

The Fifth Sunday of Great Lent: St. Mary of Egypt

By Very Rev. Fr. Lawrence Farley

Mary was born in the fifth century and lived as a prostitute in Alexandria from the age of twelve. She was quite sick spiritually and often had sex with partners for no charge, engaging in all kinds of unnatural sexual practices. One day when she was about twenty-nine years old, out of boredom, she followed a crowd heading for the Holy Land for the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross. She had no money and so paid for her passage by sleeping with the crew, consumed as she was with a desire to seduce as many as she could.

With the crowd of pilgrims, Mary tried to enter the Church of the Resurrection but found herself physically unable to do so. At last she understood—God Himself was rejecting her from His presence. All the shame of her past came flooding upon her, and she broke down and wept. Seeing an icon of the Theotokos, she prayed that if she might by Our Lady's intercession be allowed to enter, she would dedicate the rest of her life to holiness. Then she effortlessly entered the church and venerated the Holy Cross there. Mary then set out for the Palestinian desert, where she lived in seclusion and repentant prayer for the next forty-seven years.

At first, she was tormented by vivid memories of her old life. But she persevered in the struggle for holiness, depending on the intercessions of the Mother of God, and after seventeen years found sanctity and peace.

At the end of the forty-seven years, a priest-monk named Zosimas chanced to find Mary during his journey in the desert during Great Lent. He found her naked in the desert and, giving her his cloak to cover her, learned her story. She prayed with him, and Zosimas was awestruck to see that when she prayed fervently, she was raised and floated over a foot off the ground. She had received the gift of prophetic insight and knew all about him.

Upon her request, he brought her Holy Communion on Holy Thursday of the next year. She came to him, walking on the water of the Jordan River. She received the Holy Mysteries and asked him to come to her again the next year. Taking leave of him, she said, "Pray, for God's sake, pray for me and remember a miserable wretch."

When Zosimas returned to her the next year, he found her dead, with the words she had traced in the sand before she died: "Abba Zosimas, bury on this spot the body of humble Mary. Return the dust to the dust and pray to the Lord for me." The earth was too hard to allow him to bury her with no tools, but a lion came and dug in the earth a place for her grave. Mary, formerly a wretched and sick prostitute, had become through repentance and grace a bride of the Kingdom. She entered into glory about 530.

St. Mary of Egypt's story is recounted as the Great Fast draws to its conclusion. Her story inspires the faithful to repent of their sins, learning what a great reward awaits even the worst sinners as long as they come to God in repentance. Her transformation reveals that no one is beyond hope, and that Christ wills to save and heal all.