in the Pope and the Patriarch excommunicating each other. This is called the Great Schism. From that point on, the Western and Eastern Churches went their separate ways. Even so, their theology is still very close and does not differ significantly on any critical matters. The Roman and Orthodox churches differ theologically far less than the Roman and Protestant Churches do. The conflict of 1054 was more one of power, authority and ego than of theology.

today.¹ The Eastern Orthodox churches still use the Julian calendar to determine liturgical dates, which adds to the confusion of modern dating. Although the State of Israel uses the Gregorian calendar for all civil matters, worldwide Judaism uses the lunar calendar to calculate all liturgical dates, including that of Passover. Their calculation is also based on the relationship of the full moon and the vernal equinox, but their interpretation of that relationship is much more complicated. Because of this, no Jewish religious observance falls on the same date every year, and the date of Passover usually does not correspond exactly with the Eastern or Western dates of Easter.

Easter is obviously very closely linked to Passover. For that reason, all Christian churches set the date of Easter each year according to the lunar calendar, which is used to calculate the date of Passover. The critical factor is what is called the Paschal (Passover) Full Moon. This is the first full moon on or after the Vernal Equinox,² which falls on March 21-22 (by the Gregorian calendar) each year. Throughout Christianity, Easter is the first Sunday after the Paschal Full Moon. This should be easy, but the difference of calendars complicates the matter.

In the Julian calendar, the vernal equinox always falls on the Julian March 21, which corresponds with April 3 in the Gregorian calendar. This is a two-week difference. Another factor is that the Eastern churches believe that Easter should never fall before the Jewish Passover, which is calculated slightly differently. This occasionally pushes the Orthodox Easter even later. It is also possible that both the Eastern and Western dates could fall on the same day. This is rare, but happened last year on April 20, 2025, when the whole Christian world celebrated Easter on the same day. That same year, Passover began on April 12 and ended on April 20. In 2024, however, the Eastern and Western dates were 35 days apart, which is the longest possible span. The Western date was March 31 and the Eastern was May 5. Passover was April 22-30.

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¹ Even that has some very small errors that are corrected every few years by adding “leap seconds.” The last was added on December 31, 2016.

² An equinox is when the day and the night are each exactly twelve hours long. This normally happens on March 20-21 and September 22 each year. The second one is called the Autumnal (Fall) Equinox.

Be Wordly Wise

English Has No Future

English is often said to be one of the richest languages because it enables us to express our ideas so precisely and accurately. If you think about it carefully, though, you realize that it is in many ways very uncomplicated when you compare it with many other languages. For example, did it ever occur to you that that English verbs have no future form? In most languages, verbs have a form for each of the three major tenses: past, present, and future. In Latin, for example, *amavi*, *amo*, *amabo* means I loved, I love, I will love—a different form for each tense. Most regular English verbs have only two forms: present (love) and past (regularly formed by adding -ed, loved). There is also a gerund (formed by adding -ing, loving). I can say, “I love” and “I loved,” and that’s it. All the rest of the past tenses are formed by using auxiliary words, such as forms of to have and to be: I have loved; I had loved; I was loved; I have been loved; I had been loved. The future is formed by using the present (love) or past (loved) along with “will” or “shall” and often a form of “have”: I will love; I will have been loved; I will have been being loved. Every one of these delicate nuances uses the same basic two words: love or loved. If we want to mess around with the future, the best we can do is to mess around with the present form, “love,” as in “I will love.” We use the present tense for the future, as in, “Where are you going tomorrow?” “I am going to church.”¹ “And what about next week?” “I am going to church again.” “Are you going to church the following week?” “No, I’m in Chicago all that week.” In all those sentences, there is no future tense used, yet we understand completely what is meant. The fact that we understand it does not mean that it is precise, however. “I ain’t got no pencil” communicates the idea quite accurately, but it could hardly be said to be a precise statement. English is a fascinating and very useful language, but no one could accuse it of being logical (although few languages are).

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¹ This raises another question: Why in English do we use the progressive (ongoing activity) form when almost every other language would use a simple, straightforward present tense—“I go” rather than “I am going”? In almost all other languages, the progressive is used only when you want to emphasize that the activity is going on right at that time.

