

THE FAITHFUL SERVANT

April, 2021

TWO SAINTS

The third Sunday of Great Lent, the Veneration of the Holy Cross, is a dividing line in our observance of the Fast. The first two Sundays of Lent commemorate historical events, the restoration of the icons in the first Sunday and St. Gregory Palamas's teaching about our relationship with God in the second. Then the emphasis changes. The image of the Cross itself is placed before us in the church for our encouragement in facing the rigors of the Fast through the second half of the season. For the next two Sundays, we have before us the lives of two great saints of the Church as models of "taking up the Cross" to follow Christ (Mark 8:34), St. John of **The Ladder** and St. Mary of Egypt. The first was a great teacher of repentance and the spiritual life as set forth in his book, **The Ladder of Divine Ascent**; the second of how repentance worked in one extreme example of both sin and repentance. These saints may not be all that familiar to us, but they should be. St. John's book is assigned to be read at mealtimes in Orthodox monasteries throughout the world, and St. Mary's story is to be read as a part of the recitation of the Great Penitential Canon of St. Andrew of Crete in the fifth week (unfortunately, we will be unable to do that service this year).

Below are some short biographies of those saints taken from a "Lives of the Saints" book from our library (title and author not with me as I'm writing). This is a start, at any rate, at getting to know them, their writings and deeds. Of course, you can probably fill in much more information from online sources, including www.oca.org, and both **The Ladder** and St. Mary's life in our copies of the Great Canon are available for loan from church. But this is a start. May it begin to help provide us with the "good strength" to continue in our spiritual effort through Lent and into the Great and Holy Week of Our Lord's Passion and Resurrection at the end of this month.

St. John Climacus (Gr. Klimakos; trans. "The Ladder")

(c. 569-649). Probably born in Syria...he joined the monks on Mt. Sinai when sixteen and was professed four years later. He lived as a hermit nearby, and later when he was thirty-five continued his eremitical life at Thole. He was learned in Scripture and the Church Fathers and became a sought-after spiritual adviser, noted for his ability to console distraught souls. When seventy years old, and over his objections, he was elected abbot of the monks on Mt. Sinai and ruled until shortly before he died in the hermitage he had lived in for forty years. He is particularly known as the author of **The Ladder** ["of Divine Ascent"]... describing the thirty steps of the ladder required to attain religious perfection, which was enormously popular during the Middle Ages. He died on Mt. Sinai on March 30.

St. Mary of Egypt

(5th century). ...she was an Egyptian who went to Alexandria when she was twelve and lived as an actress and courtesan for seventeen years. She was brought to a realization of her evil life before an icon of the Blessed Virgin, and at Mary's direction went to the desert east of [Jerusalem], where she lived as a hermitess for forty-seven years, not seeing a single human being and beset by all kinds of temptations, which were mitigated by her prayers to the Blessed Virgin. She was discovered about 430 by a holy man named Zosimas, who was impressed by her spiritual knowledge and wisdom. He saw her the following Lent, but when he returned, he found her dead and buried her. When he returned to his monastery near the Jordan, he told the brothers what had happened and the story spread.

A NEW FEATURE—BOOK REVIEW

Many thanks to our parish librarian, Erin Henry, for volunteering to supply us with book reviews for this newsletter! I have already warned her that she'll have competition—from me! I'm sure I'll be finding a text here and there that I'll want to comment upon! But this one is excellent. Erin's review makes me eager to get to the book myself, so now there's further competition—who's going to get to read it first?

Toolkit for Spiritual Growth: A Practical Guide to Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving by Fr. Evan Armatas, Ancient Faith Publishing, 2020

A small, unpretentious book just over 100 pages, this guide offers newcomers and those already Orthodox Christians concise explanations of the three actions forming the foundation of the Orthodox Christian faith. Though many books have been written on the topic of the “three-legged stool” (a phrase used for prayer, fasting, and almsgiving), and many go into depth regarding these three central practices, Fr. Armatas's guide is easily-digestible and refreshingly welcoming.

