

The Sundays of Great Lent

Forgiveness Sunday

The Church begins us on this Lenten Journey with Forgiveness Sunday (also called Adam's expulsion from paradise). We are taken back to the Garden of Eden as the hymns of the church place us in the shoes of Adam and Eve. Adam long ago blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent for their sins and we often do the same thing but **now** Christ has given us a second chance- a chance to choose what Adam and Eve didn't choose, a chance to forgive our brothers and sisters, a chance to choose the tree of life, which is the tree of the cross as we say in Holy Week (for forgiveness is truly a cross).

This time we know that the tree of the cross conquers all. This time we know that the tree of the cross leads to salvation. This time we know that Christ himself (true God of true God) endured the tree of the cross. This time we know that life comes from the cross. This time we must forgive in order to have new life, to reconnect with God and our neighbor. This time we must forgive to live in harmony and love. This time we must forgive so that in this angelic state of love and unity we might begin lent and continue to become what we were created to be; one with God and each other.

Forgiveness itself is a rejection of the hopelessness of our situation and an affirmation of the hope, love, and mercy of Christ. It is a sign of the cross- A bridge leading to New Life-A breakthrough of the kingdom into this world.

Another theme of this Sunday is of course repentance. In the vespers service for this day we reach out to God and call out to him in our lowly sinful state. The Prokeimenon says, "Turn not thy face away from thy servant for I am afflicted, hear me speedily, attend to my soul and deliver it." So much of lent is a calling out to Christ- it's a movement from our inward focus to a dependence on God (less of me, more of him). We must decrease as he must increase, but the paradox is that we actually become more and more stabilized, rooted, and secure as humans. We become more and more of who we are- little Christ's created in the image and likeness of God.

Sunday of Orthodoxy

We begin with victory after a first week that might have been full of small losses. We might have broken a couple fasting rules and maybe got a little discouraged after all those long services calling ourselves sinners. Maybe we thought to ourselves, "Ahhhh that was only one week? How can I continue for over 40 more days?" The Church gives us little pump up speech- an inspirational push after our first tough week of Great Lent.

We celebrate the Triumph of Orthodoxy on this day as it was also celebrated on the first Sunday of Great Lent in 843. We celebrate the restoration of icons, the affirmation of the truth that God did indeed become man and can be depicted as one in an icon.

We believe the veneration of icons is not some sort of worship of wood, but in fact a veneration of the image depicted on the wood (the honor goes to the one depicted, not the wood).

The beauty of this feast lies in the unity and oneness of the faithful all together affirming the truths about God, our faith, and our life here on earth (“the faith that supports the universe”). This feast is a witness of that new life in Christ- resurrected life -where the saints are alive in heaven and depicted as so on the icons. Their story is a heavenly story and the icons give us a glimpse into this story. They give us a glimpse into the kingdom. They are a reminder of our true calling, our true homeland. In this way, this celebration fits in perfectly with the first week of Great Lent and goes right along with the Gospel for this Sunday, “You will see greater things than these...truly truly I say to you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man”.

Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas

The basis of the teachings of St. Gregory lie in the truth that mankind can **know** God. Humans were created to know God and if you know what “knowledge” meant in the ancient times you know it meant more than just academic knowledge- It meant experience and oneness. St. Gregory proclaimed that we can know God/experience God in his energies (not his essence- no one can know God in his essence- it is utterly beyond us). This “experiencing God in his energies” can sound confusing, but on a basic level it means that God touches our souls, minds, and bodies and this often makes us feel light- bright- full of joy. The very holy people see a divine light in these moments, which is the uncreated light of God. It is an experience of God- the glory of God- the light of the Transfiguration. It fills us, unites us to God, and illumines us. God’s energies are the way that he allows us to participate in himself.

What a great reminder about what life is all about- participating in God- becoming like God. It is about more than just a relationship; it is about union- union with God. It is about sharing in the very life of God (his love) and becoming one with him. This is our Lenten goal/our life goal/ our new life goal that Pascha reveals to us.

Sunday of the Cross

The image that always comes to mind when we celebrate this feast is one of Constantine who sees the sign of the cross in the sky and hears “In this sign conquer”. I think this is exactly what we need to hear by this point in the fast (“In this sign conquer”). The crosses and struggles we encounter during lent are to help us conquer- conquer the passions and conquer the distractions this life throws at us. The cross is a struggle but it always leads to new life- resurrection. Our fast isn’t so much focused on submission but rather on new life. It isn’t focused on curtailing our freedoms as much as it is focused on guiding us to live freely. The cross is never looked at as an isolated event, just like Great Lent is never looked at as an isolated event. They are both always connected to Pascha and new life. Lent is always filled with bright sadness- never a hopeless cry to a distant God. It is rather a cry to a God who was crucified for us in the flesh- a God who shows that sacrifice leads to salvation. We see the cross as a symbol of victory, the enthronement of a king, and a way into paradise.

Sunday of St. John of the Ladder

The feast of St. John is March 30th but since we don't really have weekday liturgies during lent and the saint is so popular we also celebrate his feast on the 4th Sunday of Great Lent. St. John Climacus (of the ladder) was born in the 6th century and became the Abbot of St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt Sinai after 40 years of ascetic toil. He was a great ascetic and great teacher who guided souls along the path towards salvation. He became an ascetic at 16 and later in his life wrote one of the most famous books in all of Orthodoxy - *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. It was written for monks to help them in their asceticism and spiritual warfare along the path towards theosis (unity with God). The book has 30 chapters and each chapter represents a rung of a ladder leading towards the kingdom.

We remember on this day the value of asceticism and fasting. It is how we come to God. Adam and Eve were deceived by the serpent, who tricked them into thinking they could come to know God and be like God by eating (a fruit). Fasting is a denunciation of that lie- proof that it is a denunciation. Life, true life, is not in food – it is in Christ- knowing Christ, so we fast to switch our dependence on food to a dependence on God. We push ourselves to our limits and turn to God in our weakness and surrender to him. We get by through dependence on God and this causes us to begin living life centered on him. He becomes the axis around which our day revolves. Fasting helps us realize what we are truly hungry for and it helps us realize what true nourishment really is.

St. Mary of Egypt

St Mary of Egypt made a radical change in her life (about as radical as it goes). She once lived a very sinful life taking advantage of others as she satisfied her carnal desires as she pleased. She was her own god living with complete freedom, power, and passion –until she encountered God- true God of true God. This changed everything. Encounter with God- the source of life- the fountain of life-the bread of life- the creator in whose image we were made -often exposes us, showing us our false realities and our idols we have created. The truth that an encounter with God brings is something we can hide from like Adam and Eve or embrace like St. Mary of Egypt.

After her encounter with God she gave up all she had known for so long in a radical way and began to live her life as a wanderer in the wilderness repenting of her sins. She never forgot that encounter with God and how life changing and life-giving it was. It was New Life for her. Her encounter with God revealed to her the “realness” of life. She encountered true love - selfless, humble, sacrificial, and merciful and it led to a life greater than anything her carnal desires could offer her.

Encounter with God doesn't have to be a life changing moment like that of St. Mary of Egypt. In fact every time we pray we are experiencing an encounter with God- an encounter that reveals the truth about our life and how we have missed that mark. As paradoxical as this sounds, the more we realize our sin the more we see God clearly (the beauty, splendor, and majesty of God in our lives) and the more we see God clearly the more we can model our life after his. It is with this belief and with this hope that we offer our repentance during Great Lent- so that we might see God more clearly and live in oneness with him. May we have the courage and desire to say with the saints, “We are the greatest among sinners, beloved by God, being transformed into his likeness.”