A Touch of Trivia

In early 1975, George Lucas started casting the first Star Wars movie. A primary character in that movie was the scoundrel con man Han Solo, and Lucas wanted Al Pacino to take the role. Pacino, who later admitted that he didn't really understand the script, turned it down. Lucas opened it up for auditions, and a young aspiring actor who was working as a part-time carpenter on the set asked to audition. As soon as Lucas heard him reading the part, he knew that this was the man. It was, of course, Harrison Ford. If it had not been for that part in Star Wars, he might never have been later cast as Indiana Jones, and that movie and its sequels might never have become the great successes that they were. It has become a Hollywood legend how an unlikely and unexpected casting incident produced one of the most enduring movie heroes and contributed to two of the industry's most successful franchises, Star Wars and Indiana Jones.

Richard R. Losch+

James and Jacob

It would probably be more correct to entitle this article, “James *is* Jacob.” Everywhere in the Bible, whenever you see the name James it is really Jacob. It is the Hebrew name *Ya'akov* (יַעֲקֹב), rendered in Greek as *Iakōbos* (Ἰακώβος).¹ Although today they are usually called James, Jesus had two disciples, Jacob the Greater and Jacob the Less. The leader of the early church in Jerusalem was Jacob (called the Brother of the Lord), and the General Epistle that is commonly called the Book of James should be called the Book of Jacob. To be stuffily correct, the classic translation of the Bible should be called the King Jacob Version², and our parish should be called St. Jacob's Church. Relax, tradition is powerful, and none of this is going to happen. In almost every translation of the Bible, the name is translated to its equivalent in that language.³ In English, however, while the Old Testament always uses Jacob, the New

¹ As with many letters, *b* and *v* are often interchangeable between languages.

² The reign of King James I is known as the Jacobean era.

³ German, *Jakob*; Dutch, French and Spanish, *Jacob* (Spanish also uses *Diego*); Italian, *Giacobbe* (also *Iago*); Polish, *Jakub*; Russian, *Dzheykob*.

Testament almost always uses James.

So how did the name Jacob become James? In Latin, the Greek *Iakobos* became *Jacobus*. In Late Latin many sounds became blurred, including *b* and *m*, so *Jacobus* became *Jacomus* (resulting in the Italian *Giacomo*). Old French, which is noted for dropping syllables, adapted this to *Gemmes* and *Jammes*. These came to England with the Norman conquest. In time, both evolved into James.

In general it would be a bit pedantic, if not completely foolish, to try to change every James into Jacob. In the case of the New Testament, however, it is important to realize that any time we see the name James, it is really Jacob. It was Jacob the son of Isaac whose name was changed to Israel, and who is the ancestor of all the Jews. This is why Jacob is such a common name among the Jews. God is often referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and this name is revered in both Judaism and Christianity.

Richard R. Losch+

A Touch of Trivia

Julius Caesar was assassinated on March 15, 44 BC. He received 23 stab wounds, of which it was determined that only one was fatal. The Roman historian Suetonius reports that Caesar's physician Antistius examined his body after the murder and made that determination. Marc Antony made the most of that in his funeral oration when he pointed out that slash in Caesar's blood-soaked toga, blamed it on Brutus, and called it (according to Shakespeare) "the most unkindest cut of all." This is the first documented example in history of a forensic autopsy to determine the cause of death.

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Arguing With God

Anyone familiar with the Bible knows the story of Abraham arguing or negotiating with God over the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 18:22ff). This is not a unique situation. There are several instances throughout the Old and New Testaments where people disagree with God (or Jesus) and tell him so. In fact, the very name of the Jewish nation, Israel, was the name given to Jacob after he wrestled with God (Gen 32:22ff). Israel in Hebrew means "struggle with God." It is impossible to give a count of how many instances there are because it is so hard to define the difference between an argument, a

negotiation, a discussion, or a simple questioning. The stories also vary greatly one from another, such as the difference between Abraham's compassionate argument with God over Sodom and Jonah's petulant temper tantrum when God showed mercy on Nineveh after he first intended to destroy it (Jon. 4:1ff).

If something comes too easily, it is usually taken for granted. We appreciate what we have to struggle for. That includes learning, worldly achievements, and spiritual growth. A significant part of the ancient Jewish ethos is spiritual struggle. This is clearly reflected in much of Jesus' teaching, where time after time, he promised us that we would have to struggle, face danger, and possibly even face death for our faith. Christianity therefore also recognizes that struggle is productive. This is one of the objections of Judeo-Christianity to the basic principle of Islam, which is total, unquestioning submission to God. The very word "Islam" in Arabic means "submission." Judeo-Christianity teaches that God wants us to be morally serious thinking beings, not blindly obedient slaves. God welcomes moral engagement. When people in prayer challenge God or appeal to his justice or compassion, they are engaging him on a very personal level. This is exactly the opposite of just getting angry with him or turning away from him. In the New Testament, we see this many times. Peter, for example, challenged Jesus right after he had acknowledged him as the Messiah (Mk. 8:27ff). Jesus reprimanded him, but despite the many times that Peter either challenged him or even denied knowing him, he still made him the leader of the Apostles. When the Canaanite woman asked Jesus to heal her daughter, and he told her that it was not fit to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs, she challenged him. She responded, "Yes it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Matt.15:21ff). He commended her for her faith and healed her daughter.