Fr. Evan stresses the importance of realizing the framework already set up by Christ, citing examples from scripture, and offering realistic ways to live a life of obedience to God. Not only did Christ give us a way to pray when he taught His disciples the Lord's Prayer, but the Holy Fathers have developed a structure of prayer for every day, following an annual cycle; when used mindfully, this structure of prayer gives us the support we need to live our life as obedient Orthodox Christians. When we become despondent regarding our personal struggles, we gain strength and clarity when we use the prayers of the Orthodox Church. Fr. Evan makes an important point regarding the use of formal prayers to guide our attention away from self-serving, stream-of-consciousness prayer and towards a mind-set that respects our sacred and unique relationship to our God. God knows what we are going through and what we need; prayer is a humbling aide to communicate with Him.

Almsgiving can often be a stumbling block regarding financial affordability. Fr. Evan gently helps us to see our charity as anything we do in love, even for ourselves. A single mother,

for example, can begin by being attentive to and spending quality time with her children and home, as well as taking care of herself. Though it may sound selfish, when we begin our charity with ourselves and our family, we are best able to continue a life of service to others.

A stark warning that food can be a downfall to humans, Fr. Evan reminds us that eating what was forbidden is how mankind became trapped in sin; again, we come back to obedience. Helpfully broadening perspective on fasting (which can become ridiculously focused upon food alone), he welcomes us to consider a fast from anything that separates us from God. Remember Christ's human example of baptism, fasting, and overcoming temptation by Satan before beginning His earthly ministry. Being the spiritual animals we are, driven hard by our senses and desires, fasting is, arguably, the spiritual tool most acutely working in us to realign our body and soul. Then, as Christ did, we can carry out our unique ministry God has created us in His image to fulfill.

Erin Henry, St Catherine Church librarian

This book is available for checkout from St Catherine's church library.

WHAT NOW?

For your consideration this month, a Psalm of praise, but first, a little background (NB— just for clarity's sake for all here, I am using the “standard” numbering of each Psalm):

As we went over the Psalms in our weekly Friday online studies, it became clear that there are several groupings within the Psalter of those with similar themes. We have, for example, the “Psalms of Ascent,” 120-134, which are read at the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. More to the point here would be the group at the very end of the book which are read as “The Praises” at Matins, Psalms 148-150. In fact, this batch of Psalms of praise is longer, extending back to 145 (and including Psalm 146, “Praise the Lord, O my Soul...,” the Second Antiphon at most Sunday and festal Divine Liturgies). A quick look at all in that sequence will reveal the common theme of undiluted praise of the God of Israel.

But Psalms 145-150 is not the only group of “Praises” in the book. Psalms 95-100 also stand together with a common theme of praising the Lord (“Come, let us rejoice,” “Sing to the Lord,” “Make a joyful noise,” etc.). I've even come to think of this sequence as “The Little Praises!” And I have found the first one in that series to have particular relevance for us in the late stages of Lent, approaching Holy Week.

Here we do, indeed, “rejoice” and “make a joyful noise,” and with good reason, too—notice the clauses beginning with “for...,” the reasons, then, for which we are offering our praise are spelled out. He is the great God and King (v. 3) who controls the universe (v. 4), which He had created (v. 5). And for all that, we “worship and fall down...and weep...for He is our God and we are [His] people!” (v. 7). What else **can** we do in light of all that?

The truth of the matter is that more is required of us because of His greatness and mercy. From verse 8 (“Today...”) until the end, the rest of this Psalm of praise sounds a warning—that “...if

you will hear His voice, harden **not** your hearts...” The remainder of the Psalm is an exhortation to righteousness and a warning of the consequences if we ignore that exhortation. If we continue in our “rebellion” against our God and His Law, we “shall not enter [His] rest,” we will remain in the “wilderness” of our alienation from Him, as our kind (“your fathers”...“that generation”) has done through the ages. We know enough about God to praise Him. Jesus Christ has called us to account, that “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). We know Who He is—we’re responsible for acting like it if we wish to enjoy the “rest” of the heavenly Kingdom which He has opened for us, just as He had led Israel to its Promised Land in ages past.

Psalm 95

Come, let us rejoice in the Lord! Let us make a joyful noise to God our Savior!

Let us come before His face with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to Him with psalms!

