

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF THE GREAT FAST ~ OF ORTHODOXY
John 1:43-51

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The Greek Orthodox service of the Supplicatory Canon to the Mother of God (*Paraklesis*) describes our relationship with the Lord as a “secret life hidden in God.” For you see, we judge by the externals, by what we can experience with our senses, but only God {and a very small group of very holy ascetics with the gift of clairvoyance} can see into the heart of another person. There is only one human heart which is revealed to us, and that is our own. And even then, often our egos and pride blind us from clearly seeing ourselves as we actually are. To see even our own hearts is a gift from God, given only when we have sufficiently conquered our pride and egos with repentance, prayer and fasting, and have achieved a sufficient level of humility. We hear so much about faith that everything seems to revolve around our faith, yet faith also is not something to be measured or analyzed but faith is also a mystery, and our personal faith is also a “secret, hidden in our hearts”, between us and God alone.

In today's excerpt from St. Paul's letter to the Hebrews we heard about “the men of the Old Testament who lived by their faith in a promise whose fulfillment they did not see.”¹ Fr. Alexander Schmemmann points out in his book “Great Lent” that after Paul mentions these righteous men, St. Paul's epistle concludes with the words “And all these, having obtained a witness through their faith, did not receive the promise, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” What is that “better something” that God has foreseen for us? The answer is to be found in today's Gospel: “You shall see greater things than these... Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” Remember that originally Great Lent was the time of preparation for the catechumens who were preparing to be baptized on Holy Saturday. The Lord is speaking to the catechumens on this first Sunday of Lent and telling them that after they are baptized they will “see the inauguration of a new age, the fulfillment of all the promises, the manifestation of the Kingdom.” But they will see it only if they believe and repent, if they change their minds (“repentance” in Greek, “μετάνοια,” literally means “to change your mind”), if they have the desire, and if they accept the effort. The Church knew that this special forty day period of intensive prayer and fasting before Pascha would be fitting and beneficial for all the baptized as well as a way to prepare for the great feast of Pascha. Thus, Great Lent evolved from a preparatory period for the catechumens into a preparatory period for all Christians as well before Pascha.

Baptism is not the end of the rigors of spiritual struggles, but only the beginning. The need to pray, the need to fast, the need to repent, these are the activities of a lifetime. The need to struggle in the Christian life, the need to struggle in that “hidden life in God” will only end when we have drawn our last breath. In the Paterikon (the lives of the monastic fathers) there is an account concerning a certain place whose inhabitants noticed that during Great Lent the temptations of the Evil One seemed to temporarily cease. Things became quiet and the usual attacks from the demons seemed to cease. Then, after Pascha, as if on schedule, the temptations would resume. One holy father from this area had great audience before God. He prayed to the Lord to reveal to him the answer to this mystery. A demon appeared before the eyes of the father. The father asked the demon, “Why do the temptations cease in our town during Great Lent?” The demon answered, “Because we go to make war against those who make war against us. The people in this town are spiritually weak. We can always come back after Pascha and renew our attacks against them and lead them into sin. But during Great Lent the fathers on Mount Athos wage such a fierce warfare against us, that we must call in all of our available troops and organize as large an army as possible to make war against those fathers on Mount Athos who make war against us. There is no other way to possibly challenge the mighty strength of their spiritual struggles and warfare against us.”

This edifying story from the Paterikon reveals to us that the Christian is a spiritual warrior. The Christian wages spiritual warfare against the passions, against sin and against temptation. As St. Paul instructs us in Ephesians 6:11-12, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." As we continue this journey of cleansing and repentance through spiritual warfare, let us remember on this first Sunday of the fast, the Sunday of Orthodoxy, that our warfare is in vain if we don't stand on the pillar of truth. St Paul concludes his letter by writing, "Therefore, take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having fastened the belt of truth around your waist...(Eph. 6:13)."

As we enter the second week of the forty day fast, may we be proven to be valiant and courageous warriors, indefatigable, and in the end, victorious, so that we may greet Holy Pascha cleansed, bright and luminous. Amen.

1. See in Chapter Four *Sundays of Lent* page 73 ff. in "Great Lent, Journey to Pascha," by Alexander Schmemmann, SVS Press, New York, 2003.