The crucial distinction is between challenging or questioning God and renouncing him by thinking one's self to be morally superior to his action. For example, it often happens that God allows suffering in the world, and we don't understand why. This is particularly difficult when it is we or someone we love who suffers. Questioning or even challenging him to help us understand is perfectly acceptable, and perhaps even encouraged by God because it is through this that we grow spiritually and in our understanding of the faith. The temptation is to be angry with him, and this can be destructive. When great suffering had been visited on St. Teresa of

Ávila, she asked God why. He replied, “That’s the way I treat my friends.” She answered, “That’s why you have so few.” When things go wrong, it is the time that we most need God, but unfortunately, it is also the time that many renounce him. St. Teresa did not turn against him. She went to him for answers and was not afraid to engage him on a very personal level. Suffering and tragedy should never cause us to turn away from God, but there is nothing wrong with expressing displeasure with what he has allowed and questioning why. They can deepen faith and force harder questions in a more adult relationship with God. An adult relationship includes struggle rather than simple childlike expectations of ease and protection.

Richard R. Losch+

Holy Cow

The common image of farm animals in the ancient Middle East is that of sheep and goats. While these were important animals for the production of wool, meat, and milk, and were a significant part of a farmer’s wealth, they were not his most important animals. Cattle, particularly oxen, were by far the most valuable animals. They made the difference between farming for subsistence and farming for productivity and profit. While sheep and goats were valuable for what their bodies could yield, cattle were most valuable as beasts of labor.¹ The most important of these was the ox, because of his sheer brute strength. An ox is nothing more than a castrated bull, but castration causes him to develop immense muscle and bone structure. Studies of the remains of Bronze and Iron Age cattle have shown that the breeding of these beasts for strength was well understood among the farmers of the time. This is reflected in the many references to them in the Old Testament. To offer a young ox as a sacrifice in the Temple represented a very significant financial offering, as well as a sacrifice of potential future productivity. In most pagan religions that worshipped animals, cattle held a high position in the pantheon. Apis the bull was an important god in ancient Egypt.

¹ Ancient people rarely drank milk as a beverage, and they preferred goat’s milk rather than cow’s milk for cheese. The poor rarely could afford meat of any kind, but beef was considered a luxury even among the rich. Work cattle were too valuable to be eaten, and by the time they were too old to work, their meat was too tough to be pleasant.

Aaron's golden calf (Ex. 32:1ff) and those that Jeroboam set up in Bethel and Dan (I Kg. 12:29ff) were probably images of Apis.

Draft animals received special treatment because they were recognized as the means of growth and development. Sheep and goats were important and had their place but cattle were considered special because they could alter the entire landscape. Also they were less harmful to pasture land. Sheep eat the grass right to the roots and therefore have to be moved from pasture to pasture. Cattle eat the surface grass, which then grows back quickly. Oxen were critical to productive farming. A man with a hand plow can plow barely enough ground to grow sufficient crops to sustain himself and a small family. One man with an ox can break ground that a man by himself could not break at all, and he can plow at least ten times as much ground in the same amount of time. To make it even faster and more efficient, two oxen were yoked together with a wooden yoke over their shoulders. To work effectively the two must be approximately the same size and strength. The Levitical law goes into great detail about forbidding yoking unequal animals together because if the animals are unequal, the physical strain can be very great on the weaker one.¹ The prophets frequently used yoked oxen as a metaphor for slavery or oppression. Many cultures of the time abused their draft animals, and the Jews were among the first to recognize that these were a blessing from God and a source of wealth and power, and that their use required careful thought and restraint rather than simple exploitation.

With their lack of mechanization, ancient peoples relied greatly on cattle, which did an immense amount of physical labor. They pulled their plows, and threshed their grain, and pulled the carts that transported their goods, but their greatest contribution was forcing them into new concepts of the relationship of humans and animals. They formed their concepts of how power, blessing, and mutual responsibilities were understood.

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"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

- Thomas Edison

¹ The Jews were among the first people on earth to have strict laws regarding the humane treatment of animals, including the requirement that animals be allowed to rest on the Sabbath.