For the Lord is a great God and a great King over all the earth;

For in His hands are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are His also;

For the sea is His, for He made it; for His hands formed the dry land.

Come, let us worship and fall down before Him and weep before the Lord, our Maker!

For he is our God and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.

Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness,

Where your fathers tested me, tried me, and saw my works forty years.

Therefore I was angry with that generation and said, “They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways.”

So I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest.”

HOLY WEEK/PASCHA SCHEDULE AND OTHER ANNOUNCEMENTS

At the time I sent out the April calendar, I still wanted to check with both the Parish Council and our Archdiocesan authorities about how best to proceed this year for Holy Week services; hence, the “TBAs” through the listing for that week (4/24-5/2). I’ve since sent out a proposed schedule on the parish email list, so you may have seen it, but it’s worthwhile repeating here:

Saturday, April 24, 10 AM—Lazarus Saturday Divine Liturgy

6:30 PM—Vespers of Palm Sunday with Blessing of Palms and Branches

Sunday, April 25, 10 AM—Palm Sunday Divine Liturgy

Wednesday, April 28, 7:30 PM—Matins of Holy Thursday

Thursday, April 29, 7:30 PM—Matins of Good Friday (**The Passion Gospels**)

Friday, April 30, 7:30 PM—Vespers of Good Friday

Saturday, May 1, 10 AM—Holy Saturday Vespers Liturgy of St. Basil

May 1, 11:30 PM-May 2—Vigil and Divine Liturgy of Pascha

As I mentioned in the email, I believe the logistics of holding the outdoor processions Friday and Saturday nights are going to be too challenging to attempt with our limitations of distancing, masking, etc. still in place, given our route through the yards, alleys and street. We will do what we would do when it rains heavily, staying indoors. And Friday night, we will only offer the Vespers, as that is usually the better attended of the services we usually offer. I am also wary of attempting too much for myself, since I do not know how much support will be present this year for serving and singing.

I expect that we will still be serving under the limitations for distancing and masking set by our Synod and diocese—that has limited us to 25 worshipers per service. That would severely cut down on attendance for the Paschal service Saturday night. A few suggestions:

1. We are now permitted to have **30** attendees. I looked over our pew arrangement, and we can use more of our space to fit that many and still observe proper distancing. I just received word that this has been OK'd by Metropolitan Tikhon. That's not many more, but it helps!

2. In the past, we have not offered the Paschal Vespers Sunday afternoon, as I have attended that service at Cathedral with His Beatitude and the diocesan clergy. I am not planning on doing so this year, and it may not be offered anyway except for the Cathedral community this year. I will plan on offering the **Paschal Agape Vespers at 1 PM on Pascha, May 2**, and **Blessing Paschal Foods** at the end of that service as well as at the end of Liturgy the night before.

You will then have **three Paschal services** which you may attend: the **Holy Saturday Vespers Liturgy** (actually, the first Paschal service!), the **Paschal Vigil and Liturgy Saturday night into Sunday morning**, and the **Paschal Vespers Sunday afternoon**. If you've been "shut out" of attending Saturday night for the main Paschal service, you still have then two more opportunities to attend services for the Resurrection of the Lord. And, yes, another chance to have your basket of the Paschal foods blessed Sunday afternoon as well as after the Liturgy.

There will **NOT** be the following this year: 1) service books distributed at any service; 2) outdoor processions Good Friday and Pascha night; 3) Holy Saturday Matins with the Praises and the watch at the Tomb; 4) Flowers distributed from the Tomb Good Friday; 5) eggs distributed after the Paschal Liturgy (this **might** change if we can figure out how, like with antidoron at Liturgy); 6) the parish breakfast after the Paschal Liturgy.

I am very sorry that we still need to function under these limitations, but, as I've said before, it beats what we could do last year, thanks be to God! And as some might say looking to a plague-free future, "Next year in Jerusalem!"

Also, this past month, we commended to Our Lord's care in the hope of His heavenly Kingdom, the souls of Elena Paunescu and George Mihich. We also performed the one-year anniversary Panikhida for John Morgan and blessed his gravesite and headstone at Garfield United Methodist Church Cemetery in Smithsburg. May Our Lord keep them all in His eternal memory!